

"You better get down there," her mother turned her head over and rubbed the back of her head with her towel. "It's her day off, but she came in just to help you with your driving. ~~Evie~~. Don't forget to thank her."

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"I know. I won't." Evie got up slowly and looked at her mother's hair. "Why don't you just use the hair dryer?"

"Ever since I went blonde I try not to," her mother replied, "I don't want anymore damage done to my hair." She swung her head up and looked at Evie. "~~Hey~~, why don't you practice in my car? Would you like that?"

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"Uh, ~~the Benz~~?" Evie asked. She was *not* about to go there again. "No, it's okay," she told her mother. "I'm already sorta used to Lindsay's car. I mean, it's the only car I've been using, besides when I'm with dad and using his."

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"~~What?~~" Her mother frowned as if she didn't understand. How could anyone turn down her classic burgundy Benz? "No, really," she continued. "As long as you stay in the front and don't leave Camino del Rio, you can go ahead and practice with it."

Deleted: Her mother frowned as if she didn't understand. How could anyone turn down her classic burgundy Benz?

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"No, I'm cool," Evie's stomach slowly made a sommersault. "I'd rather just practice with Lindsay, in her car."

"Well, okay." She went back to drying her hair.

Evie went downstairs to meet Lindsay in the kitchen. *Why*, she wondered, would her mother offer her Mercedes? That was something her mother would *never* do, unless, say, maybe things were pretty bad with Sabrina. Maybe she was using her car as a distraction? It was just a bit suspicious.

Deleted: Maybe she was testing Evie?

"*Estas listas?*" Lindsay asked as she took her car keys out of her purse and handed them to Evie.

"Yeah," Evie took the keys from her. "I'm ready."

The last time she had been behind the wheel in Rio Estates was that fateful day when she had gotten in that (que to lower voice) *acidente*. Evie felt the odd sensation of an unwanted *de ja vu*. But today would be different, she hoped. For one thing, she wasn't going to be distracted by a phone conversation with Dee Dee, and for another, it was a Sunday. According to Lindsay, Jesus put in double time as a co-pilot for those needing extra guidance.

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"Now," Lindsay fastened her seat belt after she got into her car (License plate JKL29K; and only one bumper sticker, Radio Laser) with Evie. "What's the first thing you do?"

Evie reached for the radio dial. "Make sure I got some tasty tunes on?"

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"Evelina," Lindsay tapped her hand.

"I know, I know," Evie teased as she checked the rearview mirror and side mirror.

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"Safety belt first and then make sure all mirrors are adjusted correctly to the driver's height."

"*Correcto*," Lindsay pulled down her car's sun visor and put on her sunglasses. It was just a little after 9 a.m., but the sun was already reflecting off the hood of the car.

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As Evie backed out of the driveway and onto Camino del Rio, she felt a little shaky. She took a deep breath and told herself that she just had to relax.

"*Ay, no te ocupadas*, Evelina," Lindsay patted her arm. "Don't worry so. You're doing so well with your driving. Much better than when Sabrina was learning."

Evie suddenly sat up in her seat.

"Really?" she asked. "You taught Sabrina to drive, and she sucked?"

"I did *not* say *that*," Lindsay frowned. "She was just very nervous and timid. You are, ~~I don't know~~, more of a go-getter."

"Really?" Evie suddenly felt gleeful.

Lindsay shook her head and looked out the window. "Ay, I don't know what's going to happen to Sabrina. She is still so sad"

"My mom said it's just a matter of time," Evie said. "She's just depressed"

"I don't know," ~~Lindsay said~~ *didn't sound convinced* "She doesn't eat, and she just sleeps all the time."

~~She~~ looked out the window. "It's a sensitive time, and you should try to be extra nice and helpful."

"I *am* helpful," Evie frowned at Lindsay. "All the work I'm doing at the reserve. I do a lot, Linds."

"I know, *mi'ja, claro que si*," ~~Lindsay said~~ "I know you've been working hard, Everytime I pick you up, *ay*, you look so tired"

"Yeah, I am Very tired" Evie felt the need to state her case one more time. "~~And even when I'm not at the reserve and I have to go to fundraisers and stuff~~" Okay, so she had only been to one fundraising event and it was far from being burdensome with work, but even Arturo had said her attendance, her ticket, *helped* the cause. "Just last night I went to a charro rodeo."

A *charreada*?" Lindsay asked. "~~Oh, we~~ have them all the time in Mexico. My cousins were *escaramuzas*."

"Really?" Evie turned Lindsay. "I've heard that word before. What's that?"

Lindsay reached over and ~~gripped~~ the steering wheel. "Keep your eyes on the road, Evie. *Escaramuzas* are team riders, women. A *charrita* is actually a cowgirl."

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"Oh," Evie nodded. "So, I went to one last night and it was so cool. They did these tricks--."

"*Suertes*," Lindsay interrupted. "They are called *suertes*."

"Oh, right," Evie said. "How come you've never told me about *charreadas*?"

"~~Evelina~~, how would I know what might interest you?" Lindsay said. "You are so finicky. One day it's surfing, and now it's suddenly horses? What are you going to do now? Trade in your flip flops for *botas*?"

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"I've *always* been into horses," Evie ~~asserted~~ *99*. She looked down at her Rainbow flojos. She wasn't about to trade them in for cowboy boots just yet.

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"For today, let's just concentrate on the driving," Lindsay said. "The sooner you learn to drive, the sooner --." She stopped herself.

"The sooner what?" Evie looked over at her.

"The sooner you get to drive," Lindsay simply replied.

"No, you were gonna say something else," Evie insisted. "Is it about my car? Are my parents gonna get me my Beetle for my birthday? They are, right?"

"Turn here," Lindsay ignored Evie's question and pointed to Calle Boca *Grande*. "Evelina, remember to use your signal *every* time you need to make a turn or get into another lane. Give the other driver enough time to know what you plan to do."

"Why?" Evie asked. "So they can speed up and block me?"

The sedan suddenly jumped forward.

"And you don't need to hit the brake all the time," Lindsay said. "Keep *both* hands on the steering wheel."

"Oh, I'm *never* gonna get this!" Evie groaned. "I'm not gonna get my driver's license by my birthday."

"You can get your license anytime," Lindsay said. "You don't have to get it by your birthday."

"If I wanna drive away from my party in Cherry Bomb, I do," Evie said.

"*Cherry bomb?*" Lindsay looked at her. "*Que es* cherry bomb?"

"That's what I'm gonna name my car," Evie told her. "Cool, huh?"

"Where are you getting this idea that you're getting a car for your birthday?"

Lindsay asked. "And I thought that you may not get your party."

"Who said that?" Evie asked. "Did you hear that, like, recently?"

"I thought I heard you your mother talking to your dad and--"

"And what?"

"I don't know, I don't want to say anything," Lindsay got flustered. "But I thought I heard them talking about going up to Sabrina's school and I thought they were talking about that same weekend."

"*What!*" Evie couldn't believe what she was hearing. "The weekend of the 29th?"

My birthday weekend? You are *not* serious."

"Mi'ja, don't..." Lindsay reached for the gearshift. The car instantly stalled.

"Oh, man," Evie realized that she had shifted too slowly, but that was nothing compared to the fact that it looked like her party may not happen. "I'm *never* gonna get it."

truly
you r never going to get what?
"*What* aren't you *never* going to get?" Lindsay asked

"Take your pick," Evie answered glumly.

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Chapter 14

"You should have been there, Alex," Evie went on about the charreada as he drove her to the reserve ~~the next morning~~. "It was amazing. The horses were so beautiful. They really are these incredible animals. God, I feel like such an idiot. I mean, I've been doing all this work at the reserve, and I guess I really had no idea why. I know why I need to work at the reserve, but I had no idea *why* my help was even needed. I can't believe people would just give up on ~~a~~ horse, ~~their~~ pet. Do you know what I mean?"

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"Uh, huh," Alex said, but it seemed as though he wasn't really listening. "So, I don't get why you skipped Baja just to be out drinking it up with the girls."

"I wasn't drinking it up," Evie said. "Didn't you just hear me? That was Raquel and Tori's deal. And you know I had to go, to get the credit. It just happened that it turned out to be really cool, sorta educational."

"Educational?" Alex looked at her. "What's next? You're gonna join Math-
letes?"

"You know, if I didn't know better," Evie threw him a sideways glance. "I would say you were jealous."

"Jealous?" Alex frowned. "Jealous of what?"

"That I'm doing different things, learning about different things."

~~Alex looked at her and smiled.~~ "Eves, no, I am not jealous. ~~For~~ *reals*. I'm actually glad it turned out okay for you. It just would have been cool if you had come to Baja."

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"Well," Evie ~~looked back at him~~. "It would have been *cool* if you could have waited and planned the Baja trip ~~on a weekend that I could actually go~~."

When Alex pulled up at the reserve, Evie was unusually excited about her workday. She wanted to find out more about horses and *charreadas* from Arturo. But when she reached the stables, Tori had beaten her to the punch with follow up *charro* chit-chat.

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^{as} "So, did you and Josephina have fun at the ~~charreada~~ ^{Saturday mlti}?" Tori was asking Arturo. As Evie walked over to pull out flakes of alfalfa and oat hay.

"Oh, yes," Arturo said "I love *charreadas*. They have them all the time in Pico Rivera, but I rarely get a chance to get out there. My father is a *charro*. So are my brothers."

Deleted: smiled again, uncharacteristically.

"And they do all those tricks?" Tori asked

"They aren't called tricks," Evie joined in. "They're called *suertes*."

"Right," Arturo looked at Evie, slightly surprised. "You know, the Mexican *charro* was the first cowboy. Not that many people know that."

"Really?" Tori nodded enthusiastically, and it made Evie a little suspicious. It wasn't like her to be so conversational with Arturo. "That is so cool," Tori went on. "How come you aren't a *charro*? I mean, you totally could be one. You know so much about horses and stuff."

"It's the 'stuff' part that s really isn't my thing," Arturo confessed. "I didn't follow the *charro* tradition. Besides, my whole family is still back in Colorado, and they all practice and perform together."

"You came out to California by yourself?" Tori asked

"Yeah," Arturo answered. "I moved out here because I really wanted to go to Thatcher."

"And you left behind your whole family? And all your friends?" she asked.

"Whoa," Arturdo laughed and up held his hand, faking protest. "I didn't know I was the subject of some in-depth interview. Is this part of your extra credit?"

"No," Tori laughed lightly. "I was just wondering, that's all."

Evie couldn't help but feel a bit curious too. Arturdo was a senior at Thatcher and only a few years older than she and Tori. She couldn't believe that someone would move halfway across the country just to work with some horses. She loved to surf, but she couldn't imagine moving to, say, Hawaii, just to be closer to some choice waves. But then again, after that cute little caramel colored horsie she had seen at the rodeo, oh, who knows. He was just too adorable.

"But come on," Tori tilted her head and looked up at Arturdo. "Don't they have horses in Denver?"

Was she actually flirting with him?

"Of course," Arturdo furrowed his brow. "But Thatcher is one of the best equine schools in the country, and if I wanna study veterinary medicine at UC Davis, I need a high school that would give me the best transfer. I'm starting Davis in the spring." *I wanna go to Davis*

"Hey, Grandma Chablis goes to UC Davis," Evie said. "Wow, you might see her there."

"Chablis?" Arturdo asked

"I mean, Chavella," Evie said. "We call her Chablis cause she teaches viticulture Wine making."

"Uh, yeah," Arturdo smirked. "I know what viticulture is."

"Turrrro!"

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It was Josephina calling out for Arturo. Evie was surprised they hadn't heard her car (~~license plate~~ ^{Vanity} PRINCESS) pull up.

"We're over here," Arturo called out over his shoulder. "In Blackie's stall."

Josephina stood at the doorway in a form-fitting plum colored satin halter dress, beige fishnets that shined against her tanned legs, and spikey knee-high black leather boots. She topped off her whole look with a black velveteen derby hat.

"You're not done yet?" she asked Arturo. Her annoyed tone was less Valley-esque and more demanding. "I thought you made the reservations? At seven?"

"Uh, *hello?* ~~How are you? How has your day been?~~" Arturo teased Josephina for ~~not greeting him before she got demanding~~ ^{property} ~~He~~ ^{four} dropped enormous pills into the selected ~~feed~~ buckets. ^{Deleted: as h}

"Arturo," Josephina checked her slim gold wristwatch. "It's time to go." She ground her boot heel into the gravel. "I don't want to be late. If we don't get there on time, we might as well not go at all."

"Josephina" Arturo stopped what he was doing and exhaled. "We'll make it. I'm the one who made the reservations, remember? And we're only 25 minutes away."

^{but} "I guess Evie and Tori can take over," Arturo suggested as ~~he~~ ^{she} looked at Evie. ^{Deleted: Evie wondered if Tori felt as suddenly uncomfortable as she did. ¶}

"You don't mind, do you?"

"Uh, no," Evie said "I don't mind."

What could she really say? He was the boss, sorta.

Arturo turned back to Josephina. "I've got my shirt in my truck. I'll go change."

^{si, si} "Okay, okay," Josephina checked the time again. "But do it quickly." ^{she}

"I hope I didn't interrupt you guys," Josephina looked over Tori and Evie as Arturo went out to his truck. *"It always seems..."*

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"Huh?" Evie asked. "What do you mean?"

"When I walked up," Josephina started. "It's like you guys were in a middle of a conversation? It seems like every time I see you two with Arturo, I am barging in on something."

"No, we were just being silly," Evie felt awkward. The last thing she wanted was Horsaphina *hating* and then complaining to Arturo about it. She looked over Horsaphina and assessed damage control. "You look really pretty. *Are you going somewhere fancy?*"

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"Oh, yeah," Horsaphina agreed as she smoothed out her dress and adjusted the gold mesh bracelet on her wrist. "Arturo's taking me to Koi."

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"Koi?" Evie asked. She had no idea what Koi was. Was it a club? A lingerie boutique, as in *Coy*? Maybe it was a mispronounced Native American name for another horse reserve?

"The Teppan Grill?" Josephina smiled when she noticed Evie's confused expression. "They seat you in groups of twelve, and if we're late? We'll get a regular chef, but I want Mayru. He's the owner?"

"Oh, right," Evie nodded.

"I can't believe you've never been there," Josephina said.

Neither Evie nor Tori said anything.

Josephina looked around with an air of disapproval. "Don't you guys ever get tired of working here?"

"Nuh uh," Evie said. "Not really." *It was half true.*

"Me neither," Tori agreed with Evie.

"Well, I would," Horsaphina stated. "I don't get it. Arturo spends so much time here. But then again, you two *have* to be here? Right?"

"Not really. We're volunteers," Evie pointed out. "I mean, I could have picked any organization for work."

"Hmm - mmm," Josephina wasn't convinced. "That's not what Turo told me."

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"What are you talking about?" Evie asked.

"He said that your school counselor called to ask if the reserve still had room for you? And they didn't? Turo had already made out the whole schedule for the year, and he's very organized that way. But when he told them no, your counselor went over his head and straight to Lynn. She okay'd it."

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"Oh, I didn't know that," Evie said. No wonder Arturo had been tough on her from day one.

When Arturo re-appeared, *Evie looked up* ~~Wow~~. What a difference a nag makes. He had changed from his worn out old blue and green Pendleton work shirt to a grey button up shirt. His hair was slightly combed back, and Evie noticed that he had put on the slightest hint of a scented cologne, (eucalyptus and woody). Did he always wear cologne? Maybe ~~she~~ just hadn't noticed before. She did remember that Alex used to wear cologne (sea breezy and fresh), at least, for the evenings when the Flojos would all go fancy party crashing or something. Evie sighed to herself. But that was all so last semester, and in a distant galaxy so far, far away.

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"Turo," Josephina scowled at his boots. "You *cannot* wear those to Koi. They have a dress code?"

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"Josephina," Arturdo started. "There is nothing wrong with my boots." He looked at the ones she was wearing. "You're wearing boots."

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"Yes, but mine were, like, four hundred dollars?" Josephina rebuffed. "They're not some Red Wing work boots from, like, Gordon's Western Wear."

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"Josephina," Arturdo pursed his lips. "If you want me to change it's only going to make us even more late. Is that what you want?"

It seemed obvious to Evie that Josephina was working his last nerve.

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"What ever?" Josephina just looked up at the sky, seemingly surrendering control.

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As soon as they left, Tori turned towards Evie and smiled smugly. "Pretty smart of us, huh?"

"Smart of us, what?" Evie asked.

"Kissing Turdo's ass like that, pretending we were all into the rodeo and working here and stuff," Tori said. "That part about your Grandma Chablis just about killed me."

"But I *did* like the charreada," Evie insisted. "And my Grandma Chablis does go teach to Davis. What are you talking about?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm behind with my hours. I've been late sometimes and Turdo subtracts even the minutes. If I don't get the credit I need, I'm gonna have to retake one of my other classes. I'm thinking if I get on Turdo's good side, he might be cool letting me slide. You have all the hours you need?"

"Uh," Evie hesitated. "Yeah, I don't know. I mean, I think I'm pretty much on the right track." She hadn't really sat down and looked over all her hours and she just assumed that when she showed up that her attendance counted for a full shift. The way her body ached she at least *felt* that she had put in her share.

Deleted: She hadn't really sat down and looked over all her hours.

"Yeah," Tori went back to work. "I'd hate to be doing all this for nothing."

Evie watched after Arturo and Horsaphina as they headed for his truck. He held the door open as he waited for her to get in the passenger seat, and then went around the front of this truck and got in.

When Arturo's truck finally drove off and was out of sight, Evie excused herself.

"Man, you better be right back," Tori warned her. "I ain't gonna do all this alone, like last time."

"No, I just gotta make a call," Evie said as she went to get her backpack from the supply shed. She pulled out her cell phone and speed dialed Alex's number. While she waited, she thought of Arturo. He wasn't such a bad guy. So he was a bit of a dick-tator at first, but Evie thought it was pretty cool, no very cool that he cared so much about what he did at the reserve. She realized it might be time to take the 'd' out of Arturo's name.

Again, she got Alex's voice mail.

"Hey, Alex. It's me," Evie started. "Hey, I'm wondering... this coming weekend. Do you think we can go out? Like not surfing, but go out, out? Do something different? Okay..." She didn't know what else to say. "So just let me know."

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Chapter 15

The following Saturday evening couldn't come fast enough for Evie. She had spent the whole week looking forward to going *out* with Alex. He had responded to her phone message with a text:

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Sat. Nite. Cool. *No Prob.*

Smthin diff. TTYL

"So, no surfing this weekend?" *Alex had* double-checked one last time with Evie on Friday afternoon as he was taking her to the reserve. "You sure 'bout that?"

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"I have to work all day tomorrow and then again on Sunday," she reminded him. "I really have only *Saturday* *evening* free." *Common mistake*

"Okay, but we *could* do a twilight set. After you're done with your shift at the reserve we can head out to Sea Street. There's supposed to be a south swell."

"Alex," Evie said. "This is California. There will *always* be a south swell coming from somewhere. I wanna go out, *out*, remember? Do something different. You said it was no problem."

"You're right," Alex smiled. "Whatever you say, cutie."

* * * * *

By Saturday night, Evie had decided on her favorite halter, the satin one with the yellow and green swirls, and a three-tiered satiny skirt she had bought at Tilly's. She even made the bold decision against wearing flojos (*gasp*) and slipped on some

espadrilles (*sorta* satiny) that she'd borrowed from Dee Dee. Thanks to all the long hours at the reserve, Evie was losing her tan. She went to her bathroom and looked through her cabinet for some foundation. She ~~wanted~~ ^{gradually} a darker cream. Maybe, Sabrina had something?

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Evie went down the hall to Sabrina's room, but, like always, found the bedroom door closed.

She was about to knock when she heard a sound, a muffled noise, coming from inside Sabrina's bedroom. Evie leaned closer. Was Sabrina crying? Evie caught her clenched fist just in time before it hit the bedroom door.

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"But it's *not* getting better," Sabrina sobbed. "My family is driving me crazy. I should have just stayed back at Stanford. Here, I'm surrounded by friggin' idiots."

Evie couldn't believe what she was hearing. *Friggin' idiots?* Who was she talking about?

"No," Sabrina struggled to catch her breath. "I don't even talk to her. She's such a little spoiled brat that I might as well not have a sister at all."

Whoa. Evie pulled back from the door. Was she hearing right? Was Sabrina talking about her? No. She could *not* have heard right. She leaned in closer to the bedroom door and strained to hear more.

"*Evelina!*"

Evie looked up and found Lindsay, in the middle of the hallway, holding a small box of tile samples.

"You do *not* sneak around, trying to listen in on other people's conversations," Lindsay spoke sharply under her breath, "You are being very rude."

"But she's talking about me, us," Evie lowered her voice in protest.

"Evelina," Lindsay insisted. "Leave her alone."

Evie reluctantly moved away from Sabrina's door.

"I have to come into your room," Lindsay heaved the box of tiles to her left hip.

"Your mother wants to see which tiles she needs to order for your bathroom."

"Now?" Evie asked.

Lindsay adjusted the box again. "~~Yes, she~~ wants to place the order first thing in the morning, and I'm going to be leaving soon. We have to do it now."

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"O *okay*..." Evie *begudgingly* started back down the hall to her bedroom. There was no way she was going to argue with Lindsay. And God forbid, she ~~sound~~ *act* like a spoiled brat.

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Oh, *hurtful*.

As she entered her room with Lindsay, the bedroom's landline rang. Evie grabbed the receiver off the carpet floor.

"Hullo?" she asked.

"*Finally*." It was Raquel. ("*What up, girl?*" I called your cell and it went right to voice mail, and you didn't answer my text."

"My cell's charging." Evie went into her bathroom and walked past Lindsay, who was lining up the tile samples against the wall. ~~She~~ grabbed her make-up bag off the sink's counter and moved out of Lindsay's way.

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"And then I've been calling the landline," Raquel continued. "And it just rings and rings. I didn't even get the voicemail."

"Sabrina's been on the phone." Evie was half listening as she sat on the edge of her bed and squirted a glob of foundation on her shoulders. She was going to have to settle for the orangish brown ^{effekings or} Sunburst foundation.

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"What's wrong?" Raquel asked.

"Nothing," Evie tried to shake off the feeling. Sabrina's words stung something fierce. She smoothed the cream evenly across her neck and shoulders. "Raquel," ^{she} Evie started. "Do you think I'm spoiled?"

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"What?" she asked. "Who said that? Alex?"

"No. Nobody." Evie lowered her voice again and looked over at Lindsay, but she wasn't even paying attention. In typical "Lindsay Knows Best" fashion, she just stood in the bathroom with a disapproving look on her face as she looked over the tile samples.

"Actually," Evie started. "I just overheard Sabrina on the phone, and she told someone, I think one of her sorority sisters, that I was spoiled. A spoiled *brat*, to be precise."

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"She said *that*?" Raquel asked. "I don't know. I mean, I guess someone might think you were spoiled, because you *do* get a lot of stuff that you want."

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"*Me?*" Evie was thrown off by Raquel's blunt reply. "That is so far from the truth. Who's the one schlepping horse crap around? Who's the one who may not have her own birthday party? On a year that there *is* actually going to be a February 29th?"

"It's really how you look at it," Raquel said. "I mean, of course, you should get the things you want. But some people might think you are spoiled, but I'm surprised it would be Sabrina saying that. I mean, doesn't she usually get her way?"

checklist. No VPL, *check*. No unsightly bulge of back fat, *check*. No bac-... wait. Evie peered closer into the closet mirror and discovered a small, but still very noticeable, blemish. It was right below her left shoulder. Argh! The curse of mid-winter bacne! She instantly squeezed more Sunburst goop onto her finger and dabbed the offending violator. But the foundation now made *that* section of her skin look blotchy and uneven. She decided to ~~pull off her whole halter~~ and give herself a thorough application of cover up, but just as she pulled her halter off, her mother walked into her bedroom.

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"Mom, do you mind?" Evie held the phone between her chin and shoulder and covered her chest with her arms. "I'm changing."

"Sorry, Evie." Her mother could have cared less. "The door was open and I already knew that Lindsay was in here." She brushed right past Evie. "I need to take a look at these tiles."

It was less about Evie's modesty and more about the incriminating 'Rx'E' inked near her left breast. Last semester, she, Dee Dee and Raquel had La Ley Cee, a tattoo artist who eschews the "over 18" requirement and will ink anyone with enough of an idea and enough cash. She loved her little Rx'E in blue black ink near her heart, *that concerned Evie.* *it made her* *in a secret he kind of way* *her mother* *feel so un-Rio Estates, a bit secretly scandalosa,* but if Vicki Gomez ever found out that her youngest daughter had a tattoo *anywhere* on her body, there would only be one kind of party for Evie... a good-bye party.

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"Hey," Raquel asked. "Did you get that fancy ass manicure for your date with Alex?"

Evie laughed. "Wow, Raquel. Thanks. I mean, that is so nice of you." She was touched by her offer. "But hopefully Grandma Chablis will come through and I won't have to put the *mordida* on you."

"Cool," Raquel said. "Well, just let me know."

"Okay," Evie ~~looked at herself in the closet mirror again~~ She was still a little taken by Raquel's offer. "I better go."

Deleted: got up from her bed.

"Lates," Raquel said. "Don't do anything I wouldn't ~~approve of~~"

do myself more of

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As she headed downstairs, ~~Evie~~ felt fortunate (*not* spoiled) that she lived in a two-story home. There is nothing more *O.C.* than descending down a staircase to the arms of a waiting surfer boy.

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But the minute ~~Evie~~^{she} saw Alex at the bottom of the stairs, her fantasy went from The *O.C.* to *O. U. Gotta to be Shittin' Me*. Yes, Alex was waiting for her in the foyer, but not looking anything remotely like a Saturday Night Hottie. He was in his usual tattered camo ~~cut-offs~~, the ones cut a little below his knees, and he was wearing his plastic flip flops, the "bin specials" that Evie knew all too well. He had obviously not taken the planning of their date as seriously as she had. He had sand around his ankles, and he ~~stank from the leftover medicinal smelling sun block he must have slathered on~~ earlier. Evie guessed that he must've still gone to Sea Street to catch that "oh so important" late afternoon swell.

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"Hey," Alex looked over Evie with a puzzled look on his face. "You're all dressed up."

"Yeah," Evie said. He hadn't said she looked nice, just dressed up. Was that supposed to be a compliment? And why did he look so puzzled?

“Yeah, Evie,” her father also looked over ~~Evie~~. “And you got some color on you.”

Were you out in the sun today?”

Okay, maybe “dressed up” and “color” were male speak for cute?

“So, where are you two going?” her father asked Alex.

“I dunno,” Alex answered in a tone that was a little too laid-back for Evie. “I’ve been at the beach all day. I’m pretty wiped out.” He stretched his head side to side to prove his point. “I think we’ll just take it easy.” He looked at Evie. “Right, ~~Eyes?~~”

Evie managed a weak smile but said nothing. He could *not* be serious.

“Well, have fun you two,” Evie’s father walked them to the front door. “And Evie, don’t forget your curfew.”

“Do you think,” Evie started. “That just tonight –”

“No,” her father said. “12:30.”

Evie walked alongside Alex towards his truck, and ~~there was~~ his long board in the flatbed – evidence that he *had* just come from the beach. She felt her chest fill up with heavy disappointment. She looked over at Alex.

“What?” he looked back at her and smiled ~~slightly confused~~.

“Nothing.” Evie looked away and felt conflicted. Sometimes Alex would look at her, and his dark eyes would just penetrate hers, making her feel the way she had felt at Sea Street on the morning he had given her the abalone necklace. She suddenly felt guilty. Alex really *was* a sweet boyfriend, and maybe she *was* a spoiled brat. Just because he was dressed down didn’t mean he hadn’t put any thought into arranging a little something special or different. The evening was just beginning. Maybe he played it off with her dad, you know, one guy trying to be cool with another guy type of thing?

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What, was he actually going to go into detail with her father about what he really wanted to do with Evie?

"Well, first, Mr. Gomez, I'm going to take Evie out to a very romantic, very expensive restaurant, where I will request the most secluded table in the whole house, just for the two of us. Then I am going to drive her out to The Shores, where we will stroll out to the most secluded area in the sand dunes, and I will spread out a blanket just for the two of us. Then Evie will cuddle up next to me as I crack open a bottle of Veuve (her favorite) and pour it into two glass flutes that I brought with me because I had been planning this evening for a whole week. Then I will make a toast to our evening right before I pull out a book of poems that I have carefully chosen for Evie, but, I have to confess, the minute I look into her dark brown eyes, I'll--"

A long, slow whistle interrupted the satin halter-ripping scene in Evie's head. The whistle came from the front of Alex's truck. She squinted her eyes in the darkness and slowly made out the glow of a cigarette in the passenger seat of the cab.

No!

But yes. It was Mondo. She could *not* believe what she was seeing.

"Why is *Mondo* with you?" Evie struggled to keep her voice down to a whisper.

"You wanted to do something different," Alex answered earnestly. "And it's just been a while since we all hung out together, and you were saying that --"

"*What?*" Evie forced herself to maintain her composure. "Are you serious?"

"Uh, yeah," Alex sounded confused. "Why?"

"I *said*," Evie started. "That it had been a while since you and I hung out, spent time *together*. I wanted to go out, *out*, remember?"

"What?" Mondo frowned. "No. It stands for 'Whaddya need?'" He ran his hand over his freshly shorn scalp. "Check it out, my cousin just got back from Amsterdam and he told me that, like, all the cafes have little areas with designated question mark signs. Like, you can get *anything* you want there. You know what I mean? Cool, huh?"

"Yeah I guess," Evie fastened her seat belt and couldn't help but smirk. "In Amsterdam."

"So," Mondo rubbed his hands together and leaned forward between Evie's and Alex's seats. "What's up for this evening?"

Evie decided to stick to her guns. She was going to get her fancy dinner at Koi whether it killed her, or, more appropriately, killed Mondo's date with Alex.

She feigned an earnest smile. "I was thinking we'd go get sushi."

"Sushi?" Mondo smirked. "Uh, no thanks," He held his nose and dropped the sides of his mouth. "I had sushi last night, if you know what I mean." He looked at Alex. The look in his eyes said everything.

You have got to be kidding.

"Mondo," Alex reprimanded him as he started his truck. "Come on, there's a lady present."

"Yeah," Mondo looked at Alex in the rearview mirror. "That's what I thought. Last night."

Alex started to pull out of the driveway. "So, you want sushi, Evie?"

Not after Mondo's inexcusable one-liner.

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"You know," Mondo chimed in as he flicked his cigarette butt out the window. "I could actually go for some seafood. We should go to Otani's. They got kick ass ~~tempera~~"

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"*Actually*," Evie tried to lure Alex from siding with Mondo. "I was thinking of Koi."

"Koi?" Mondo frowned as he leaned forward, between Evie and Alex. "You mean that fancy ass place that took over where the E Bar used to be?"

"Yeah," Evie said

"Nah," Mondo said. "We don't wanna do Koi. It's all SUV ~~vermin~~. We gotta go to Otani's." He leaned back in his seat and looked at Alex in the rearview mirror again. "Dude, they have a waitress with a rack *this* big." He made a gesture over his chest like he was balancing two imaginary cannon balls.

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Alex couldn't help but chuckle as he drove down Camino del Rio.

Evie shot him a look. "*Alex*."

"Oh, sorry, cutie," Alex straightened his smile and rubbed her arm. "Look, we'll go to Koi. Whatever you want."

"Whatever *she* wants?" Mondo looked at Alex and then at Evie. "Talk about spoiled milk."

Evie crossed her arms over her chest. *Spoiled?*

Was Evie just being *sentida*, or was everything that came out of Mondo's mouth just truly inappropriate?

* * * * *

There was over an hour wait for a table at Koi.

"We can't seat you any sooner without a reservation," the host told the three of them. "And?" he looked over Alex and Mondo's feet. "We have a dress code. No flip flops."

"You gotta be kidding," Mondo protested. "Dude, this is friggin' So Cal, everyone wears flip flops."

"Not during dinner hours," the host ~~shook~~ his head.

Evie looked around the restaurant. ~~Outside in the patio, a fire roared in a stone fireplace stood and water trickled from decorative bamboo chutes into a kidney-shaped pond filled with bright orange and yellow koi fish. She noticed that the moon was full,~~ large with hues of soft yellow, pink, and beige. Evie couldn't stop thinking how much more romantic it would be to snuggle with Alex on one of the wicker love seats and just inhale the beauty, *alone*.

"Why don't we just wait?" Evie suggested. "We can get some appetizers or something. An hour will go by fast."

"Dude," Mondo pulled Alex aside. "That monkey totally dissed us. I ain't gonna shoot my wad here." He seemed to have already made the decision for the three of them as he started back towards the front doors with his fists deep in the pockets of his baggy cords.

"Sushi is sushi," Alex shrugged his shoulders apologetically. "We can come here another time, Eves. Promise."

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Alex sat between Evie and Mondo at the counter at Otani's. It was a short counter with yellowed, chipped Formica and a sloppy pile of stained, plastic menus at the far end.

The diners were far from SUV germin and were made up more of aging surf veteranos and leather skinned longshoremen. Both groups, Evie noticed, wore tattooed sleeves depicting their life for battles? with the Pacific.

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Otani's was cheap eating, and you could fill up if you had a little cash. Cash. Otani's did not take credit cards, and Alex had forgotten his wallet and only had three bucks on him. Evie's pride refused to let her offer any of the twenty bucks she had on her towards the meal. The three of them shared one (1) tempura shrimp boat with a complimentary order of sticky white rice, and it actually turned out to be a good thing that Mondo did tag along. It allowed Evie to order a diet soda.

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As they were finishing up their meal, Mondo looked past Alex and eyed Evie's shoulders as if he were seeing them for the first time.

"What's up with your skin, G?" he asked her.

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Evie rubbed her shoulders. "I always get goose bumps when it gets a little cold."

"No," Mondo looked her over. "It looks like you got dirt or something smudged on them." He reached over, across Alex, to brush off whatever he thought was on Evie's skin.

"It's not dirt, Mondo," she pulled away from him. "It's bronzer."

"Bronzer?" Mondo looked confused. "For what? It's getting all over your satiny shirt."

~~"It's not a shirt," Evie said. "It's a halter."~~

that

~~"Well, whatever it is, you better be careful. You're getting crap all over it."~~

Mondo said.

"Never mind, *Mondo*," Evie hugged her arms across her chest and placed her hands on opposite shoulders. It was cold in Otani's, and she remembered seeing a jacket in Alex's truck.

"Alex," she started. "Don't you have a jacket in your truck? I thought I saw one."

"Uh, huh," Alex played with the ice in his Styrofoam cup with his straw. "I thought I'd need it, but I'm okay."

"Do you mind if I wear it?" Evie asked.

shirts

"Nuh, uh," he said as put his hand in his pants pocket and pulled out his car keys.

"But try not to get all that make up on it."

"Oh," Evie didn't take the keys. "Never mind."

"Dude," Mondo nudged Alex to look over at the group of women who had just entered Otani's. "We're talking boulders at 3 o'clock. *Your* 3 o'clock."

"*Mondo*," Alex threw him a sharp look, but before doing so, Evie noticed that

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Alex did take a quick glance over towards the women.

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"Hey," Mondo suddenly said to Evie. "You ate more than your fair share."

"Huh?" Evie saw that he was now looking over her paper plate.

"Look," Mondo counted the shrimp tails on her plate with the end of his wooden chopstick. "Alex and I only have three tails each, but you've got, like, five."

"Mondo," Evie couldn't believe what he was implying. She looked down on her plate. "It's just batter."

"No, it ain't." Mondo pressed down on the tails with his chopstick.

"What, you want me to burp them back up?" Evie asked. Could the tension between her and Mondo get any fiercer? She pushed her paper plate away from him. "Stop it."

"So," Alex stretched back, oblivious to how annoying Mondo was to Evie.

"What's up for the rest of the evening?"

Evie hoped that she didn't hear him correctly. Hadn't he planned *anything*?

"Check it out," Mondo started after he finally had stopped counting shrimp tails.

"A buddy of mine was telling me about a party over on Hemlock. Should be pretty K.B."

"What about my board?" Alex rubbed the space between his eyes and yawned. "I don't wanna leave it out at some party."

"Yeah, I'm not really in the mood for a party, either," Evie said as her stomach growled. Hmm, maybe pride wasn't such an honorable thing. Time to use her twenty?

"But maybe, if you really want to go," she started to tell Mondo. "We could drop you off." She looked over at Alex's Nixon. It was only 10 p.m. She still had a good two and a half hours before she had to be home. She and Alex could still have *some* time to themselves.

"We?" Mondo looked at Evie. "When did you start sharing Alex's pink slip? You don't even drive."

"I know," Evie said. "I'm just saying that we might do something else."

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"But Evie, if you don't wanna go to a party," Alex asked her. "What do you wanna do?"

"I don't know." Evie hated being out in the position of activities director, and why was Alex not backing her up? "I thought we could go to the pier, walk around. There's a full moon tonight."

"Whoa," Mondo pressed two fingers on the side of his neck. "I hope my pacemaker can keep up with this excitement." He looked at Alex. "Dude, come on, let's go check out the party. Hey, you know who's gonna be there?"

"Who?" Alex asked.

"Our boy, Jose."

The minute Evie heard the name, Jose, her stomach went from empty to numb.

"I haven't seen that clown in weeks," Alex chewed lazily on the end of his plastic straw. "What's he been up to?"

"Maintaining," Mondo casually pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "So he says."

"Alex," Evie leaned her head to the left and looked up at him. "Can't we just go for a walk tonight? Like on the pier? It's so nice out."

There was no way she wanted to see Jose, even at some mellow, kick back party. Not only had Jose cheated on Raquel, but he had also practically molested Evie at a Sangro party and almost decked her in the school's parking lot. Why would Alex, her own boyfriend, even want to be in the same room with Jose?

Both Evie and Mondo waited for an answer from Alex as he continued chewing on the end of his straw.

"Dude," Mondo stretched his arm around the back of his stool. "You know, I'll do whatever you want. ~~He looked at Evie~~ *she* ~~"I'm easy."~~

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At about half past 11 p.m., Evie returned home. Her so-called date with Alex was officially over, and ~~Evie~~ *she* was dropped off one full hour before her 12:30 a.m. curfew. No such thing had ever, ever, happened during the so-called best years of Evie Gomez's life.

"The whole evening sounds completely wretched," Dee Dee sympathized. She called Evie as soon as she got her text. "And Alejandro? Did *nada*?"

"Nothing," Evie was embarrassed to admit. She knew that Dee Dee was already comparing Alex to Rocio. "Once he was with Mondo, it was like I didn't even exist. They were too busy yucking it up and checking out girls."

"That is so disgusting," Dee Dee said. "What the hell is wrong with Alejandro?"

"I have no idea." Evie was already in bed, nibbling on a flakey hornito ~~and a~~ *she was starving* pumpkin empanada that her father had brought home. "So, what are you doing home on a Saturday night?" she asked. *me me* "No Hermana, ~~group hug?~~

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"I have a brunch tomorrow," Dee Dee said. "With some of the other Hermana candidates. I should be in bed already, but I've got this avocado mask on and I wanted to give it another 20 minutes."

"*Another* brunch?" Evie asked

"No, this is the first one," Dee Dee said. "The last Hermana get-together was an informal meet and greet and after that, the second get-together was more of mixer." Dee Dee took a breath. "*Oye*, have you seen Josephina? Has she said anything about me?"

Ever since Evie had told Dee Dee that she had met Josephina, Arturo's girlfriend and senior Hermiana member, Dee Dee was always trying to dig up bits and pieces about her possible future as a Hermiana debutante.

"No, *Dee Dee*," Evie said. "I told you, she never talks about *anything*. She just *asks* things. The girl talks in question marks. But have you talked to Raquel?" she asked. "I texted her but didn't hear back."

"I talked to her a few hours ago," Dee Dee said. "She was on her way to some house party. A house *arrest* party."

"Huh?"

"Exactly," Dee Dee said. "One of Davey Mitchell's little friends got in trouble for breaking his probation, so he's tied to his house, with his mother and an ankle bracelet. All the Bard Boys took a party to him,"

"Are you serious?" Evie laughed.

"Yeah, he isn't allowed to go anywhere over 500 feet away from his house without checking in with his P.O."

It was funny to hear Dee Dee talk so T. V. cop shop. "So where was this party?" Evie asked.

"Some place on Hemlock," Dee Dee said.

"On Hemlock?" Evie repeated.

"Yeah," Dee Dee said. "Why?"

Evie suddenly felt empty. "No reason."

Chapter 16

"Go-mez," Alex threw Evie a sideways glance as they drove to school together.

"How long you gonna beef with me?"

It was Monday morning and Evie was still feeling tender from the Saturday date fiasco with Alex,

"I'm not beefing," Evie tried to answer casually, but it was no use. ^{faking it.} ~~He~~ hadn't even ^{his that} ~~apologized~~. Unless, that is, you counted ^{Aux} ~~the~~ text message she received the morning after. ^{their not out.}

Mrng Gomez. Cool prty

Srry u mssd it. TTYL

His text was less of an apology and more of an observation. So he went to a "cool party" and he was "sorry she missed it"? BFD. She couldn't hide her aggravation from ^{Alex} him and had remained silent for pretty much the whole drive. She kept her arms crossed over her chest and didn't add anything to his comments except an occasional mild "uh, huh" to something he'd said.

"Saturday night was so not my fault," Alex insisted. "I can't control Mondo."

"But you can control whether or not he comes with us on a date," Evie refused to look at him and instead looked out her window and focused on the fascinating scenery -- oil derricks and lemon groves that lined Highway 33 into Ojai.

"How was I supposed to know we were on a *date*?" Alex was perplexed. "You told me that you wanted to go out, *out*, and that you wanted to do something *different*. To me, hanging out with you and Mondo is different. You're my two favorite buds."

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"That's just it, Alex," Evie said. "I'm not your bud. I'm your girlfriend."

"But you're also my bud," Alex said. "I don't get it. Why do things have to be so different now that we're a couple? You're not trying to change me are you? Like mold me into a little version of what you think is ideal?"

"What? Of course not."

Evie didn't want him to change. She liked Alex for who he was and what he was about. And that was the reason why she thought he would make a great boyfriend, *her* boyfriend. So why wouldn't he act like it?

"I don't get it, Evie," Alex continued. "Sometimes I don't get you."

Evie discreetly glanced over at Alex and studied the outline of his profile. How could she have *not* have noticed how cute he was when they were just Flojo friends? When she had started Villanueva and had been introduced to him, he had a wide medical bandage adhered across the bridge of his nose. He also had cotton splints stuffed up his nostrils. Evie had figured that he was just like the other vanity plates at Villanueva and that he had also gotten a nose job. It wasn't until later that she learned that the bandages were from a surfing accident -- some newbie's foamboard had flung up right into his face and had shattered his nose and cheekbones. He was supposed to have kept the bandages and splints for at least 1 ½ weeks after his surgery, but upon hearing that some south westerly swell was coming in at the Sea Street break, Alex yanked the splints out himself, right in the school's parking lot. He just *had* to catch that swell. The yanking act alone made Evie think he was just about the coolest guy. And cool guys can make cool boyfriends, ~~right?~~ But why, she wondered, couldn't he be cool enough and just tell

no?

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Mondo that his company was not wanted on their dates? Evie studied Alex's profile more. Sigh. He was quite handsome.

"I'm sorry, Alex," Evie tugged on his elbow. "I just wish, sometimes, we could do things more, I dunno, romantic. You know what I mean?"

But Alex didn't say anything back except "uh, huh" as he turned up Monte Carlo 76 on his iPod.

* * *

They pulled into Villanueva, and before Evie hadn't even gotten out of Alex's truck she received a text from Dee Dee.

Rocio Here! OMG.

Lts to tell!

Dee Dee was *so* excited about having Rocio in Rio Estates and she wanted to do a girl's only lunch off campus to tell Evie and Raquel all about him. As if the both of them hadn't heard enough about him already. But Evie figured it would be a good breather from Alex. Eating lunch apart might give them time to think. She texted him by the start of first period.

Goin to O-hi w/

the grls 4 lnh.

To which he responded:

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Of course she read more into his two-word text. *Much* more. ‘No prob’ as in ‘No problem. I really don’t care what you do?’ Any textlator could translate Alex’s simple six characters (seven, if you included the space) to mean that he was annoyed with Evie. perhaps over Evie? It took everything in her power not to follow up with a response. During class, she found herself checking her cell just to re-read the two words and see if she could figure out their deeper meaning. Evie looked around the classroom, wishing she had either Dee Dee or Raquel in civics to help her decipher ^{the} cryptic text. Who, she scanned the ^g classroom, could she trust with such personal information? Absolutely no one. For one thing, the timing was bad. It would so not be good PR for Evie to be hosting the coolest party of the year yet not able to be cool with her man. People would definitely talk. She snapped her cell shut. She just would *not* think about it. But four minutes later, Evie was going crazy. She opened her cell again.

“Hey,” she leaned over to September Valdez, who sat next her. September was a senior and had had many boyfriends during her reign at Villanueva, she was also the vice president of Villanueva’s Senior Sleuth’s Book Club, so she *knew* how to read between the lines. “What do you think this means?” Evie showed her Alex’s message.

“Who sent it?” September took Evie’s cell and propped it up inside her civics book, assuming that Vasquez-Reyes Alarcon didn’t have X ray vision. She studied the text.

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"Alex sent it," Evie whispered from the side of her mouth. She kept her eyes focused on Vaquez. The last thing she wanted was her phone to be taken away, not at this crucial time in her life.

"Alex, as in your boyfriend Alex?" September asked.

"Uh, huh," Evie glumly answered.

"No smiley face or heart," September looked it over and shook her head.

"Hmmm...it doesn't look good." She handed the phone back to Evie as soon as Vasquez Reyes-Alarcon turned his back to face the dry board. Evie turned her phone off and felt her stomach sink. Yup, September knew what she was talking about.

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"So, he got in last night," Dee Dee went on about Rocio as she, Evie, and Raquel headed out of the student parking lot in Jumile. "He's staying in our guest room and ay, it was so hard to leave him this morning."

"He slept at your house?" Evie asked, from the backseat.

"Yes, and it was unbearable," Dee Dee cranked up Rebeld on her iPod. "I haven't seen him in over four months, and I just wanted to sneak in the guest room and be with him the whole night." She pulled out on to Ventura Avenue and made a left, towards O-hi Frostie.

"So why didn't you?" Raquel immediately turned the volume down, way down.

She hated Rebeld. "If I had some fine ass *papi chulo*, as you claim he is, under my roof,

Deleted: Pastilina Mosh

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that I hadn't seen for months, you best know I'd be giving him a big ol' grand welcome, *Americana* style."

"Raquel, you're scandalous!" Dee Dee turned up the volume and gave Raquel a look. "I *can't* sleep in the same bed with Rocio. My parents would *freak* seeing us come out of the same bedroom in the morning."

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"What you gotta do is set an alarm clock in his room," Raquel began. "Like, set it for an hour earlier, before your parents wake up. But you gotta make *sure* you wake up and get out of the room. Also, make sure you don't go in the room wearing any perfume or that hair stuff of yours that's gonna leave girl stink behind."

"You've obviously done this before," Evie said.

"You could say that," Raquel ~~faced~~ Evie with a sly grin.

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"You know, Eves," she started, "I think it was pretty shitty how Alex treated you Saturday night. I mean, I don't know, maybe you need to teach him a lesson, like light some fire under his ass."

"And how would I do that?" Evie asked.

"You should go out with some other dude," Raquel said. "Just for kicks."

"Raquel," Evie said. "I am *not* going to do something like that. That is *so* not me."

"Well, you never know..." Raquel said. "But I do."

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"Didn't you say that Rocio was gonna look into Stanford?" Evie asked Dee Dee. Evie really didn't care where Rocio went to college, but she just didn't want to talk about Alex anymore.

"Yeah," Dee Dee lit up a Midnight Berry at the first stoplight they came to. "In fact, he should talk with Sabrina. She would be the perfect person to talk with."

Chapter 17

O-hi Frostie was literally the last burger stand still standing on the downtown's main drag. Unlike the majority of new eateries that had overtaken the area, it offered outdoor dining without pretentious heat lamps, multiple page menus, or linen napkins. A handwritten menu board hung above the order window, and if it got too cold outside, you ate inside. And as far tableware went? No forks, spoons or knives. Only parchment thin paper napkins were offered to wipe off the thick grease their burgers left behind. By the time Dee Dee pulled up, O-hi Frostie's wooden picnic tables were already overtaken by backpacks and skateboards, courtesy of nearby Vista Sierra public high school students.

Only

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"Ew," Dee Dee looked them over. "*Vista Sierra.*"

Evie looked at Dee Dee in surprise. Such private school snootiness was unlike her.

"So when do we get to meet Rocio?" Raquel asked Dee Dee as they all got in line to order.

"Definitely at Evie's party," Dee Dee pulled up her sunglasses and studied the menu. Evie wondered why she even bothered to look the menu. The three of them always got the same thing: A gauc dog, which, of course, was a grilled Jodie Maroni hot dog smeared with thick guacamole and wrapped in a flour tortilla, and one large chocolate frostie each.

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"Wait, Evie's *party*?" Raquel balked. "We gotta wait until *then*? What, you ashamed of us or something?"

"*Por fa*'," Dee Dee furrowed her brow and shook her head. "Don't be so *pinga*."

It's just that he is going to be so busy researching colleges and universities that I'm barely going to see him myself."

As they all stood in line, two boys, both dressed in low rise, super tight black jeans and scrappy skater T's, approached Evie.

Raquel covered her mouth with her hand and muttered under her breath to Evie, "Wassup, rockers?"

"Are you Evie Gomez?" The one boy with eyeliner asked.

"Uh, yeah," Evie answered cautiously. She looked over at Dee Dee and Raquel. "Why?"

"We wanna know if your party's open," the other kid said.

"Open?" Evie asked.

"Uh, yes," Raquel suddenly took over and leaned over Evie. "It is. You can buy an invite if you want. We have a few left. Fifty bucks each. *Cash*."

"Fifty bucks?" The boy with eyeliner asked. He looked back at his three other friends, similarly garbed skaters boys, who were sitting on one of the picnic tables.

"Yeah, we ain't talking entry to some skatepark," Raquel looked over at his friends. "This is the *panchanga* of the year."

"No, it's just I gotta just tell my other friends," he said. He went back over to the picnic table.

As he left, his friend stayed in line with Evie, Dee Dee, and Raquel. He crossed his arms and checked out Dee Dee. It never failed. No matter what set a boy was with, Dee Dee was *always* checked out.

"Are you *all* gonna be there?"

Evie looked down, she was used to feeling invisible when blonde and blue eyed
Dee Dee was near. Dee Dee never went near the beach, let alone got in the ocean, yet
everyone always claimed that she had the classic "California Girl Look".

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"Of course, we're *all* gonna be there," Raquel said. "And what about you guys?"
She looked over at the guy with eyeliner. "Will Jared be in attendance?"

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"Who?" The kid looked back at his friends. "Stevie? Yeah, he'll be coming."

Raquel smiled and whispered to Evie, "In more ways than one."

"Raquel!" Evie covered her face in embarrassment.

"Yeah," Raquel put her arm around Evie. "My girl here, her boy's been slacking
off, so you guys make sure you show some love to the birthday girl."

"Raquel!" Evie ^{*even*} got more embarrassed.

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embarrassment

"There's gonna be booze, right?" the kid asked. He could care less about deadbeat
boyfriends.

"We ain't charging fifty bucks for Hawaiian punch." Raquel frowned. She took
her arm off Evie. "Of course, there's gonna be booze. Haven't you heard? It's an *open*
bar. Why do you think I just said it's gonna be the party of the year?"

"Okay," ^{*tagged by Raquel*} The boy known as Jared Leto came back with a wad of crumpled
twenties. "How about one thirty for all four of us?"

Evie looked at Raquel and Raquel looked back at her. Dee Dee rolled her eyes
and went back to looking up at the menu board.

"Sold!" Raquel grabbed the money from Jared's hands.

"So, don't we get a receipt or something?" the other boy asked.

“You want a receipt?” Raquel looked at them. She pulled out a small slip of white paper from her wallet and wrote: “Good for Four Entries.” She blotted her lips on the paper, leaving a deep, dark red smack print. “How’s *that*?”

“Cool.” The kid took the paper, not terribly impressed. Both boys went back to the picnic table to join their friends.

Dee Dee pulled Evie aside and looked over towards the boys. “Evie, you do *not* want those guys coming to your sixteener. They’re going to expect a lot for all that money.”

“Oh, they’re harmless,” Raquel said as she counted the bills. She glanced over at the boy with eyeliner. “And that Jared Leto one is *fine*. Besides, if they show up at all, they’ll probably all be so lit that they won’t even remember any of this transaction.”

Raquel gave Evie the money and went back to looking up at the menu board. “Lunch is on you, Eves.”

car. But it was just dinner, a dinner party, at the de LaFuentes. Cool enough. Very adult-like. “We’ll definitely come,” Evie said. “Sounds swanky.”

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“But one thing,” Dee Dee added. “You can’t tell Raquel.”

“Huh? Why?”

“It’s not like I’m keeping something from her, to be mean or anything. I just...”

Dee Dee searched for the right words. “I just don’t want to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. You know how Raquel can be coarse and sometimes make a scene. I can’t have anything go wrong at this get together.”

“But can’t you just tell Raquel that?” Evie felt awkward. She didn’t like keeping things between the three of them. “Can’t you just make it clear to her that she had to be on her best behavior?”

“I wish it was that easy,” Dee Dee sighed. “But you know Raquel. You know how she can be, and now that she’s all with Davey Mitchell, I don’t know what to expect from her anymore.”

It was true. Davey Mitchell had passed Raquel’s two-week mark. They had been going out for nearly a full month, and neither Dee Dee nor Evie had even been introduced to him. *That* was very telling. ■

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“You know,” Dee Dee said. “I wasn’t gonna say anything, but Raquel called our house, drunk, twice last week.”

“Are you serious?” Evie asked.

“Uh, huh,” Dee Dee said. “And I’m not taking about d-dialing my cell. She called on the landline, like at three in the morning, and woke up my father and everything. In

fact, he was the one who said it might be better if Raquel didn't come to the get together."

"Are you effing with me?" Dee Dee's father was the most accepting of Raquel, more so than Evie's own father, who she had thought was very forgiving of Raquel's antics. Evie, herself, had received the drunk dials and tipsy texts from Raquel, but they had all been very amorous chatter, consisting of Raquel going on and on about how much she loved Evie and how Evie was her "bestest, bestest friend in the whole wide world." But thank God she never d-dialed the Gomez's land line. Her mother would shit *stone*.

"So, you won't tell her, right?" Dee Dee asked Evie in a hopeful tone.

"I guess not," Evie still felt a bit deceitful. "I mean, I won't."

"Don't even mention it to your mother," Dee Dee said. "She might say something to Raquel's mother and, you know."

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"Oh, don't worry," Evie assured Dee Dee before hanging up. "I *definitely* won't tell my mother your dinner party. Promise"

"What party?"

It was Evie's mother and she was standing in the doorway of Evie's room. Keeping dinner plans on the D.L. *might become quite a chore when all parties involved lived within the residential tract of a gated community and had ears as big as Vicki Gomez.*

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"Mom, you were *so* not listening to my conversation!" Evie was furious.

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"I was not listening in," her mother said. "*Insisted* I'm just bringing this in." She held up Evie's student driving manual. "You left it in Lindsay's car." She put *it* ~~them~~ on the dresser and then continued to stand, aimlessly, in Evie's room. "So who's having a dinner party?"

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"You know, Evie," her mother started in a tone that Evie knew indicated that she had an idea. And it would probably be a lousy one. "Why don't you take Sabrina with you to the dinner?"

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"What?" Evie looked at her mother. The last thing she wanted was money off Sabrina barging in on her date with Alex. "Why would I take her?"

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"Because it would be a nice thing to do," her mother said. "Dee Dee and Sabrina have everything under the sun in common. Sabrina was a Hermana, and now Dee Dee is going to be one, too."

"We don't know that yet," Evie found herself feeling oddly jealous. What was so great about being a Hermana anyway? Was Dee Dee so desperate to have a sister for two in her life? If so, she could have Sabrina, that's for sure. "Dee Dee still has to be nominated."

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"Oh, Dee Dee's a doll," Vicki Gomez waved her hand aside. "Of course, she'll be nominated. Also, didn't you say that Rocia will be attending Stanford?"

"It's *Rocio*," Evie corrected her mother. "And I didn't say he was *attending* Stanford, I said he was going to look into it. Checking out a school is much different than attending one."

"I *know* that, Evie," her mother said. "I just thought you'd want to help get your sister get out of her rut. But speaking of school..."

Uh oh. Here it comes.

"How is your volunteer work coming along? Is your GPA going to be up before the next quality check? Your father asked me about it the other day, and I'm feeling a lot of pressure Evie."

She's feeling pressure?

"Mom, I've got it under control." Her mother was getting under her skin ~~and~~.

~~Fortunately, the land line rang again.~~

"I hope you got it under control, Evie," Vicki Gomez said ~~as she reached for the~~
~~phone before Evie~~. "It would be a shame if we didn't get to have your party. But if we do
have it," she raised her eyebrow, "I just *hope* I don't forget to send Frank and Graciela an
invite."

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Chapter 20

"You look really nice," Evie told Alex as they drove to the de LaFuentes house.

She was feeling the brown cords and cream-colored dress shirt that he was wearing. And she loved that he had surrendered his standard "bin special" flojos for the evening. He

had on actual shoes, black canvas Winos. Too cholo cute. *in a cholo kind of way.*

Yes, the dinner party at the de LaFuentes was perfect for mending the friction between her and Alex. Granted, it wasn't a night out at a super swanky Japanese restaurant, or a super romantic poetry reading at the beach, but still it was dinner, a dinner date, and he had dressed up. He had *planned* to look nice for her.

"Thanks," Alex looked over at her and smiled. "You do a good job cleaning up yourself, Gomez."

Evie put up the armrest and snuggled close to Alex. So far, so good. She could even look over being called Gomez.

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"You know what," Alex lowered the volume on his iPod. "I haven't been to Dee Dee's since last semester. Remember? When I went over to give her swimming lessons last semester, and Alejandra de los Santos and her little pack of *fresitas* were there?"

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Evie grimaced. "Ugh. How could I forget? I showed up thinking it would be just you, me, and Dee Dee, and you're, like, in the swimming pool, drooling all over Xiamora."

"I *really* don't remember that," Alex smiled jokingly.

"Well, I do."

"But I *do* remember," Alex started. "That the de LaFuentes had a pretty tight pad. They're probably gonna have some good grub tonight."

"Totally," Evie agreed. "But I can tell you one thing they aren't going to have."

"What?" Alex asked.

"They aren't going to have *Koi sushi*." Evie playfully pinched his side.

"Evie," Alex frowned over at her. "Let it go, will you?"

"I was just messin'." Evie cuddled up closer to him.

"No, you weren't," he shrugged a little. "You keep making these little jabs, like you're trying to make me feel guilty or something."

"No, I'm not." Evie could feel his arm tense up. She looked up at him. "Seriously, I was just joking."

Alex sighed. "You *keep* blaming me for that night. You know, maybe you were just expecting too much."

"Expecting too much?" Evie leaned over and turned down Monte Carlo 76.

"What, that I wanted to go out, alone, with my own boyfriend for once?"

"I dunno," Alex said. "It's like I feel like all this pressure that you want me to act a certain way."

Evie let go of Alex's arm and sat up in the seat.

"Alex," she started. "If I'm supposed to be your girlfriend, sometimes I wanna be treated like it."

"So, what, I treat you like crap or something?" he asked. He was now turning onto Camino Pacifico and was a few blocks from Camino Cortez, Dee Dee's street.

"I didn't say that," Evie said. "It's just seems that you treated me with more chivalry when I was just a friend."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asked.

"I mean, you were more of gentleman --"

"I know what chivalry means," Alex snapped.

"Look," Evie started. "All I'm saying is when you were trying to get my attention, you were all nice and everything, but now that I'm your girlfriend you, like, totally take me for granted."

"For granted?" Alex asked. "Like what? When?"

"Jeez, where do I begin?" Evie shook her head in bewilderment. How could he possibly be so clueless? "Like you flake on me, *a lot*, and --"

"I don't flake," Alex interrupted. He leaned over and turned up the music.

"Maybe I change my mind or my plans change, but I never just don't show up. I never just leave you hanging."

"So you think you didn't leave me hanging that night at Otani's?" Evie raised her voice, if only to talk over MC76 that Alex had so rudely turned back up.

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"Uh, *no*," Alex looked at her, puzzled. "We asked you to go to the party with us. You were totally invited, but you *chose* not to go."

"Oh, so let me get this straight," Evie started. "You and Mondo were kind enough to invite me to the party with the both of you. You *two* invited *me*. Wow, gee, Alex, I hope I didn't intrude on your little date with Mondo."

"You know," Alex said. "You're acting like a bitch. Like how Raquel would always nag on Jose."

"A *bitch*?" Evie snapped at him, her eyebrows practically rising off her forehead. "Well, *you're* beginning to act like Jose. When you're not dribbling over big chested waitresses, you're acting like some lazy ass Flojo. Why can't you ever plan something for us to do? All you wanna do is surf and who knows, maybe you're seeing Alejandra de los Santos behind my back."

"Hey," Alex pulled up in front of the de LaFuentes. He didn't turn off the engine. "I'm not the one who made out with my best friend's *significant other* in a photo booth behind her back."

Evie was now legally livid. "Alex, how could you say something like that? You know what happened that night. Jose attacked *me*! You know that's what happened, and now for you to use it against me is complete shit. God, Alex," Evie leaned to the far side of the seat. She crossed her arms and shook her head. "I thought I knew you. I thought I really, really knew you, but I guess I don't."

"That makes two of us," Alex bit back.

Evie could not believe what was happening. Tonight was supposed to be such a special night, a make up night for the Saturday evening before. She looked up at Dee

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Dee's house. The Malibu lights on the front lawn showcased the de LaFuentes' three tier stone fountain. Water cascaded down to each tier, and Evie was reminded of the back patio at Koi, where water had trickled from the decorative bamboo chutes into the koi-filled pond. And now, here was *another* night that was going to be ruined because Alex was being so insensitive.

Evie ~~felt~~ tired. She was tired of arguing with Alex. ~~Is this what is was like to go out with someone? Always in the mode of arguing, defending and accusing? She was not into it.~~ She took a breath as she reached around her neck and unhooked the clasp of her abalone necklace. "Here," her hand was shaking as she gave the necklace to Alex. "Just take it."

Alex looked at the necklace, then at her. "Evie..." he started.

"No, just take it." She didn't look him in the eyes, but rather at the necklace itself. The knots that held the pieces of abalone shell in place were hand twisted and looked like a third grade attempt at high fashion. How could she have *worn* something so hideous?

"Obviously, it's too hard for you to say or do nice things for me anymore," she told Alex. "Obviously, it's too much of a challenge. Here," she held out the cord. "Just take it."

Alex took the necklace. "So what is this supposed to mean?"

"I don't know," Evie said. "Maybe we should just take a break."

"A *break*?" Alex asked

"Yeah," Evie said curtly. "Time off."

"Okay," Alex looked out his side window. "Then why don't you just give me back the headphones? I gave those to you, too."

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“Fine.” Evie’s heart sank. The Bose headphones? Ouch. “I *will*”

“Whatever,” Alex leaned over and stuffed the necklace into his glove compartment. It looked completely out of place crammed between his empty jewel cases and miscellaneous paper trash. “If that’s what you want...time off. Now, that’s a *plan* that I wish I had thought of!”

Evie got out of his truck and slammed the door. “Well, let’s see how long you *plan to* carry it out!”

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Chapter 21

When Evie showed up in Dee Dee's room, she was puffy eyed and bare necked.

"Hey," Dee Dee's face dropped when she saw Evie at her doorway. "*Que paso?*"

She looked over ^{Evie's} her shoulder. "What's wrong? Where's Alejandro?"

Before Evie knew it, she was crying all over again. "We got in a fight. He just dropped me off and then took off!"

"What? *Serio?*" Dee Dee led Evie to the edge of her bed. "Here, sit down." She grabbed a box of blue Kleenex from the shelf under her night table. "What happened? Tell me."

Evie went into the horrid details about her argument with Alex--how Alex had accused her of being a bitch, a nag, and a two-timing best friend.

"And what did you say to all that?" Dee Dee asked.

"Nothing," Evie said. "I said nothing. I just gave him back his stupid necklace."

"You gave him back his necklace?"

"And the headphones," Evie blew her nose. "I mean, I'm gonna give those back to him when I get them."

"*Hijole,*" Dee Dee looked around her room, in shock. "I'm really, really surprised, especially the part about Alejandro saying all that stuff about you and Jose. Alejandro has always seemed like such a gentleman."

"He is, or was, I guess," Evie said. "I mean, he's not horrible, but he just acts so flaky, and sometimes he treats me like just a dude. He's always calling me Gomez and ~~his~~

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texts. He always says "talk to you later." Why doesn't he ever want to talk to me *soon*?, I just burn out. Is that so wrong?"

"Of course not," Dee Dee handed her more tissue. "You are the cutest girl, and you deserve a guy who is going to treat you like a princessa."

Princesa.

"You know (Josephina)" Evie wiped her nose. "At the reserve? The senior Hermana?"

"Uh, huh, *claro*." Dee Dee moved in closer to Evie, perhaps hoping that she had the inner scoop about her potential Hermana-ship?

"Well, Arturo is totally sweet to her," Evie said. "I mean, he just dotes on her, and I just don't understand why *I* can't have a boyfriend like that." She wiped the corners of her eyes.

"Arturo?" Dee Dee frowned in confusion. "I thought you said that he was a jerk, like a total control freak."

"Not to her, he isn't." Evie said. "Arturo is totally sweet and romantic to her."

"Evie," Dee Dee said. "You were totally talking smack about him, like just a month ago, and now you're saying that he's the ideal boyfriend?"

"I didn't say he was *the* ideal."

"In not so many words you did," Dee Dee said. "And when did you start calling him Arturo? I thought he was *Ar-turdo*."

"Huh?" Evie didn't know what Dee Dee was getting at. "No, everyone calls him Arturo."

"Everyone, but you," Dee Dee said.

"Dela," Marcela interrupted Evie and Dee Dee as she tapped on Dee Dee's bedroom door. *"La familia Fontes estan aqui."*

"Oh," Dee Dee jumped up from her bed. "Ay wey! They're already here!"

Evie was so drowned in her own sorrows that she had forgotten the whole reason why she was at Dee Dee's. She heaved a heavy sigh. She was not in the mood to spend the entire evening faking pleasantness.

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Dee Dee waved her fingers in the air like she was trying to make wet polish dry on her fingernails. "I am *so* nervous." She twirled around for Evie. "Do I look okay?" *do I?*

Evie looked up at Dee Dee. She hadn't noticed how truly adorable she looked. She was wearing a soft pink knee-length dress with a cream-colored tulle edge. Her blonde hair had been curled into ringlets and moussed to perfection.

"Yes," Evie managed to smile. "You look beautiful. No, better than beautiful. You look just like... *Evie looked around the Dee Dee's bedroom walls.* Anahi."

"Anahi?" Dee Dee's face lit up. There was no higher praise. She looked at herself in the bedroom mirror, placed her hand on her hip, and drew down her face, a total Anahi pose. "Really? You're not just saying that?"

"No," Evie promised. "And yes, *really*."

Anahi from RBD was Dee Dee's favorite, favorite singer/actress/chica *rubia* in the whole wide world of telenovelas. Dee Dee idolized Anahi and RBD.

Evie watched Dee Dee continue to fuss in front of the mirror, and then she caught a look at herself. Her face was red, puffy, and tearstained. The three coats of mascara she had applied earlier had collected in the outer corners of her eyes. There was no way she wanted to meet Rocio and his family looking all *la llorona*.

"Dee Dee," Evie got up from the bed and wiped her cheeks with the edge of her palms. "Can I borrow some concealer? For my eyes?"

"Claro, of course," Dee Dee went over to her bathroom and brought out a professional-looking black leather make-up case that possessed every item Covergirl and Mac could possibly carry.

"Sientese," Dee Dee patted the cushioned stool in front of her vanity table and mirror. As Evie sat down, Dee Dee laid out a line of small tubes, pencils, and a concealer airbrush on her mahogany vanity table. It reminded Evie of being at the dentist office where Dr. Mizraji, lined up every shiny, important looking instrument on the dental tray, ready to tackle any problem.

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Dee Dee stared at Evie's face. "Ooh, you've lost a lot of your tan. We'll definitely have to go with something *mas blanca*."

Evie tried to relax and just let Dee Dee take over. It felt soothing, almost therapeutic, to have her softly rub creams and lotions under her tired eyes.

"Drama should never drain the diva," Dee Dee smiled proudly. as she stepped back to admire her work. "*Bien. Mira.*" She stepped back to let Evie look at herself in the vanity mirror. "Now you look more like Maria Dulce to my Anahi." , ho?

Evie looked in the mirror. She thought she resembled RBD's Maite more than Maria Dulce, what with her dark hair and all. But either way, she would rather look like a Sweet Maria than a Weepy Evie.

When Dee Dee finally felt both girls were Rocio Ready, she led Evie down the stairs, where they were met by Rocio himself. He was waiting in the foyer. He was quite

the papi chulo. He looked just like the pictures Evie had seen of him with Dee Dee in Mexico City. He had a slight build and seemingly freshly cut hair. His eyes were very dark and intense and topped with thick, bushy eyebrows, almost like Dee Dee's father. And he was wearing a casual dark blue dinner jacket that made him look cosmopolitan and mature. Evie had seen boys dress similarly, but only in the fashion magazines that Dee Dee had laying around her room, never in person.

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"Dela," Rocio smiled as he took her hand and helped her with the last step. "*Te ves muy hermosa.*"

"Oh," Dee Dee covered her ~~smile~~ embarrassed smile with her hand. "*Really?*"

"Yes," Rocio's eye's widened as if she were crazy to question him. "*Really.*"

"Oh, Rocio, I—" Dee Dee stopped herself and looked over at Evie. "Oh, I am so sorry! This is Evie." She placed her hand on Evie's shoulder. "*Recuerdas? Mi amiga del alma?*"

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"*Si, si,*" Rocio took Evie's hand and actually kissed it. "*Estoy encantado.* You are even lovelier in person."

Lovelier? Evie couldn't ever remember being called lovely. Did people, boys, even talk like that? She guessed in Mexico City they did. And they kissed hands too? Wait until she told Raquel. Oh wait, she couldn't. She glanced down at her hands, relieved that her hand job from Michael Kelley still looked intact.

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"*Muchas Gracias,* Rocio," Evie smiled. "I've heard so much about you."

"Good things, I hope," he smiled. "Or at least, interesting."

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Dee Dee looked over Rocio's shoulder and into the great room. "Where are your parents?"

"Listen, they're already out in the backyard," A large grin continued to expand across Rocio's face. "There was immediate respect. I felt it, first thing."

"Really? Oh, Rocio," Dee Dee linked arms with him. "I am so happy you are here." She linked her other arm with Evie's. "I couldn't be *mas feliz*. My two favorite people *en el todo mundo!*"

As the three of them headed outside, Evie couldn't help but wonder where Raquel fit in between Dee Dee's 'two favorite people in the whole world.' She felt a bit ashamed, as though being at this dinner party was betraying Raquel. But, ^{she} Evie had to admit, Raquel *had* been getting a little crazy with her party patterns. Then again, they all got a little scandalous in their own way. *Were* there levels of acceptable craziness? Last year had been a pretty wild semester and, Evie wondered, would she have been invited to the special dinner with fancy pants Mexicans if she still had her choppy blue hair?

Dee Dee's parents, Frank and Graciela, were out in the backyard, under the large palapa lounging area with another couple that were obviously Rocio's parents.

"Dela!" Rocio's mother stood up and held her hands out to Dee Dee. "Long time no see, *mi'ja*. We miss you in ^{el} Distrito."

She wore a sleeveless black linen dress suit, accented by a dramatic red raw silk *rebozo* that Evie recognized from Studio Tres Rios. Her wavy dark hair was pulled back into an elegant bun and secured by a large simple silver barrette.

Dee Dee went over to hug her.

"Oh, I miss you too, Herminia. I miss D. F. in general. How are Fred and Ofelia? Oh, and what about Café Blanca? Have you been there lately?" Dee Dee stopped herself

and covered her face, again, in bashfulness. “*Lo siento*,” she apologized. “I sometimes go on and on about Mexico.”

Sometimes?

“It’s just that I have such a love for D.F.,” Dee Dee explained anxiously. “I really miss the night life. The U.S is nothing like Mexico, and California can be, *come se dice*, *oppressor?*” I mean. No theatre, no culture...”

No culture? Hadn’t Evie just taken her to Skate Punk to look at their new line of knitted skull bags? And what about the mural that was just dedicated to Rhell Sun on Sea Street? Where was all this coming from? And why hadn’t she been introduced to Rocio’s parents yet? She felt awkward just standing there.

Dee Dee finally glanced over at Evie. “Oh, *lo siento*,” She said as if she had just read Evie’s thoughts. “I forgot. This is my dear friend, *mi amiga mejor*, Evelina.”

“Hello,” Evie nodded towards Mr. and Mrs. Fontes and followed Rocio’s cue with his Spanish. “*Estoy Encantada*.”

“*Estamos encantados*,” Rocio’s parents nodded and smiled back.

That was pretty much the only exchange between them and Evie for the rest of the evening, and she was a bit relieved. The night seemed to be all about cosmopolitan culture, proper social etiquette, and correctly pronounced Spanish, none of which were her strong points. Besides, her eyes throbbed like two enormous soggy tea bags, and she just felt *so* exhausted.

Dee Dee sat down next to Rocio on one of the rattan benches, and Evie followed.

She watched Rocio and Dee Dee and couldn’t help but notice how perfect they seemed

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together -- Rocio practically finished Dee Dee's sentences and Dee Dee advised Marcela on what to keep out of Rocio's pasta (peppers, pine-nuts). It was like they were already mini adults, and it made Evie anxious. She was going to be sixteen years old. Would she *ever* meet the perfect guy for her?

"So, have you gotten used to the time change?" Dee Dee's father asked Rocio's father.

"We are getting along okay. Thank you," Senor Fontes replied.

Rocio's father had a slight build, like Rocio, and he also wore a sports jacket. Evie noticed that he was wearing impeccably shined leather shoes. She looked over at Senora Fontes. She had on pricey looking leather shoes, too -- black sling backs with a slim heel. Thank *God* Evie hadn't worn her flojos to dinner!

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"We're getting used to the time change much better than we're getting used to this American tequila," Rocio's father playfully held up his drink. "I was expecting, since you are such the big *chingon* out here in California, you'd be serving up Tequila Oro or something."

"This is actually *Temequila*," Frank held up his own glass. "I couldn't resist seeing how it compared to the real stuff, or, should I say, tequila manufactured in Mexico."

"Oh really?" Rocio's father looked at his drink again and nodded his head with a newfound interest. "So it *was* distilled here. *Que interesante*. But you know, you can't mess with tradition."

Graciela suddenly chuckled to herself.

"What is it?" Rocio's father looked over at her.

Graciela looked down in embarrassment as she tried to cover her smile with the edge of her own silk rebozo. "Oh, nothing," she said. "I don't want to be mean."

"Now you *have* to tell us," Rocio's mother nudged with encouragement.

"It just reminds me," Graciela looked over at Evie. "And I hope I don't upset you, Evelina."

"Me? Why would I get upset?" She had no idea what Graciela could be talking about.

"I was just thinking about your father and when we had brunch at your parent's house, remember that?"

"Oh, yeah," Evie said. "I mean, yes."

As Evie's mother had mentioned, she had hosted a small, intimate brunch to welcome the de LaFuentes back from Mexico. It was last October and the morning after the big party that Raquel's mother had thrown ~~them~~. *just earlier that week*
The brunch held
Mazes also for the de La Fuentes.

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"And your father," Graciela started to chuckle again as she turned away from Evie and looked at Rocio's parents. "Evelina's father owns a *panaderia* and he makes, or *did* make, pan, pan dulce *sin manteca*."

The eyebrows of Dos Fontes rose simultaneously and soon both parents joined Graciela in laughter.

"*Sin manteca*?" Rocio's mother looked at Evie. "Without lard? *Figate*?"

But it was Graciela who answered. "*Si, si*." She started to laugh so hard that soon she started coughing. She quickly covered her mouth with a cloth napkin. Evie secretly hoped that the napkin would stay put.

"Now, Graciela. *Stop* it," Frank de LaFuente put his plate down on the glass table and came to Evie's aid. "*Mira*, we never know anything until we take chances. Right, Evie?"

"Right," Evie smiled meekly. Could she feel more like an ugly American trying to overtake the culinary art of authentic Mexican baking *good*

"*Right*," Dee Dee shook her head with a pronounced nod. "And *I* liked it. I couldn't even tell the difference, that much."

* * * * *

As the dinner plates were cleared and the three couples continued to reminisce about the fabulously wonderful city life in D.F., Evie found comfort by retreating to the kitchen. She figured she could hang, at least for a little while, with Marcela and the helper that the de LaFuentes had hired to help her prepare and serve food. *She* pulled out a kitchen stool and sat down to check for cell phone messages. There were none.

"*Que te pasa?*" Marcela asked Evie. It was apparent that she was hiding out. After all, why would a guest be in a hot kitchen when she could be outside enjoying a balmy evening outside?

She "Nothing," Evie lied. Ever since she had been spending more time with Dee Dee, Evie had gotten to know Marcela better. Marcela was a lot younger than Lindsay, almost thirty years to Lindsay's sixty. Evie sometimes felt Marecela's contemporary chica

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insight was more helpful than Lindsay's matronly madre judgment. "It's just my boyfriend and I—"

Marcela's cell phone suddenly vibrated from her hip. "*Ay, lo siento*, Evelina," she apologized as she unclipped it from the waistband of her stonewashed jeans. She read the text. "Oh, it's my baby's papa. I have to call him."

"No worries," Evie said. "Go ahead, make your call."

As soon as Marcela turned her back and got on the phone, Evie found a cheese knife and cut herself the tiniest sliver of the Spanish membrillo from the ~~a~~ slab on a serving tray. She looked over at Marcela, who now held her cell close to her ear. She had a big smile on her face and was looking over her French manicure. God, did *everyone* have *someone* in his or her friggin' life? Evie cut herself another piece of membrillo, this time with cheese.

"*E-vie*," Dee Dee came into the kitchen. "I wondered where you were. Come on," she took Evie's hand and pulled her off the stool. "We're about to have dessert. Why are you being so antisocial?"

Evie had no choice but to quickly swallow the quince and cheese she had crammed in her mouth and follow Dee Dee out to the backyard. The glass hurricane lamps on the main patio table had been lit, and now both Graciela and Rocio's mother were fully draped in their *rebozos*. Surely for show, Evie guessed--it was such a warm night and no cover-ups were really needed.

Marcela's helper soon came out with the tray of quincepaste and cheese.

Thankfully each slab looked perfectly intact. *Whew*. Evie had done a good job with the cutting. No one would suspect that she had indulged in therapeutic snacking.

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“Oh, *this is just wonderful*,” Rocio’s mother raved as the helper set the tray down. “The whole dinner was *excelente*.” She put her hand over Graciela’s. “And the *bolillos* you served? *Muy blandito!*”

“Gracias, Herminia,” Graciela smiled as she poured hot water from a small teapot into delicate teacups.

“So, tell us, Rocio,” Frank de LaFuentes started. “How has it been looking at schools? You know, I have to say,” he ribbed playfully. “I’m a little offended you haven’t looked into Channel Islands.”

“No, no, sir,” Rocio placed his fork on his dessert plate as though a long explanation on his part was going to commence. “It’s nothing against CI. I would love to attend Channel Islands. The campus is so beautiful, and I’d be closer to Dela.” He looked at Dee Dee and squeezed her hand. “But I need to get my MBA from a university that has the best department available. I can’t waste time if I want to start a business and a family by the time I’m in my mid-twenties.” This time he did not look at Dee Dee, but Evie noticed he squeezed her fingers again.

“Well, that’s very admirable,” Frank said in a tone you’d expect to be followed by a pat on the back and the lighting of a cigar. “Very admirable. I can respect that.”

Evie looked over Rocio. He was so mature and just, well, *capable*. He was barely eighteen years old and already thinking of a future with Dee Dee? In a way, he sorta reminded Evie a little bit of Arturo. Rocio was also moving away from his family and home to follow a dream, whatever that dream was. Was he moving to California to attend an American business school, or was he moving to California to attend to his American

Deleted: He

girlfriend? Either way, he was making plans. He was doing something to benefit both him and Dee Dee.

Evie opened her evening bag, discreetly checked her cell phone, and sighed. No text or message from Alex

Chapter 22

The first thing Evie did on Monday morning at school was return her beloved Bose headphones to Alex. She decided to leave them in his locker with no note, no explanation, no *nada*.

It was two days since their fight and he still hadn't called or texted her and she wasn't about to phone or text him either. After all, he was the one who had left her hanging at the de LaFuentes dinner party. If anyone deserved an apology, she did.

"I can't *believe* he wants your headphones back." Raquel leaned against the lockers. "What an asshole. Weren't they like a gift?"

"Yeah," Evie placed the headphones under his grey and white Senor Lopez pullover. She looked at the pullover and felt slightly deflated. They both used to wear their pullovers together on cold mornings at Sea Street. "He's just being a jerk," she remarked. "He asked for them back as soon as I gave him back my necklace."

Raquel peered over Evie and into Alex's locker. "You know, we could do some serious damage here. I could plant some lawn and then call the school, anonymously. Friend or not, I ain't got no loyalty when it comes to some dude messing with my girl."

"Raquel, *no*," Evie slammed his locker door shut. "He's not that big of a jerk. Besides, he has the combination to my locker and who knows? He might be talked into retaliation via Mondo."

"Yeah," Raquel reluctantly agreed. "He ain't worth it anyway. It's a good thing you don't have any classes with him. That would be a major drag. I remember with Jose, I'd have to see his ugly mug in Spanish and then his skinny white ass legs in P.E. That's why I now *refuse* to date anyone who goes to the same school."

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“Or someone who even *went* to school,” Evie found herself teasing.

“Excuse me?” Raquel cocked one eyebrow. “You know, if I wasn’t such a caring ADA, I *could* say something, but I won’t. You’re ‘La Sad Girl’ now, so I’m just gonna be all nice and supportive.” She put her arm around Evie and they started down the hall for their first period classes. “But check it out, now you and I can be a team, *the* team. Forget last semester and all that Flojo crap. We’re *Solas Patrollas*.”

“But you still have Davey,” Evie pointed out. “And Flojo or not, I won’t give up wearing my flip flops.”

“I know, neither can I,” Raquel looked down at her own jewel encrusted flojos. Two of the green swarovski gems had fallen off. “You know what?” Raquel started. “I say we skip the rest of the day and head on down to L.A. Let’s go shopping. I could use some new flojos.”

“Nuh, uh, no way,” Evie turned the corner, towards first period. As good as a shop day in Los, sounded, she couldn’t afford to skip class and get in trouble. Her party depended on her being the perfect student. “If I get caught ditching my - .”

“I promise, you won’t get caught,” Raquel said confidently.

“How you gonna promise that?” Evie asked.

Raquel opened her binder and flaunted a wad of slips. They were official Villanueva slips, white sheets of 3 x 5 thin paper, for every excusable reason to be out of school: Off campus slips, tardy slips, absentee slips, and they were all signed, seemingly, by Headmaster Covarrubias.

“How did you get those?” Evie couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

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"I've got my connections," Raquel bragged as she pulled down her Utopia Cop Out sunglasses and shut her binder. "Come on, let's go find Dee Dee and get out of here."

* * * * *

Dee Dee found a parking space for Jumile right in front of Decade on Robertson Boulevard. Dee Dee had suggested they shop at Fred Segal, and Raquel had wanted to go to Mud D., both on Roberston, but Evie was the one who needed to mend her heart and buy a new necklace. Her naked neck announced to everyone that she was Alex-less and she wanted that to change. She had first dibs on where they shopped and she picked Decade.

"You are *so* much better without him," Raquel insisted as she got out of Jumile with Evie and Dee Dee "Alex is such a punk ass. I told you how he was at that party, right? The one on Hemlock?"

"Yeah, you did tell me about that party," Evie told Raquel. She didn't want to hear about that night all over again.

Evie She hit the buzzer near the front glass doors of Decade and a clerk inside the shop let the three girls in. As soon as they entered, they were all sent back in time via the shop's exquisite interior -- polished blonde wood floors, zebra skin throw rugs, and *mid century* space-age swag lamps hanging from the ceiling created a sophisticated glamorous mood that you just didn't find, at say, Forever 21. Decade on Robertson supposedly had an

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ample inventory of designer vintage couture and ~~prices right out of Evie's price range,~~ ^{w/ ample prices} but she had seen enough red carpet poses to learn that a lot of her favorite stars shopped at Decade. It would be fun to browse and a little retail therapy would definitely get her mind off Alex.

"Yeah, so there I was," Raquel went on anyway as she followed Evie and Dee Dee into the shop. "Just kicking back, blazing some one hitters with some new friends, and here comes Jose, with Mondo and Alex. They don't even know any of the Bard Boys. I mean, *I* know the Bard crew, but they were acting as if they were part of the g-unit or something."

"I really don't think Alex thinks *that*," Evie said. Sure she was mad at Alex, but he didn't deserve to be sorely misrepresented.

"Welcome to Decade," a tall, slender salesclerk ^{Said:} with long hair and in a long sleeved shirt and vintage silk ascot looked over at the three girls. He was helping a woman with the plumage on a felt hat. "I'll be right with you."

"Oh, thanks," Evie smiled at him and pulled the hood of her Senor Lopez off her head. She immediately wished she had dressed nicer. She stood out like a sore beach bum. ^{Yellow Roxy sweat hoodie}

"You know Evie," Raquel looked through the heavy bracelets arranged on a flesh colored mannequin's arm. "You need a man. A *real* man. You know what? I'm gonna hook you up with one of Davey's friends. He's got lots of cool friends."

Evie looked over the simple but elegant dresses. There were only about ten dresses one each display rack, a sign that they were most definitely out of Evie's price

range. She carefully pulled out a short, black, strapless dress and glanced at the price tag. Ew, so many zeros for such a little amount fabric! Evie immediately put the dress back.

"I am *not* going out with some Bard Boy," she told Raquel. "There is *no* way in hell."

"Oh, *my*." Raquel pulled her sunglasses half way down and peered at Evie. She put on a southern accent and poised her hand on her chest. "Well, ess-cuse *me*... Muss Evie. I do declare I over spoke."

"Evie needs a gentleman, a *caballero*, right, Evie?" Dee Dee took down a quilted metallic bag from one of the glass shelves. Each shelf had only four or five handbags on display, totally unlike Tilly's where the totes were crammed on racks near the boogie boards and vintage rock Ts. Dee Dee placed the chain strap over her shoulder and looked at herself in one of the oval full-length mirrors. "You know, as soon as Rocio moves out here, I'm sure he'll make lots of new acquaintances who will be dying to date someone as cute as you."

"Why do I have to date anyone *at* all?" Evie exhaled. Dee Dee and Raquel were talking like grand *tias*, deciding between themselves what was best for her, and she didn't want any of it. "It's like the both of you think that all I *need* is some boy to make things all better," she told them. "Look at Sabrina. She was with Robert for, like, two years and he was, like, perfect for her, but look what happened to her."

"You know, I just thought of something," Dee Dee added as she continued to look at herself with the bag. "If you're not talking to Alex, who's going to take you to your party?"

Deleted: She felt like pulling her hair out.

"Dee Dee," Raquel looked over at her in amazement. "Didn't you just hear Evie? It's not like she's having some backwards friggin' quinceanera and she has to have some boy escort her."

"*Right*," Evie said. At least Raquel was getting where she was coming from.

"I know," Dee Dee agreed. "But she can't be at her own party all by herself."

"She's not *going* to be by herself," Raquel said. "We'll be there, and we'll be so loaded from freebie ad bevs who cares if Alex is there or not?"

"Yeah," Evie said. "Besides, you guys are acting like I'm never going to talk to Alex again," "I mean, it's not like we officially broke up." It helped her to say it out loud. She and Alex did *not* break up. They were just on a time out. *Big* difference. "Besides, it's not like my party's tomorrow. Who knows what will happen between now and then."

"Yeah, but you did give him back his necklace," Dee Dee said

Deleted: Raquel

"And the Bose headphones," Raquel added. "Besides, we don't even know if your
parents are gonna let you have the party."

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"Right," Evie's mood dropped again. Her quality check was coming out in a little *less than* over a week and she had yet to check in on her hours or get Dee Dee to start on her essay. Evie shook her head as if she could shake off the worry. No, she was not going to stress about her party right now. She was going to have fun.

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The salesclerk finished helping the other customer and came up to Evie. *as she* She had
just pulled out another dress, a Chanel. "Would you like to try that on?" he asked.

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"Um," Evie glanced at the price tag. It was a little *too* couture, even for fun's sake. Knowing her luck, she'd snag the fabric or break the zipper and she'd have to pay

for the damages. After the fender bender, she couldn't afford any more avoidable accidents. "I don't think so. It doesn't look like my size."

"You can't go by label sizes with vintage couture," the clerk said. "You just have to feel if the dress works or not."

"Feel?"

"Yes," He looked over Evie. "We have quite a large collection of petite sizes."

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"What are you looking for?"

"Um, I don't really know," Evie said. She really was just looking to have fun

"Something fancy," Dee Dee said

"Anything rock star-like?" Raquel asked.

"We do have a few ~~Osne Clark~~ pieces," the clerk said. "Why don't I set you up in a dressing room and I can bring a few pieces out from our gallery?"

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Collection? Pieces? Gallery? Evie thought they were looking at clothes, not bidding for art.

"Yeah, bring some out," Raquel answered for Evie.

"~~Of course,~~" the clerk said. "I'll be back shortly." He left for another room in the back of the shop.

Deleted: Sure

"So when is your driving test?" Raquel asked Evie.

"Next week," Evie answered

"And you're all ready?" Dee Dee asked "Right?"

"I think so," Evie said confidently, again if only to convince herself. "I've been practicing with my dad and Lindsay for, like, the last month."

The first dress that caught her eye was long and hot pink. It was ^{actually} less a dress and more a gown. She had never worn a *gown* before. She had always thought that if she and Alex went to prom together she would wear a long dress, but would it be a gown? The prom was still two years away, *and* she wasn't even with Alex or anything. *Alex*. Ugh. She *had* to stop thinking about him.

Evie slipped out of her flojos, her shorts and her ^{Roxy hoodie} ~~Senor Lopez~~ and slipped on the gown. She came out of the dressing room and walked over to the three ^{Sided} ~~way~~ mirror.

"Man, you look *so* cool," Raquel ~~said~~ *raved*.

"Yes," the clerk agreed. "It's a very body aware gown."

"~~Uh, well~~, I don't know if I want to be so aware of my body," Evie modestly crossed her arms. But she had to admit the gown was cool, very cool. It was a halter gown and the back went down super low. It had a slit that practically went up to her left armpit and if she wasn't showing enough skin already, there was a diamond shaped peek-a-boo opening right in the middle of her chest. God, she never imagined that she could look so, dare she say it, *hot*, in a dress.

"No, no," Dee Dee said. "It looks good, gives you hips."

"Really," Evie looked in the mirror. "You thinks?"

"Evie," Dee Dee said. "Your hips are speaking Spanish!"

Evie covered her mouth and laughed.

"Oh, my God," the clerk also laughed. "I *have* to use that line. There's someone who needs to make my hips speak Spanish and I'm not even bilingual!"

Suddenly the shop door's buzzer rang.

"Oh, ~~it never ends~~," the clerk ~~rolled his eyes~~ as he went to release the front door.

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the gown

"You *gotta* get it," Raquel looked Evie over.

Evie looked at the tag. "Oh, my God. I shouldn't even be wearing this!"

"Why?" Dee Dee asked. "Cuantos?"

"It's like two thousand dollars!"

"*And?*" Raquel asked.

"And, *hello*, I don't know about you, but *I* don't have two thousand bucks for a dress or anything, especially after the whole Lindsay fiasco. *Please*" Evie started back into the dressing room to take off the gown. "I'm just trying on things for fun."

"Evie, do you *like* the dress?" Raquel asked.

"Well, yeah. But that doesn't mean -"

"Do you *love* the dress?"

"Well, yeah," Evie said. "No question." She looked at herself in the mirror. Her hips, for sure, did not lie. The gown actually gave her curves. Not quite hourglass, but there was some concave action going on at her waist.

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"Then you *are* getting the dress," Raquel opened her Roxy tote and pulled out her wallet.

"Raquel!" Evie exclaimed when she saw Raquel pull out her wallet. "You are *crazy*. You are *so* not buying me this dress!"

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"Why not?" She nonchalantly pulled out her credit card. "It'll be my birthday present to you."

"Raquel, *no*," Evie covered her entire face. She couldn't believe what she was hearing

"Evie, yes. I can't have my ADA looking all *scrapa* at her own party. Right, Dee Dee?"

"Uh, right," Dee Dee said. Even she looked a little awkward about the whole transaction that was about to take place. "Now I feel bad. The present I got for Evie sucks compared to the gown."

"Well, if you want," Raquel said. "You can pay for half of it."

"Uh, I don't feel *that* bad," Dee Dee said.

The clerk came back. "So have we made a decision?"

"Yes," Raquel handed him her credit card. "We'll take it. And we'll take ~~that~~ for her," she directed towards Dee Dee, who still had the quilted bag draped over her shoulder. "And we'll have them both wrapped," Raquel added. "They're gifts."

the purse

Chapter 23

When Evie got home from L.A, she immediately went her room to try on her gown again. *What* would she tell her mother? The gown was far from being a "great find" at one of the *segundas* downtown. but then again, Evie snobbishly figured, what ~~did her~~ mother know about vintage couture?

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As she was zipping up her gown, she heard her cell phone ring and fumbled in her bag looking for it. But before Evie found her phone, it stopped ringing and then her bedroom's landline rang. It was Dee Dee.

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"I've got something major to tell you," Dee Dee said. Her voice sounded serious.

"What? Don't tell me that Raquel's credit card was stolen and we gotta return everything?" Evie teased. She looked herself over in her closet mirrors. ~~Damn, she was~~

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~~Caliente!~~

"No, don't say that," Dee Dee laughed. "I would hate to have to return my purse. God, don't you just love your dress?"

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"I'm wearing it right now," Evie confessed sheepishly.

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"Are you serious?" Dee Dee asked. "So why do you think Raquel has all this extra ~~cash~~ ^{cash}?"

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"From not having to cover Jose's ass all the time," Evie said. She actually like that she knew something about Raquel that Dee Dee didn't. Sure they were all ADAs, but she could be a bit of a control freak when it came having first run information on either friend. "Remember?" ~~she~~ ^{she} asked. "Raquel was always paying for him when he ran out of his trust money."

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"I ~~guess~~," Dee Dee said "I mean, I didn't know him when they were going out, but she had said he was pretty ~~on the chido side~~. I'm taking my ~~purse~~ to school tomorrow. Wait until Alejandra de los Santos sees it."

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"Yeah" Evie started. "Wait until —" She stopped ~~herself~~. She ~~really~~ had no one to impress with her ~~sexy hot pink halter gown~~. Alex might not even *be* at her party.

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"So anyway," ~~Dee Dee sighed~~, "I have to tell you. Rocio came back today, from looking at schools in the Bay Area."

Deleted: Dee Dee sighed

"Cool," Evie continued to look at herself again in the mirrors. "Has he made any decisions?"

"Yeah," Dee Dee started slowly. "And it looks like he doesn't want to go to college out here, at all."

"Oh, no. Are you serious?" Evie knew Dee Dee must be bumming hard. She was surprised that she hadn't requested an ER/RE! meeting.

"He doesn't want to leave D.F.," Dee Dee explained. "And I don't blame him. So," she cleared her throat. "I'm thinking I'll move back to Mexico ~~too~~, so I could be closer to him."

"*What?*" Evie laughed. "~~Yeah, right~~. Dee Dee, you are *so* not moving back to Mexico City. You're crazy."

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"No, I'm not," Dee Dee asserted. "I already talked to Graciela about it. She said I could stay with her family in Coyacan." She paused. "That's where Frida used to live, with Diego."

"Yeah, I *know* that, Dee Dee." Evie felt irritated. "But wait, I don't understand. How can you just move back to D.F.? You just started at Villanueva, and what about Las Hermanas?"

"I know," Dee Dee sighed. "I feel really bad about that."

"Feel *bad* about it?" Evie asked. It now seemed apparent that Dee Dee was serious. "Dee Dee, are you saying you don't want to be a Hermana anymore? I can't believe this."

"No, I'm not saying that. I definitely want to be a Hermana, I'm just saying that I don't think I can be one at this time. I'm going to have —"

"*At this time?*" Evie couldn't believe what she was hearing. "So when do you think you can *become* one? When you're like thirty years old or something?"

"You didn't let me finish," Dee Dee interjected. "Evie, I need to make a decision, and right now my decision is that I want to be closer to Rocio."

"But Las Hermanas is all you've been talking about forever. What about the first dance, with your dad? And your mom? She *wanted* you to be a Hermana."

"Evie," Dee Dee said. "I don't know what to tell you except that it's really my own decision, and for you to bring up my mom like that..." her voice got soft. "I, I just don't want to get into it right now."

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"Yeah, but Dee Dee," Evie started

"Evie, I really don't want to talk about it with you."

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Dee Dee practically hung up on Evie. She was stunned. How could so many things change in a matter of days? First, she had lost her boyfriend and now her best friend was leaving! She called Dee Dee back, but her call went straight to voice mail.

Evie then texted Raquel with the emergency code of ER/RE! but didn't hear back from her all night.

Chapter 24

"Hello?" Arturo waved his hand in front of Evie's face. "Anyone there?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Evie looked up. She was feeding Charnuco and had no idea that Arturo had even been talking to her. "I wasn't paying attention."

Evie was still in a bit of a daze. Dee Dee announcement ~~the night before~~ was still weighing heavily on her mind. How could she even think of moving back to Mexico? On their drive to school, Dee Dee ~~had~~ refused to discuss it at and Evie didn't push the

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Hung up on her hang up

subject. It was a long day at Villanueva for Evie. Raquel didn't go to school and Evie was without Alex's shoulder to lean on. *Alex*. His absence was sinking in.

"So, do you want to?" Arturo asked.

"Want to what?" Evie asked.

Arturo cocked his head down in confusion. "Take the horses out. We're pretty much done here, and I know your housekeeper doesn't come for another hour, so I was thinking we could take them out."

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"You mean to ride?" Evie asked.

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"No," Arturo smirked. "Take them out on a date."

Evie laughed. Actually, what Arturo had said wasn't that funny, but somehow his mild sense of humor was rubbing off on her. "I totally want to go riding," Evie patted

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Chamuco. "But wait, I thought volunteers weren't allowed to ride the horses."

"They can't unless they have seniority. Seniority in *experience, not age*," he smiled. "And I know from your file that you used to spend time with horses up here, when you were a kid, right?"

"Uh, right," she told Arturo. Evie wasn't about to admit that she had colored her file, just a wee bit. She had gone horse horseback riding one time, and one time only, when she was, like, ten years old. But Arturo didn't need to know specifics.

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"Why don't we take Chamuco out?" she wasn't asking asked.

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"Nuh, uh. No way," Arturo said.

"No, come on," Evie insisted. "We're totally friends. Look." She pulled out a carrot of her front pocket and fed it to him. "Ah, dun't choo like that, huh, Cha-muu-co boy?"

Alex winced.

"What?" Evie asked.

"The babytalk," he said. "It's gotta go."

Evie looked at him. Did she hear right? "Okay, boss. Whatever you say. Let me
just go get my pullover and I'll be ready." "

Deleted: " she patted Chamuco. "

"We can take Sprinkles and Panchito out," Arturo said. "They could use the
exercise. You can take Sprinkles," he suggested. "He's just about the most gentle horse
we have."

Evie gave Chamuco a hug around his neck and then sprinted to the supply shed.
Just as she grabbed her Senor Lopez pullover from her backpack, she noticed the light on
her cell phone was blinking. She couldn't resist. She opened up her phone and yes, it was
a text from Alex.

Can we talk?

Evie's heart dropped. *Oh*. She wanted to text him back, right away.

"Evie!" Arturo called out. "Come on, we're losing the sunset. There's this great
ridge to see it."

Sunset? Arturo hadn't said anything about a sunset.

She looked over Alex's text. What to do, what to do? Evie closed her phone and
tossed it back into her backpack. She would text Alex as *soon* as she returned from her
ride on Sprinkles.

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When ~~she~~ came out of the shed, Arturo was already saddled up on Panchito and held the reins to Sprinkles. She was a bit taken by the way he looked, high up on Panchito. Arturo looked *nicæ*. He looked somewhat manly and definitely in charge. Maybe there *was* something about a boy in cowboy boots. ~~Being on a horse couldn't help~~ either.

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black mustang

Evie felt a little nervous as she ~~started~~ towards Sprinkles. She hadn't been on a horse in years. She lifted up her left foot, stuck her sneaker in the stirrup, and clumsily hoisted herself up onto ~~Sprinkles. Oomf!~~ She flopped ungracefully onto poor Sprinkles' back. She immediately sat up in the saddle and took hold of the reins.

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Arturo looked ~~over~~ Evie. "You look good," he nodded "He agrees with you." He tapped Panchito on his side and pulled the reins to the left. "Come on."

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Evie nudged Sprinkles with the inside of her sneaker, but he did not move. She nudged him again. Still nothing. Arturo was already a few yards ahead of her and heading towards trail that led from the reserve.

"Wait, Turo," Evie called out. "You didn't give me a gentle horse. You gave me a dead one!"

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Arturo looked over his shoulder. "Give him a good kick."

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"Kick? I don't want to hurt him!"

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"He can take it," Arturo ~~called back~~, "Your foot's gonna feel just like a little baby pat to him."

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Evie nudged Sprinkles ~~side~~ a bit harder, and he suddenly got himself (and ~~her~~) into gear.

"Whoa!" Evie wasn't quite prepared for his *giddyup* to just get up and go so quickly. She held onto the saddle horn and tried to keep her balance, but it was a bit of a challenge, to say the least. Sprinkles wasn't the most steady ride. His body ~~fell into~~ a rhythm that Evie couldn't follow and her bottom was already getting more of a work out than she was planning on. Did Arturo say they were gonna ride for a whole *hour*?

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But fifteen minutes later, the four of them, Evie, Arturo, Sprinkles, and Panchito, were already deep in the chaparral of the riverbank, among flora and fauna that Evie had never even known existed. ~~Even though it was mid-winter, Cacti tunas were in bloom and Evie caught a family of cottontail rabbits scurrying across the dirt path.~~ How *long* had she lived by the river, in a neighborhood ~~and on a street named for the river,~~ and yet she hadn't spent anytime ~~near~~ the actual river that ran through the whole county?

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"Yeah,

"Oh, my God," Evie marveled. "I *love* it out here. I can't believe I've lived so ~~here~~ all my life, and, not once have I've never come up ~~this way~~."

Arturo ~~also~~ looked around. "~~Yeah, a lot of people forget what's in their own~~ backyard. Especially," he looked at Evie and smirked, "if you live in *Rio* Gates."

"Hey," Evie teased back. "I can't help where my parents bought a house."

~~"Yeah, but you can help where you spend your time," Arturo said. "But~~ *Nah,* ~~besides,~~ I think because I'm not from around here, I make it a point to explore more than the average person. ~~Sometimes, after my shift, I come up here on Princesa and take a sunset ride.~~"

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Hor-
"Princesa?" Evie asked. "And who does Josephina ride?"

"Oh, Josephina won't go horseback riding. She's never been out here."

"What?" Evie asked. "You are *not* serious."

"Yeah, I am," Arturo said casually. "I'm the one who takes Princesa out for exercise. Josephina got Princesa for her sixteenth birthday, but I can't remember the last time she's even worked out with her." Arturo sighed and shook his head. "That's the problem with some people. They think that horses are really cool and that they make cute pets. They don't realize how much work they are. Oh, hey, he looked ahead. Check it out." He pointed out a grassy field they were just riding up to. "See where it's all matted down over there, in the middle of the field?"

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"Uh, huh," Evie looked over.

"That's where coyotes were sleeping," Arturo said. "From the size of the impression, you can tell it was a large pack of them."

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"*What?*" Evie looked around nervously. "Coyotes? You're kidding, right? There was no mention of river coyotes at orientation. God, something is *always* out to get you!"

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"What do you mean?" Arturo asked.

"I mean, when I'm surfing, I worry about sharks, and now that I'm horseback riding, I have to worry about coyotes!"

"You don't have to worry," Arturo laughed. "They only come out at night. We have a *little* bit of time before the sun goes down, and besides, I'd protect you."

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"I can protect myself, thank you," Evie teased indignantly.

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"So, I didn't know you surfed," Arturo reined to the left, leading Panchito, as well as Evie and Sprinkles, down a smaller trail.

"Uh, huh," Evie said. "Well, I haven't actually for a while." She realized it had been over a month since she had gone to Sea Street with Alex. "I used to surf a lot with my boyfriend. I mean, my sorta boyfriend."

"Is he the one who gave you that necklace you always wore?"

"~~The necklace? You mean mine?~~" Evie asked. She didn't think Arturo would notice something ~~like the accessories that volunteers~~ wore.

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"Yeah, the shell one," Arturo said.

Guess she was wrong.

"Yeah, Evie said. "But I gave it back to him,"

"Did you break up with him?" he asked.

Just a tad privado, don't you think, Turo?

"No, not really." Evie didn't feel like going into the details, especially with Arturo, who was in a solid steady relationship and wouldn't understand the gloominess ~~of sudden singledom~~. It had been about four days since her argument with Alex, and his absence from her life had become painfully apparent. She missed the little conversations they'd have on their way to school and she missed how he'd always take her to the reserve. It was, really, very sweet and considerate of him to always ask how she was getting home from work. ~~He really could be the concerned boyfriend at times~~. She kept rethinking what had gone wrong the night they were going to the de LaFuentes. Had she been giving him annoying jabs? Was she trying to make him feel guilty? God, maybe she was a nag.

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"Poor guy," Arturo ~~clicked his tongue,~~ "I can relate."

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"What do you mean, *poor* guy?" Evie frowned. "You don't even know him, and you don't even know my side of the story."

"But I know all about yo-yos."

"Huh?" Evie asked.

"When Josephina and I first started dating," Arturo started to explain. "I gave her a bracelet. It was supposed to mean that we were going out. Wasn't your necklace like that?"

"Yeah, I guess," Evie said. "I mean, yeah, it was."

"Exactly," Arturo said. "But every time Josephina would get mad at me, she would break up with me, which was like every other week, and then she would take the bracelet off and give it back. At first it used to piss me off, but then it all became so routine. We'd have a fight, she'd take off the bracelet and ~~well, you know the story.~~ She just gave me back her bracelet," Arturo said. "*Again.*"

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"Oh, no," Evie said. "I'm sorry."

"And you know what? If she asks for it back, I'm not going to give it back to her. I'm fed up. I'm over it. I'm over her. So, yes, I actually *can* relate to your boyfriend, or whatever you are calling him now."

"Well, I don't plan on asking for the necklace back," Evie insisted. "And I didn't break up with him, officially."

"Does he know that?" Arturo asked.

"I'm sure he does," Evie said. "I mean, I didn't say, 'Here's your necklace back, I never want to see you again'."

"Good," Arturo nodded. "~~Like I said,~~ there is nothing worse than a yo-yo relationship."

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"I know that," Evie agreed. She had never been in any other relationship, yo-yo or not, she wasn't about to admit that to him.

Arturo pulled the reins to the right and Evie saw that he was leading them back to the reserve. Their quick little ride was ending too soon.

"So hey," ~~Evie asked cautiously~~ "What's gonna happen to Chamuco?"

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"Well, we got ~~another~~ adoption day coming up. Hopefully someone will take him."

"And if someone doesn't ~~take him~~ what happens to him?" Evie wasn't sure if she really wanted to hear the answer.

~~"He'll just have to stay at the reserve longer ... until the next clinic"~~ Arturo said

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~~"We have them four times a year."~~

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"Why do you think he hasn't he been adopted yet?"

"But people always want younger, healthier horses," Arturo said "Chamuco has already passed his prime."

Evie felt bothered by this news. "Well, at least he ~~was~~ ^{was} the reserve.

"Yea, and we all take care him. You know, even when you're done with your ~~school~~ credit, the reserve can always use more help. I hope you've thought about staying on."

^{SC HR2}
"Actually I have," Evie said. She really had been thinking of continuing to work at the ~~reserve~~. Not only had she grown to love the horses and but she was really liking the people ~~who was~~ meeting at the reserve—including Arturo.

"Yeah, when I leave for Davis," he started. "We'll be short one more hand."

"You got accepted into Davis?" Evie asked. "Wow, congratulations!"

Deleted: Oh my God

"Thanks," Arturo smiled. "I'm not starting until the spring, with early enrollment. I'm really looking forward to it."

"That is so cool," Evie said. She felt a little conflicted. She was truly happy for Arturo, but also a bit sad that he would be leaving the reserve. It seemed that everyone was bailing or had bailed on her. What was the weekly total so far this week?

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"And if you start working at the reserve you can learn more about horsemanship," her said.

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"I know about horsemanship," Evie ^{made eyes} ~~felt a sudden need to~~ defend ^{itself} herself.

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Arturo looked at her dangling feet. "One of the most basic things to know is how to ride a horse properly."

"Right." Evie didn't understand his point. "That's a given."

"Yeah, for one thing," Arturo said. "You can't have your feet hanging off the side of a horse like that. You need to keep your shoes ~~in~~ the stirrups."

* * * * *

By the time they got back to the stables, the sun had already set. Evie remembered she hadn't seen the sunset from the ridge Arturo had mentioned.

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"I'll show you next time," ~~he~~ ^{she} promised. "I was sorta getting worried that it was gonna get dark on us and, you know, los coyotes."

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Evie rolled her eyes at him.

"So did you have fun?" Arturo asked as he got off Panchito.

"Oh, yeah," Evie said. "Definitely. This has been one of the best days I've had in a long time."

"I was thinking that maybe we can go get coffee or something," Arturo said as he took the reins for both horses. *They were now at Sprinkles stall* "And if you want, I can give you a ride home."

"Oh, my housekeeper is probably already on her way." Evie suddenly felt regretful. She was having fun with Arturo and would have liked to hang out with him longer. He had been so cool and friendly during their ride. Plus, it didn't hurt that he was easy on the eyes and that he was quite the *caballero*, as Dee Dee would say.

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Evie started to dismount from Sprinkles and as she swung her left leg around, she couldn't help but lose her balance. She grabbed for the ~~ring~~ horn, but still stumbled off *saddle* Sprinkles

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"Whoa," Arturo caught her to keep her from falling. "Careful there."

"Oh, how embarrassing!" Evie fell back into his arms. She quickly stood up on her own. "Yeah, guess I could use a lesson on horsemanship."

Arturo looked at her and smiled, an almost shy smile. "You're really cute."

"Yeah, for someone who doesn't know much about horses," Evie joked. She straightened her shirt and pulled up her low rise jeans. She suddenly felt the oddest sensation in her stomach. *No, this could not be happening.*

"I'm going to be direct..." Arturo started

God, why did her stomach feel so weird?

"Would someone like me even have a chance with you?"

"What are you even talking about?" Evie tried to play it off and kept her head down as she wiped the dust and Sprinkles' horse hair off her jeans. She *loved* having a

boy ask such a direct question. Unlike Alex, who had shyly come up from behind to offer affection, Arturo was front and center.

"You know what I mean" Arturo placed his fingers under her chin.

Now it wasn't just her stomach. Evie's whole body tingled. Her mouth felt dry.

"I don't know, Arturo," she said softly. She didn't want to look into his eyes for fear that he might know what she was feeling. "I guess you'd have to find out."

Did she really just say that?

"Oh, yeah?" Arturo pursed his lips and then smiled. "Is that a challenge? Well, I *live* for challenges." Before Evie knew it, he had lifted her chin and had started to kiss her.

Evie couldn't resist. She placed her hands on Arturo's shoulders and reached up for more. He was tall, taller than Alex, that's for sure and his kiss was deep and long, different than Alex, who gave quick, but gentle kisses. Evie instantly felt that vaguely familiar light-headed feeling.

"Evie?"

Both Evie and Arturo looked up.

It was Alex. He was at the entrance of Sprinkle's stall.

"Alex," Evie immediately pulled back from Arturo. She wiped her bottom lip with the back of her hand.

"I... you didn't answer my text," Alex started. "And Lindsay said you were still here, and so I just came by." He was speaking to Evie, but his eyes were on Arturo.

"Oh, yeah," Evie nervously fluffed her hair forward and started towards him.

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"No, *don't*." Alex held his palms out towards Evie and took a few steps back.

"Alex, wait," Evie started.

But it was too late. He was already heading back to his truck. He got in and drove away.

Chapter 25

~~4getit,~~

Excuse me? Had Evie read Alex's text correctly? And what did it mean? She held her cell close and re-read his text on her cell's screen, ~~4getit~~? It was nearly 1 AM, and she had been waiting, dying, to hear from Alex, and now this is what she got? *What* did it mean? She went through the complete text message message history between her and Alex. How had their relationship shifted from "Nite, QT" to "~~4getit~~" in just a matter of days? Of course, she knew how. One word, Arturo.

After Lindsay had been picked up from the reserve ~~that afternoon~~, Evie had asked her to drive her by Alex's house, but his truck wasn't parked in his driveway. He didn't return any of her phone calls or texts, and his cell phone went straight to voice mail. It was clear to Evie, very clear, that he didn't want to talk to her. It couldn't be true. But maybe it was -- ~~Was Alex~~ not her boyfriend anymore?

Of course, she wasn't able to sleep. Her mind was racing with worry, confusion, and fear. Alex (worry), Arturo (confusion —what *had* happened between them?), and her ~~dreadful~~ driving test (fear, major). Then some of the players changed, but the theme continued: Dee Dee (worry), Raquel (confusion), and, of course, ~~the~~ driving test (fear, ~~still~~ major). Alex and Arturo, of course, were ~~always~~ floating around in the background. Evie ~~hooked~~ her cell phone under her pillow, turned over and closed her eyes in determination. She *had* to sleep. Her driving test was in less than four hours.

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→ Forget to talk
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Diaz

Get to sleep. Sleep! Don't think about him or him or her or...them. Your driving test is the most important thing right now. The first thing you do is check your mirrors. No, you put on your seat belt. Stop it! You need rest. Fall asleep already!

Arturo, Alex... Arturo. *Argh!*

Evie turned on her other side and hugged ~~her other~~ pillow when she heard what sounded like Davey Mitchell's truck. She ~~knew that~~ *anywhere* staccato rumble of ~~his 4x4~~. She pulled her cell phone out from under her pillow and checked the time. Could it really be him coming down Camino del Rio at 1:30 in the morning? ~~She~~ pushed away the sheets. got up from her bed ~~and~~ looked through her bedroom shutters. ~~Yes~~, it was Davey. He was bringing Raquel home from God knows where. Evie crossed her arms and watched Raquel step down from his ~~lifted~~ 4x4 and sneak around the side of her house.

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Evie immediately texted her:

Cn I cme ovr?

To which Raquel replied:

Now?

Evie:

ER

Raquel:

K. Ktch dr.Shh!

Evie quickly threw on some sweat pants, a hoodie, and her Juicy Couture flojos. She crept downstairs and went through the side door of the kitchen ~~before cutting~~ across

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to the Diaz's backyard. When she entered the Diaz's kitchen door, she found Raquel tearing through the refrigerator's freezer.

"I totally have the munchies," Raquel announced, as if it wasn't already obvious. She pulled out two Trader Joe's green chili and cheese tamales and popped them in the microwave.

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"Raquel," Evie moaned as she pulled up a stool. "You won't believe it. Alex just broke up with me. He broke up with me by text."

"I thought you guys had already broken up," Raquel said nonchalantly. She hit two minutes on the microwave's timer.

"Not officially," Evie said. Her eyes started to water. Her body felt numb.

"But I thought you gave him back his necklace," Raquel said. She took a soda from the fridge. "Want one?"

"No," Evie shook her head and wiped her eyes. Wasn't Raquel listening? "I mean, we never really talked about it. We just said we were going to take a break."

Raquel sipped her soda and frowned. "But what was there to talk about? You gave him back the necklace. Isn't that how people do it when they're 'going steady'?" She made air-quotes with her fingers.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Evie asked.

"I mean, you get into all these rules and regulations, the 'decorum' of relationships, and please, why can't people just do whatever the hell they want?"

The microwave's timer went off, and Raquel pulled out her tamales.

"Raquel, are you even listening to me?" Evie asked. "It's like you're more interested in your food."

"*Sorry*, Evie." Raquel unwrapped the cornhusks from her tamales and slid them onto a ~~paper~~ plate. "But I'm starving. Do you mind if I eat? It *is* my house."

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Evie hated that she was being so *sentida*. Raquel wasn't known for being the most compassionate, but tonight she was being downright in-*sentida*.

"Raquel, why are you being so mean to me? I'm telling you that Alex just broke up with me, and it's like you don't even care."

"Evie, I'm *not* being mean. And of course, I care. I'm just hungry. Go on, please. I'm listening"

Evie exhaled "So, I was at the reserve and Alex caught me -."

"Caught you?" Raquel asked. "Caught you doing what?"

"I was with Arturo," Evie started "And Alex came by and caught us -."

"Doing *what*?"

Evie pulled her stool closer to the counter. The jack cheese oozing out of the corn ~~tamale~~ looked good, but she was far from hungry. "Nothing really. I mean, we were just kissing, sorta."

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"*Just* kissing?" Raquel's mouth dropped. Evie could see the mouthful of corn masa spread across her teeth and tongue. "Did he have his hands down your pants?"

"No! We were just—"

"Up your shirt?"

"Raquel, *no*! Quit interrupting!"

"But you *were* making out with him?" Raquel took another bite of her tamale.

"Shit!" She ~~spit~~ under her breath as she opened her mouth and let a wad of *masa* drop

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unto her plate. She took a quick swig of soda and waved her hand over her opened mouth. "It's fucking hot!"

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"Are you alright?" Evie asked.

"No," Raquel continued to wave her fingers over her mouth. "I friggin' burned my tongue. *Sheeeyat*. Whatever, go on."

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"We had *just* started to kiss," Evie continued. "It didn't seem like we were making out. It was more of a first kiss that got some, I dunno, extended play."

"Wow." Raquel cut a small piece from one of the tamales with a fork. This time she blew on it lightly before putting it into her mouth. "When did this happen?"

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"Today, I mean, at the end of my shift at the reserve. I've been texting you all night, but you never texted me back," Evie complained. "I even texted the emergency code."

"Evie," Raquel rolled her eyes to the side. "Lately all your texts are so-called emergencies. And besides, I was with Davey. It's not like I was just gonna take off and have him drive me all the way back to Rio Estates."

"Where were you?"

"We were kicking it," Raquel said.

"Where?" Evie asked.

Raquel looked at her. "At the Hobo Jungle."

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"Hobo Jungle?"

"Yeah" *why?*

Hobo Jungle was a part of the river that was know for its, how would one say, challenged population. Whatever you called the people living in Hobo Jungle, river

people, transients or actual hobos; they had been living on the river for years, generations. As a little kid, Evie was always curious about those who lived in Hobo Jungle. Whenever her family would drive on the bridge that crossed that section of the river, ^{Evie would} she'd bend her neck in vain, hoping to catch a glimpse of a hobo roasting a hot dog pierced by a twig or eating beans out of a can. But ^{her} Evie's father told her and her sister that Hobo Jungle was not ~~some~~ cute little village of hobos all getting along together and eating hotdogs on a stick. Hobo Jungle was a place to avoid if they knew what was good for them. The area, he said, was full of ex-cons, drug users, and aimless transients. He warned them that if he found out that either of them ever even went *near* Hobo Jungle, he else would give them a spanking to remember.

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And now here was Raquel, ~~looking it~~ in the Jungle.

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Evie ^{her} ~~watched Raquel~~ as she scarfed down the rest of her tamales, and it was then

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that she noticed how bad Raquel looked. Not "It's one in the morning and I've been partying all night" bad, but rather "It's one in the morning and I've been partying hard for the last four semesters" bad. Raquel's skin was flakey, and she had two small scabs on the right side of her face. She looked oddly puffy in her face and her fingers. Not necessarily fat, just bloated.

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"Raquel," Evie ~~started~~ ^{hesistantly} "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't I be?" Raquel drank more soda. She didn't look Evie in the eyes.

"I don't know," Evie didn't know how to say that she thought Raquel looked bad without sounding insulting. "You just look, I don't know, tired."

"Well, it's almost two in the morning, Evie. And to be honest," Raquel bit back
"You don't look so hot, either,"

"That's because I haven't slept," Evie got up from the kitchen stool. "And I have my driving test tomorrow, I mean, today, and I just know I'm gonna fail. Everything is turning to crap."

"Well, things can't always go the way we want them to in life."

"God, Raquel," Evie raised her voice. "Why do you have to be so negative all the time?"

"I'm not negative," Raquel insisted. "I'm just being honest. If you ask me, people should be more honest." She got up to shut the kitchen door. "And *you* need to keep your voice down. You're gonna wake up my mom."

"Okay," Evie ~~put her hands on her hips~~, "I'll be honest." She somehow found the courage to say what had been on her mind for some time. "I think you have a problem. I think you party too much, and to be honest, you're not looking really good."

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"*Excuse* me?" Raquel looked at Evie, almost amused.

"And I'm not the only one who thinks that," Evie started. "Dee Dee and I think you drink too much, way too much."

"Dee Dee and *you*?" Raquel repeated in a sarcastic tone. "Oh, and when did you ~~two~~ get together and decide this? That's a pretty bold observation coming from the two of you."

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"It's a *realistic* observation, Raquel," Evie said. "An observation that's making me worried."

"You know, Evie," Raquel crossed her arms and cocked her head. "Maybe *you* should have a drink once in awhile. You run around worrying about everyone, trying to get them to be or act a certain way, and maybe you should just let people be. Quit being so judgmental."

"Judgmental?" Evie snapped. "I'm not judgmental. I'm just concerned, Raquel. Excuse me if I get concerned about people I care about."

"Yeah, you sure showed concern with Alex."

She did *not* just say that.

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Raquel scraped the remaining melted jack cheese from her plate and crammed it into her mouth. "Okay, you want to be so honest, all things in the clear?" she asked with her mouth full of *masa*. "Well, I wanna know something, the honest truth."

"What?" Evie asked.

"What *really* happened between you and Jose in the photo booth, at that Sangro party last semester?"

"*What?*" Evie balked. "You gotta be kidding me!"

"Well, I'm not. Do you have a problem with me asking that?"

"Yeah," Evie said. "I do have a problem because you know what happened. I told you."

"But why *exactly* were you even in the booth with him?"

"I *told* you," Evie's voice rose again. "I saw his flojos and then I saw Alejandra's flojos and I thought they belonged to you. I thought it was the both of you, but it wasn't. And when Jose saw me, he pulled me in."

"Pulled you in, huh?" Raquel asked suspiciously. "And you just couldn't say no?"

"I didn't have *time* to say no! He just pulled me in, and like, grabbed me!" She couldn't believe what Raquel was insinuating!

"The thing is," Raquel remarked calmly, "Alejandra de los Santos doesn't wear flojos."

"I *know* she doesn't," Evie said. "But that night she...I mean, Jose had bought her some. These red Roxys and —."

"*He* bought her flojos?" Raquel asked

The kitchen light went on.

"What is going on here?!" It was Raquel's mother. She was in a terry robe, and her eye mask was pushed up to her forehead. She was *mad*. "Evie, what are you doing here? At this hour?!"

"I was just..." Evie started. She hadn't seen Kitty Diaz look so angry in such a long time. ~~Actually, the last time she looked so pissed was back when she discovered that~~ Raquel had forged her name on a *business* check, but that was some time ago.

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"Raquel!" Kitty Diaz leaned into Raquel and sniffed. "You stink like booze! What the hell is going on?!"

Raquel propped her hand against the kitchen counter and leaned back. She looked at Evie and said dryly, "Thanks a fucking lot, *Evie*."

Chapter 26

The next afternoon, Evie was given her walking papers. Literally.

"I'm sorry," her driving instructor wrote a big fat ⁹2 in blue ink on the score sheet. "I had to remind you to put your seat belt. That's an immediate fail." Your biggest problems were parallel parking, gear shifting, and speed. You need to work on these."

Evie didn't say anything as she reluctantly took the paperwork from her instructor and headed back into the DMV office, where her mother and Lindsay were waiting. She swung open the glass door, and they both stood up from the plastic chairs they had been sitting on. They were both smiling, ^{looked confuse} as if they were anticipating good news. But once they saw Evie's face, they both just knew.

^{What happened}
"How did it go, *mi'ja*?" her mother asked anyway. ^{Why are you back so early?}

"I didn't pass," Evie held out her score sheet. She was on the verge of tears. She nervously rubbed the side of her face and looked around the DMV. People were either slouched over the main counters, lamenting to stone faced clerks, or they were slouched

^{I forgot to put on my seatbelt."}

over ~~paperwork~~ and pulling their hair out as they struggled with the written part of the driving test. Yes. The DMV was an evil, ugly place.

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~~What~~ "Mom," her mother took the score sheet, ~~looked it over~~, and clicked her tongue.

How can that be?

"So you'll take it again. No problem" — Lindsay

"Well, you did your best, Evelina." Lindsay pulled out her car keys to drive them home. Evie couldn't help but look down at the key ring. Did Lindsay *have* to flaunt them so soon after her failure?

Deleted: DMV

They left the office and went around the side of the ~~DMV~~ building to get Lindsay's car. Evie took a seat in the back and looked out the window. How could she have ~~forgotten to put on her seat belt?~~ *How how how?* Her parents had paid the California Driving School a lot of money to teach her how to drive, and she had spent a lot of time practicing with her father and Lindsay. She must have failed, ~~she~~ *forgotten* figured, simply because she had had practically only three hours of sleep. She had left Raquel's house at nearly two a.m. and didn't fall asleep until nearly five in the morning. *Of course.* She was in a daze from sleep deprivation. It was not her fault. She *was* a good driver. How could anyone have expected her to pass a driving test in her condition?

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As Lindsay drove downtown, every driver on the road seemed to be boasting their independence as they whizzed along down Vineyard Avenue in their cars. They were free and liberated, not confined to the backseat like ~~she~~ *she* was and ~~Evie~~ *Evie* wondered if she would ~~she~~ *she* ever be allowed to participate in such an exclusive parade. Her stomach started to hurt.

Deleted: to Evie

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"Mom," she leaned forward from the back seat. "Do you think I could just go home?"

She was so not in the mood for school. Raquel would ~~definitely~~ still be pissed off at her, and Dee Dee ~~most likely wouldn't even be in classes but~~ ^g was probably off somewhere with Rocio picking out China patterns. And Alex? Yeah, right. Mr. ~~Forrest~~ ^{4getit} Like he really cared.

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"Evie," her mother turned around to face her. "You can't miss school just because you didn't pass your driving test,"

"It's not that," Evie's held her side and leaned into the back seat's fabric upholstery. "I just really, really don't feel good. I didn't sleep at all last night, and I feel sick."

"Oh, I don't know," her mother looked at Lindsay and then back at Evie. "But you do look really tired."

^{When} They ~~arrived home and~~ pulled into the Gomez's driveway, Lindsay kept her sedan running as Evie got out.

"We're going to meet your father," her mother told her. "It's better if he doesn't know that I'm letting you skip school, so don't say anything when he gets home."

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"I won't," Evie got her backpack from the car's floor. "Are you gonna tell him I flunked my test?"

"I'm going to have to," her mother replied. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah," Evie yawned. "I really just need some sleep."

"Okay, *mi'ja*," Her mother looked worried. "I have my cell, and you know your sister is home if you need anything."

"Okay," Evie said.

Yeah right. Sabrina would be the *last* person she would go to if she needed anything

When Evie got inside the house, all she wanted to do was go to the den, grab the ~~multi colored~~ afghan, a` la Lindsay, and snuggle in front of the ~~Plasma~~. Maybe *People's Court* was on. Now that would be great. The way Judge Milian lashed out Cuban dichos and costly penalties to poorly prepared defendants always made Evie feel better about her own problems.

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But when she stepped down into to the den, Evie was surprised to find Sabrina there. She was in a pajama top and sweat bottoms, spread out on the den's brown leather couch *and* covered with Lindsay's crocheted afghan. Her feet where propped up on the coffee table.

"What are you doing here?" Evie asked as she crossed over her legs.

She didn't mean to come across as accusatory as she might have sounded. It was just that since Sabrina had been home, she *never* left her room. ~~And of course~~, Evie still held a grudge over the smack she had overheard Sabrina say about her on the phone.

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"Last I checked," Sabrina didn't bother to look up. "This *was* my house, too."

"No, I mean, you're usually in your room." Evie flopped down on the matching leather loveseat and kicked up her own feet on the coffee table. Their mother had insisted there was to be no 'flopping' or 'kicking up' on the den's expensive, mid-century ~~California Mission~~ furniture. But their mother wasn't around at the moment.

Sabrina kept her eyes on the Plasma screen. She was watching a Korean soap opera with no subtitles. She laughed along with the programmed laugh track

Evie looked around. "Where the remote?" she asked. "I wanna watch *People's Court*."

"Evie, don't," Sabrina reached for the channel changer on the coffee table. "I'm watching this."

"Like you can really understand what's going on."

"Of course I do, or else I wouldn't be watching it," Sabrina replied.

"~~Want, don't tell me,~~" Evie started sarcastically. "~~You're now president of the~~
Korean Club?"

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"Evie," Sabrina still didn't look at her, but rather reclined her head farther back onto the couch. "Just let me be. I've been in my room all morning, and I just wanted to take advantage of no one being home today. Or I *thought* no one was gonna be home. Why aren't you in school?"

"I'm sick," Evie cleared her throat for effect.

"You don't seem sick," Sabrina finally looked over at her. "And if you are, shouldn't you be in bed?"

"Well, you don't seem sick either," Evie snapped. "Shouldn't *you* be back at Stanford? So you don't have to be here? Surrounded by *friggin' idiots*?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sabrina asked.

"You know what I mean," Evie said. "I *heard* you."

"Heard me, what?" Sabrina asked.

"I heard you, last week," Evie continued. "You were on the phone basically talking smack about me, saying how much you hate being here and calling me a spoiled brat."

Sabrina turned away from Evie and looked back at the T.V. She said nothing.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi... Evie counted in her head.

"Evie," Sabrina finally sighed. "You just wouldn't understand."

"Oh," Evie said. "And that's because I'm such a friggin' idiot or a spoiled brat?"

"No. Evie. It's just," her sister started. "I've been having a really, really hard time and..."

"And what?" Evie wasn't so convinced that Suprema could ever have such a hard time at anything.

"Evie, I don't want to get into it," Sabrina continued. "For the last month, I've had to have an answer for everything and everyone. *Why* was I breaking up with Robert? *Why* was I going back home? *When* was I going back to school? It's like everyone wanted a tidy little answer tied up in a perfect little bow, and you know what? I don't *have* the answers. I'm tired. I just want to, I don't know... chill."

Chill? Did that word actually exist in Sabrina's vocabulary?

"You don't know," Sabrina said. "Maybe you don't understand. I mean, you've always been the baby of the family, the favorite and --."

"The *favorite*?" Evie gawked. "*Me*?"

"Uh, yeah," Sabrina said. "You."

"You're crazy," Evie told her. "You're the one everyone just idolizes. Mom, Dad, Lindsay, Dee Dee's dad... even A through H."

"A through H?" Sabrina pursed her lips and slowly cracked a smile. "You mean the counselor? I haven't heard that name in years. He's still at Nueva? You call him that too?"

"Uh, yeah," Evie felt the ice thawing. "I mean, everyone does."

"Does he still clean his glasses, over and over again?" Sabrina asked. "Like obsessive compulsive?"

"Oh, my God," Evie laughed. "Yes. I don't think he ever pays attention to what anyone is saying."

"Oh, he's paying attention all right," Sabrina said. "But only if you're a female student. He's the biggest perv."

"*What?*" Evie balked. "A Through H? Gross! He's like three hundred years old. That is so not true!"

"It *is* true," Sabrina insisted. "We used to say that A through H stood for Ass and Hiney. That was his specialty."

Sabrina slapped her hands together and let out a high-pitched laugh. Evie knew that laugh. It sounded like a baby seal crying out for his mother ~~and it was annoying enough to make anyone around Sabrina wince. But to Evie the laugh made Sabrina seem less suprema and, actually, more human.~~

"Oh, my God," Sabrina said. "Those were some fun times, back at Villanueva. I wish I was back there, when life was much more chill."

There was that word again.

"Chill?" Evie asked. "Are you sure we went to the same school?"

"You just have a different circle of friends than I had," Sabrina said. "I was always with the square kids, the future CPAs of the world." She rolled her eyes. "I don't know, I think maybe because I am the oldest, mom and dad were tougher on me. Mom was so strict with me when I was at Nueva. I wasn't allowed to date, or hang out at Sea

Street. And to be running around with someone like Raquel when I was fifteen? No way."

"Fifteen and three quarters," Evie corrected her. "I'm almost sixteen."

"*A little less sixteen,*" her sister smiled at her.

"Hey, I love that song," Evie said. She was surprised that her sister knew of it.

"Yeah, one of my sisters at Stanford always played Fall Out Boy," Sabrina said

She suddenly turned down the volume on the Plasma. "Eves, I'm sorry about what you heard that day on the phone. I've just been out of my mind. I don't like being here, but it really doesn't have anything to do with you. Mom and Dad are really getting on my case. Mom especially. She can be so stifling."

"Tell me about it," Evie was surprised that her sister shared the same sentiment. She had always thought that the two "Go-mez Girls" consisted of her mother and Sabrina. She was the odd one out.

"I just feel like I am letting everyone down," Sabrina continued. "I don't need to be reminded how much Stanford is costing mom and dad, or how I didn't love Robert enough."

"Is that why you broke up?" Evie asked. "You don't love him anymore?"

"No, I do love him," Sabrina sighed and curled her legs onto the couch. "But he was going to start grad school this spring, in Massachusetts, and he wanted me to transfer schools so I could be closer to him. At first I was into the idea, but then I just felt like I was losing a part, a big part, of myself. I wasn't Sabrina Gomez anymore. I was Robert Ramirez's girlfriend." She shook her head. "I wasn't about to leave my sorority sisters, my friends, my family... California."

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"In that order, right?" Evie smirked.

"No," Sabrina threw Evie a sideways glance. "But God, Evie, Robert was, like, so insulted, and he would go on and on about me not going with him, as if I didn't love him enough or something. I grew up wanting to be a Stanford grad, not some grad student's girlfriend in friggin' Massachusetts." She sighed again. "It takes a lot of compromise to be in a relationship, and maybe I'm just not ready to be in such a serious one. And I feel sorta selfish, because I really want to do what *I* want to do, and sometimes people can't understand that."

"Right," Evie nodded. It made sense didn't it? But then she thought about Alex. It seemed that sometimes he wanted to do what *he* wanted to do and she wasn't letting him. Ooh, was she as bad at Robert?

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"So anyway, I really just want to rest," Sabrina pulled the afghan up to her chin. "At least for one quarter, and then I'll go back to school. I want a fresh start. Fresh starts are always good."

"Yeah," Evie agreed as she rubbed her arms. "Everybody needs a fresh start once in a while."

"Are you cold?" Sabrina asked.

"Yeah," Evie stretched. "I'm gonna go get a blanket upstairs."

"You can share the afghan with me."

"Oh," Evie was surprised by her sister's offer. "Okay."

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She got up from the loveseat and joined her sister on the couch. Sabrina spread the blanket over the both of them.

Deleted: Evie

"So what do you wanna watch?" she asked Evie.

"Uh, I don't care."

"Are you sure?" Sabrina asked.

"Yeah," Evie said. "We can watch whatever you want."

Chapter 27

When their mother and Lindsay got back, Evie and Sabrina were still in the den. They had created a feast of canned bean dip and bagel chips and were watching old episodes of Laguna Beach that Evie had TiVo'd.

"One of my sisters went out with Jason," Sabrina told Evie. "Just one date, but ~~it~~ was enough. She said he was *really* cheap."

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"No way," Evie dunked her chip into the bean dip. "*Serio?*"

"Yes," Sabrina said. "He practically wanted her to order from the kid's menu, and *then* he asked for a doggie bag for their *bread*."

"Oh *My*. God," Evie laughed. "That's messed up."

"And he was so short," Sabrina laughed with her. "Talk about trial size!"

"It is so nice to see you out of your room, ~~mi'ja,~~ their mother told Sabrina as she came down into the den and joined both girls on the couch. ~~And good to see you two together.~~ I'm going to call your father. Maybe we could barbeque tonight."

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Both she and Evie had taken their feet off the coffee table.

Deleted: ", " their mother told Sabrina as she came down into the den.

Evie squirmed deeper into the den's couch. Should she make a run for her bedroom... window? Her mother was obviously hearing about last night's activities.

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"Kitty, no, of course, not," Vicki Gomez continued. "I won't say a word. You have my promise. Yes, she's right here." She looked over at Evie again, just as she was getting up to leave.

Evie was confused. What was going on? What was Kitty telling her?

Deleted: Vicki Gomez

After a few more "oh nos" and "of course, nots" Evie's mother hung up the phone.

"What happened?" Evie cautiously asked her mother. "What did Kitty say?"

"Raquel hasn't been feeling well," her mother said hesitantly. "So, Kitty's going," she paused. "So Kitty's going to check her into Isla del Mar."

"Isla del Mar?" Evie was taken aback.

Deleted: Sabrina looked up.

"What?" Sabrina looked up. "Why?"

Isla del Mar was a center on the northeast hills of the county that treated people for addiction or depression. Sometimes, last semester, the Flojos, Evie, Raquel, Mondo, Alex, and Jose would cram into Mondo's Maurader and make their way up the winding road to Isla's parking lot. It was relaxing to sit and lean against the long, high stucco wall of the in-patient entry building and take in the panoramic view of the city and the ocean. If you went at night, which they often did, you could see the offshore oil rigs twinkling in the distance. However, Evie never dreamed that one of *their own* would be on the inside of the same building.

"Kitty said Raquel got in trouble, again."

"In trouble with what?"

Her mother didn't answer.

"Mom," Evie said. "Tell me. She's my best friend."

"Evie, I told Kitty I wouldn't say anything, but now I'm thinking that you need to know and that I need to know."

"~~Need to~~ know what?" Evie asked. Why was her mother talking in riddles?

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"Did you know that Raquel was dealing drugs?"

"*What?*" Evie exclaimed. "*No!*"

"Are you being honest with me?" Her mother looked at her sternly. Even Sabrina looked at Evie, wide-eyed with curiosity.

"Mom, *no*," Evie insisted. "I swear I didn't. What are you talking about?"

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"Evie, don't swear," her mother said.

"No, I mean, I promise, *promise* that I didn't know anything about this. I had no idea."

"None of your friends do or deal drugs?"

Uh, oh. Evie thought of Mondo. He sold pot, but was he really a friend? Sure they had hung out in the same clique last semester, but was Mondo really a friend now? Not that much, really, anymore.

"Friends?" Evie asked. "No, but I do know of people at school who sell pot and stuff, but they aren't my friends."

Evie's mother put her hands on the kitchen counter and took a deep breath.

"Evie, it's pretty serious. Raquel could end up at the CYA or something, so it's better she get help now. Kitty and Charlie want to curb it before it gets out of control, but frankly, I think they should have done something a lot earlier."

"Mom, how could you say that?" Sabrina shook her head. "You just said that Raquel's in serious trouble, and now all you can be is critical towards Kitty and Charlie?"

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"I'm just saying it might be too late," their mother tried to explain. "Raquel has had problems long before this, and you'd think, with Kitty being the head of Las Madrinas and everything, that she would have been a little more pro-active."

"What's gonna happen to her?" Evie asked.

"Kitty's taking her to Isla tomorrow morning."

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"Tomorrow?" Evie asked. "Already? What's the rush?"

"I don't know exactly," their mother confessed. "They wanted to take her in today, but they needed to get some things at home in order first."

"Well, I'm going over then," Evie got up from the couch and started for the kitchen door.

"Evie, don't." Her mother blocked her with her arm. "You need to leave her alone."

"*What?*" Evie balked. "My best friend is going away, and you're telling me I can't see her before she leaves?"

"Evie," her mother said. "You can't go over now. Give this time to Kitty and Charlie. That's all I'm saying."

Evie brushed past her mother and stormed up to her room. Could this day get any more jacked up? Just as she was about to flop onto her bed (on which flopping was allowed), her mother called out from downstairs.

"E-vie! Vi-si-tor!"

Visitor? Her mother ~~practically sang the announcement, something that usually only her father or Lindsay did.~~ Who would be visiting now? Why did her mother sound ~~so~~ wait, it *must* be . . . *Raquel*.

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Evie rushed from her room and headed downstairs, but instead, to her shock, she didn't find Raquel in the foyer. It was Arturo.

"Hey, Evie," Arturo said nervously as she came down into the foyer.

What was *he* doing at *her* house? Do stalkers wear cowboy boots?

"Oh, hey, Arturo," Evie answered "Um, how did you know where I lived?"

MORE

"Your address was on your file card," ~~he~~ explained. "I'm sorry to just drop by, but you forgot your backpack." He lifted Evie's bag from the foyer's wooden slat bench.

Deleted: Arturo

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"You took off so fast yesterday."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry about that." Evie took her backpack from him. Okay, so he wasn't a stalker, but he had hunted her down, sorta. "I hadn't even noticed it was missing."

Arturo laughed. "Oh, so I can see why you need extra credit for school."

"No," Evie felt embarrassed "It's just been a rough two days."

"Oh. Sorry," Arturo looked down at the floor and then down the hallway. "I didn't want to make things complicated. I hope I wasn't disrespectful, you know, about..."

"No, it was okay," Evie said.

"Just *okay*?" Arturo winced playfully.

And I didn't even go to school today
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"No, I mean, it was nice." Evie lowered her voice and looked down the hall. She didn't want her mother overhearing what was up with her.

Was it really nice? It seemed so at first, but not worth it.

"I meant all those things I said," Arturo told her. "I don't want you think that you were some kind of rebound or anything. I have always been, I don't know, sorta *intrigued* by you."

"Intrigued? By *me*?" Evie couldn't quite believe him.

"Yeah, why not?" he asked. "From that first day I met you, I thought you were really cute, but I didn't know what to do. I was still with Josephina, and I knew you were with someone."

"How did you know I had a boyfriend?" Evie asked. "I don't think I ever mentioned it."

"That shell necklace," he said.

Evie raised her eyebrows.

"It looked homemade," Arturo ~~explained~~ "And seemed sorta special to you. Girls usually don't wear the same necklace, every day."

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Evie smiled. "Sure they do, that is if the necklace *is* special."

"My point exactly," Arturo said ~~as he~~ looked around Evie's house. ~~She felt that~~ she should ask him to hang out for a while, but she really didn't want to ask. She ~~just~~ wanted to ~~get over to~~ Raquel's as soon as possible.

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"So are you gonna be at the reserve on Wednesday?" Arturo asked.

"I don't know," Evie said. "I mean, my best friend is going away and—."

"Back to Mexico?"

how to dress, but he was really a sweet person. How could she have gotten into a lip lock with Arturo? She had made a big mistake. She wanted Alex. She had to get Alex back. But how?

Chapter 28

"I *knew* something was up with Raquel," Dee Dee told Evie *the next morning*.

Deleted: later on the phone that night

They were both on the Diazes door step *It was* "Didn't I tell you?" *she* Dee Dee continued *as she rang the bell again*. "Remember in the counseling office? That day we were looking for a job for you?"

"I know," Evie agreed somberly. She remembered that day very clearly. She had also felt that Raquel was going off a little on the deep end, but *had hoped* that maybe Alex was right *when he had said that* perhaps Raquel was just going through a phase.

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"No wonder she had so much money lately," Dee Dee said. "*Oh My God* Do you think she used drug money to buy my purse and your gown at Decade?"

"Ew," Evie winced. She didn't like the idea of wearing a dress that came from some *successful or, (depending which side you were working for) blotched* drug deal. "I didn't even think of that."

but still "I can't believe her parents are sending her to Isla. I mean, don't you think that is a little severe?" Dee Dee clicked her tongue. "Oh, God, poor Raquel. *I would just think that her mother -*"

Deleted: ? We have to go see her tomorrow, before she leaves

Deleted: , " Dee Dee clicked her tongue.

Kitty answered "Hi Kitty," Evie looked up as the *Door* *front door* opened. "Um, sorry it's so early, but we hope you don't mind. We just wanna see Raquel before, you know, she leaves today for the, um, doctor."

→ Lo Suenito

"Lo siento, girls," Kitty Diaz shook her head at Evie and Dee Dee. "Raquel's still sleeping."

"What time is she leaving for Isla?" Evie asked

"We're gonna leave around ten," Kitty answered. She looked tired. *Very tired*

Her eyes *each* had a *half* moon of darkness under it. Her hair, cut in a bob style, was flat on one side.

"Can we wait until she gets up?" Evie felt anxious. "Or maybe you could wake her up and tell her that we're here?"

"No, Evie, I can't," Kitty yawned, forgetting to cover her mouth. "You girls go to school. You'll be able to see Raquel soon enough."

"Ay, Kitty," Raquel's father came to the door. "Let them see Raquel. They are her best friends, her amuegitas."

"Charlie..." Kitty looked up at him

"Just let them see her," Charlie *widened* the door. "Come in girls. Go see Raquel."

When Evie and Dee Dee got to Raquel's bedroom, her door was slightly open. The window shades *as usual* were pulled down, and only the *computer's* screen saver, a *B.J.* photo of the three girls *on the hood of Raquel's Beetle*, offered light.

"Raquel?" Evie whispered through the darkness.

Dee Dee pushed open the door, and both girls peered in. Raquel lay on her side in bed, under an array of black clothing, her Black Molly Monster, and a couple of *Kerrang!* magazine scattered about.

"She's asleep," Dee Dee whispered to Evie. "We should just go."

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Chapter 29 ¶

Deleted: Raquel's mother was standing in the doorway of the Diazes house. It was early the next morning, just around 7 a.m.

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the collected mess on top of her
"Wait," Raquel turned over under her comforter.

Dee Dee looked at Evie wide eyed. They both wanted to see Raquel, but neither of them had ^{known} actually rehearsed what they were going to say to her. They walked into the room towards her.

Deleted: bed.

"Hey, Raquel," Evie said softly as she sat down on the side of Raquel's canopied bed. "How you doing?"

"How do you *think* I'm doing?" Raquel answered ~~drily~~. "My parents are trying to get rid of me." Her head was on ~~it's side~~ on the pillow.

Deleted: Raquel answered.

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Deleted: Dee Dee

"Raquel, your parent's aren't trying to get rid of you," Evie said. "They just want you to get better. We all want you to be in a better place."

"And ^{I can better} a better place is some friggin' ~~psycho~~ hospital?" Raquel asked. "Why don't they just send me to Hawaii for a few months? Yeah, I could hang with that."

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"Why?" Evie found herself asking. "You have connections there?" The words ~~had~~ slipped out before she knew it. She felt angry. Raquel had ^{screwd} fucked up, big time and she was trying to be all funny about it.

Deleted: up from her pillow

"What's that supposed to mean?" Raquel looked at Evie.

"Raquel," Evie started. "Why were you dealing? Is that how you bought my dress? With your drug money?"

Raquel rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue. "Oh, come on. You don't have to be all dramatic, *drug money*. I put your dress on my credit card. Dee Dee's purse, too. I don't deposit ~~cash~~ ~~cents~~. Is that what you are so concerned about? That your two ~~6~~ gown didn't come from the right kind of money? Please."

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"Where you selling with Mondo?" Dee Dee asked.

"Mondo?" Raquel rolled her eyes again. "Hell, no. And I wasn't doing anything major, just peddling some pot now and then for Davey."

"*Davey?*" Evie exclaimed. "Raquel, you have *got* to get a grip. I mean, why the hell are you helping *Davey?*"

Raquel put her head back on the pillow, closed her eyes and sighed.

"Raquel," Evie started. "I don't get it. I mean, we can all go off the path once in a while, but what's going on?"

Raquel still didn't answer. She pulled her blankets up to her neck and ~~although~~ ^{even though} her eyes ~~were~~ ^{were} closed, Evie could see that they ~~were starting to~~ tear up. "You guys wouldn't understand," ~~she said~~.

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Evie felt another one of those moments coming on. Hadn't Sabrina just told her the same thing last week? Why did people, people whom she *thought* she was close with, think she couldn't possibly understand ~~anything that they were going through?~~

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"Raquel..." Evie started.

"No, I mean it," Raquel interrupted. "You guys are all into your own things. Dee Dee's with Rocio, and you've got your surfing and horse thing. I don't have anything. Before I used to have Jose, and we were Flojos, and we used to hang out and it was fun. But now I don't even have that. And, I don't know, sometimes I really miss Jose. I miss being Jose's girlfriend."

"Jose?" Evie asked. "How could you possibly miss him? He was a *jerk*."

Raquel looked at her. "Don't you think that Alex was a jerk at times and don't you still miss him?"

"Yeah, but..." Evie started.

"Yeah, nothing," Raquel said. "I'm not saying how I feel makes sense. I'm just telling you how I feel. I don't know. Jose just made me feel good. Not all the time, but a lot of the time he did."

"And so now selling dope makes you feel good?" Evie asked. "Don't you think that's a little too stupid, ~~barrio~~, Raquel?"

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"Evie," Dee Dee looked at her. "Give Raquel a break. We came here to be supportive, not to be judgmental."

"I'm not being judgmental," Evie tried to defend herself. But in a way, she knew that she was being critical. She looked at Raquel. "Yeah, I guess you're right, I guess I don't understand."

"It's sorta like how Sabrina is depressed and she just sleeps a lot," Dee Dee tried to explain. "But maybe with Raquel, she had to do something different, something that's more Raquel, I don't know, more ~~hocking~~."

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"I ~~wasn't~~ doing anything ~~that~~ ~~was~~ dropping," Raquel defended herself. "I mean, who doesn't sell pot once in awhile?"

"I don't," Dee Dee said.

"Yeah, and neither do I," Evie ~~added~~. "Raquel, you were getting out of control."

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Raquel frowned and shook her head.

"Raq," Dee Dee started. "I wasn't gonna say anything ~~about this either~~, but my dad got really mad that night you called our house and you were drunk."

"Oh, well, yeah," Raquel looked awkward. "Of course, but I apologized to him. Remember I called the next day. He was cool about it."

he may have sounded cool

"Yeah, but I mean, he was really put off and I wasn't gonna say anything but he and Graciela had a dinner party for Rocio and--" Dee Dee seemed unsure if she should continue.

"And what?" Raquel asked. "What's the big mystery?"

"They had this dinner for Rocio and his parents and my dad, he didn't want you to come. He was afraid that you would make a scene or something."

"What?" Raquel's eyebrows raised. "Your dad thought that? That I would make a scene?"

"Uh, huh," Dee Dee admitted.

"Was Evie invited?" Raquel looked over at Evie. "Did she go?"

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"Well, yeah," Dee Dee answered.

~~"I'm sorry, don't be mad,"~~ ^{Raquel} Evie told Raquel. "I didn't want to hurt your feelings."

"Wow, I feel like shit," ^{looked around like normal} Raquel said. "I always thought your dad liked me."

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"He *does*," Dee Dee ~~emphasized~~. "But he doesn't like the way you can act sometimes. It didn't help that you were spending so much time with Davey."

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"Yeah," Evie said. "He hasn't been the best influence."

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"The lady I was talking to at Isla said that I should also stop making boys the priority," Raquel confessed. "But I mean, I *like* boys, why is that a problem? Giving up boy booty would be like Evie giving up her flojos."

"But flojos aren't my life," Evie said.

"They *aren't*?" Raquel looked down at Evie's feet. She was wearing brand new silver Trovata flip flops. The straps were braided with straw like fabric and encrusted

with tiny white seashells. Evie loved them and had to have them the second she saw them at A Shore Thing, one of her favorite downtown shops.

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Evie looked down at her flip flops. "Okay... I see what you mean. But it's one thing to love flojos and another thing to be consumed by them."

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"I don't know," Raquel smirk. "I've seen you get all crazy at Walden's surf shop whenever their new shipment from Roxys comes in."

Look, so
"Okay, okay," Evie laughed. "You know, what you're saying about that lady at Isla saying that you cut boys from the menu for a while? It's sorta like what Sabrina was telling me."

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"Suprema?" Raquel propped her pillows up and sat up slowly. "She's talking now?"

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"Yeah, and she's taking a break from boys," Evie said. "Well, I don't know about boys, but definitely from Robert. He wanted her to move to Massachusetts with him 'cause he's gonna go to grad school out there. That's why she broke up with him."

"Really?" Dee Dee looked over at Evie.

"Yeah, but she didn't want go with him," Evie continued. "He got all mad at her. And now she's just taking a break from him and just about everything. She says she needs to focus on who *she* is and what she wants."

"Which is?" Dee Dee asked

"I dunno, I guess being a good president for her sorority, doing better on the tennis team, stuff like that."

"But that's easy for her," Raquel said. "But I'm not good at anything. I mean, what could I possibly focus on?"

"Okay," ~~Evie looked at Raquel and~~ exhaled. "We better go. We'll call you the very first day they let us," ~~she~~ leaned in to hug her goodbye.

"The ~~very~~ first day?" Raquel asked. Her eyes ~~suddenly~~ had a profound look of fear in them.

"The very first day," Evie said. "*Promise.*"

"Okay," Raquel sighed.

Dee Dee and Evie ~~both continued with long good byes and then~~ reluctantly left.

~~"I hope Raquel is gonna be okay,"~~ Dee Dee said ~~to Evie~~ as she got into Jumile. "I mean, she seems okay to me, making little jokes and stuff."

"Yeah," Evie threw her backpack in the back seat and got into the passenger seat. "I just hope she takes things seriously."

"So, I don't understand. Why wouldn't your sister just move with Robert?" Dee Dee started Jumile. "I thought she loved him? I just always imagined they were, like, the college sweethearts that would get married and living happily ever after."

"I'm sure Sabrina wants to live happily ever after, but she wants to live happily right now."

"Hmm... interesting," Dee Dee headed towards the main exit gate of Rio Estates,

As she drove past the gate, the morning mail truck was just entering. Evie looked after it. She wondered if this would be the week she would receive her quality check. Dee Dee hadn't even started her essay and she had yet to turn in her hours to Vasquez-Reyes Alarcon. She calculated the calendar days in her head. If all was on schedule, and

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"That's what worries me."

if the inept student intern working in the counselor's office was on top of things, this week she'd be getting her quality check.

"Hey, Dee Dee," Evie asked. "You still like to write a lot, right?"

"Yeah," Dee Dee answered. "I told you. When I was in Mexico Rocio and I were always writing each other back and forth."

"In Spanish and English, right?" Evie aksed

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"Right," Dee answered.

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"Good," Evie said. It was time to put Dee Dee to work.

Chapter 30

On Wednesday, Evie skipped working at the reserve and asked Dee Dee over after dinner.

"You have to help me write this," Evie said as she ~~pushed aside her~~ mother's clothing and kitchenware catalogues and placed a bag and some pens on the dining room table

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"~~Help~~ you?" Dee Dee placed her ~~very "absolutely favorite"~~ vintage quilted bag on one of the dining room chairs. "I thought I was going to write the whole essay for you." She looked at the pens. "And we should be at your computer. I'm not doing it by hand"

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"No," Evie pulled out two flat boxes from the Lautzenhauser's bag. "Didn't you get my text?"

"Yeah, why do you think I am here?" Dee Dee took a seat.

"No," Evie shook her head in frustration. "Dee Dee, I need to write a letter, to Alex."

"A letter? To Alex?" Dee Dee's eyes widened. "~~What? La Reina~~ de text is actually going to write?"

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~~"Yes, Dee Dee," Evie answered. Is that so hard to believe?"~~

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"An actual letter? *Sr* abbreviation?" Dee Dee teased. "*How are you going to manage?*"

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"I'm going to manage quite nicely, thank you," Evie retorted. "Since you are gonna help me, You said you used to write all those letters to Rocio when you lived in

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"Yes," Evie suddenly felt awkward. "

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Mexico, and this is my last hope. Alex won't answer my texts, or my IMs, or my phone calls. I'm thinking I could write him a letter and tell him how sorry I am and what a stupid mistake I made. I don't know, I just need to tell him everything that I feel badly about."

"But what about your extra credit essay?" Dee Dee asked. "You have to give me adequate time if you want a good paper."

"I know, I know," Evie said. "But I'm sure you'll be able to just whip it out, you're good like that."

"I know but—" But right now you gotta help me write this letter to Alex. I haven't had a decent night's sleep since he broke up with me."

Evie interjected

"Are you going to mail it?" Dee Dee asked. "That's what Rocio and I did."

"I don't think so," Evie said. "If for some reason he doesn't get it, I would never know. It would just *kill* me. And then what would I do? Ask him if he ever got my letter? That would just defeat the whole purpose of wanting to do something so unexpected and personal. I think I'm just gonna slip it in his locker."

"Oh," Dee Dee's mouth formed a syrupy, pouty smile. "This is so romantic." She looked over the boxes of stationary. "This is the paper you picked out?"

"Yeah," Evie showed her the two different styles. "This one," she pointed out one box that had a border of pineapples and mangos, "is like the 'fun Evie.' It'll remind him what he's missing out on."

"Or make him crave fruit salad," Dee Dee mused.

Evie ignored her. "And this," she held up the other box. "This is, like, the 'romantic side of Evie.' I know guys don't go for all the pink girly stuff, but I don't want him continuing you to think that I'm just his bud, like, another dude dropping him a note."

Dee Dee laughed. "I don't think *dudes* write each other, Evie."

"Dee Dee," Evie frowned. "Quit making fun! This is serious to me!"

"Okay, okay," Dee Dee put her hand on Evie's shoulder and squeezed it. "So sorry, ADA."

"So which one should I use?" Evie asked.

"I say use a sheet of paper from your spiral," Dee Dee said. "It's more you."

Evie took Dee Dee's hand off her shoulder and slumped back in her chair.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Dee Dee raised her hands in protest. "I couldn't resist. Besides, Raquel isn't around. Someone has to keep up with the yuk-yuks."

"Well, not at my expense," Evie sat back up in her chair and started to open both boxes. "So, what kind of stationary did you use when you wrote to Rocio?" she asked.

"Oh, I wrote him on parchment-like paper. It was ~~peach colored and~~ scented."

"Scented?" Evie asked. "Like what?"

"Like ~~peaches~~, ~~duh~~," Dee Dee said. "And then I would spray some of my own perfume in the air and wave the paper through it."

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"Ew," Evie grimaced. "How do you think it smelled after a few days in the mail?"

"I guess it smelled very *enticing*," Dee Dee smiled, "because he *always* wrote back."

Evie decided on the stationary with the fruit border. Just as she and Dee Dee worked on composing a letter that would lure Alex back to her, Evie's mother and Sabrina came into the kitchen.

"Hello, Dela," Evie's mother called out from over the counter.

"Hi Vicki," Dee Dee looked over. "Hey, Sabrina,"

"Hey, Dees," Sabrina helped herself to some pan dulce from a box on the counter.

"Longtime no see."

"Yeah," Dee Dee smiled, somewhat nervously. "So how's Stanford?" She appeared to Evie to be "Sabrina struck."

"I love it," Sabrina said simply. "I love that it's far away right now."

^{So}
~~But~~ "who's running your sorority while you are out here?" Dee Dee asked.

"Oh, we got a VP to take care of that," Sabrina crinkled her nose and waved her hand aside. "As the president, you pretty much just delegate. It's nothing like when I was a Hermana. We were all running around doing everything on our own – fundraisers, workshops, community services. Now *that* was a lot of work, but all so worth it. I loved those times."

"Dee Dee's going to be a Hermana," ^{Evie's mother} Vicki Gomez said.

"Really?" Sabrina's face lit up. She started towards the dining room table. "Wow, congratulations! Wait, when did you get nominated?"

"Well, I haven't, yet," Dee Dee admitted.

"And you can't be nominated if you're living in another country," Evie said.

Okay, just a *little* jabby.

"What do you mean?" Sabrina took a bite of her sweet bread and looked at Dee

Dee. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Well," Dee Dee started timidly. "I might have to go back to Mexico."

"What?" Vicki ^{just opened} mouth dropped. She joined them at the dining room table.

"You're moving back to Mexico City? I just saw your father at the country club today,

and he said nothing about this. *Nothing.*"

"No," Dee Dee said. "My whole family wouldn't be moving. It would just be me."

Evie tilted her head and looked at her sister. "Dee Dee wants to move back to Mexico so she could be closer to Rocio, her *boyfriend*."

"What?" Vicki let her mouth drop again, this time lower. "Dela, *mi'ja*, you're only sixteen years old. You can't move-in with your boyfriend."

"No, I wouldn't be living with him," Dee Dee explained. Evie could tell that she was getting frustrated. "I would live with Graciela's family in Coyacan."

"You might as well be living with him," Sabrina shook her head and casually took another bite of her pan. "Because if you're going to another country to be with a boy, you're basically gonna be living *with* him and *for* him. You're not gonna be a *Hermana*?"

Dee Dee sighed. "I don't know. Everything is just so confusing right now. Rocio's gonna be going back to Mexico soon, and I gotta decide."

"I would really give it some thought, Dee Dee," Sabrina told her. "I mean, if it doesn't work out in Mexico with him, what's his name?"

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"Rocio."

"Okay, if it doesn't work out with Rocio, you can always come back and you'll always have your family here, but you definitely can't be a Hermana. Not if you don't get nominated in time."

"I know..." Dee Dee said reluctantly.

"I would really think about what Sabrina is saying," Vicki Gomez said to Dee Dee. "If it's meant to be with Rocio, he'll still be there. But with Las Hermanas, they have a deadline."

"I know..." Dee Dee repeated.

Evie's mother looked over the stationary on the table. "What is all this?"

"I'm writing a letter," Evie announced, "to Alex." Her mother's and sister's line of question ing to Dee Dee ^{had changed} relax the mood at the table. At least for her. Evie hated to think about losing Dee Dee again. ^{made Evie hope that} ^{hoped they convinced} ^{Dee Dee to take a hint}

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"A love letter?" Sabrina teased as she picked up one of the boxes.

"No," Evie glanced over at her mother. "Just a letter."

"Oh, I used to love writing letters to your father," her mother picked up the other box of stationary. "But the best was getting letters back from him. That's something you kids don't have nowadays. You exchange your little texts that have no soul, no heart."

"Soul?" Sabrina laughed. "We're writing messages, not composing some RB jam!"

"So which stationary do you think I should use to write my letter to Alex?" Evie asked Sabrina.

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"I think," Sabrina eyed both boxes as she took another bite of her pan dulce. "You should just use a piece of scrap paper," she teased. "It's so much more you."

Chapter 31

~~By the time~~ Evie arrived at Duke's ~~she was already~~ feeling like a princess. ~~In~~ her hot pink halter gown, hot pink jeweled flojos, and perched on top of her head an elegant, but understated tiara. ~~how could she not?~~ A hot pink toe and hand job completed her royal look. ~~Hotter gown~~

And to top it all off, her father had rented ^a the copper convertible Camaro (ANGELS) that was used in a ^{Similar} Go Betty Go video just to drive Evie, Sabrina and Dee Dee to the party. When all ~~three girls~~ got out of the ^{Camaro} car at Duke's valet station, Evie caught a glimpse of herself in one of the restaurant's glass doors. Forget princess, how about rock star?

As she, ~~Dee Dee~~, and ~~Sabrina~~ made their way through the lobby's entrance, Evie really *did* feel like a rock star as the throngs of people—friends, family (Even A through

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How, how did *he* get in?)—crowded around her, ~~tugging on~~ her arm and wishing her

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happy birthday. People had to scream over DJ Chancla's bass driven surf music just to be heard

"Mahalo! Eves!"

"Feliz Cumpleanos!"

"You look *hot!*"

"Happy Birthday, *mi'ja!*"

Evie looked over and saw the tiny white-haired lady in a cream colored pantsuit among a mob of Hawaiian print shirts and short dresses. *Mui Mui style*

"Grandma?" Evie was caught off guard. She couldn't believe that Grandma Chablis would take a break from college lectures and her *quintana* lifestyle just to attend a grandchild's birthday party. "What are *you* doing here?!"

Grandma Chablis frowned. "That is no way to greet your *abuelita!*" She pushed past Big Bulge and Jared Leto to give Evie a tight hug. "I was ~~going to~~ miss my own granddaughter's quinceanera."

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"Uh, Grandma," Evie started. Did her grandmother really think she was turning 15, and that's why she had made the trip down from Davis? "This isn't my quinceanera. I never had one, remember? I'm turning sixteen. This is my Sixteenera."

"*What? You're sixteen?* Then how old does that make *me?*" She glanced over at Jared Leto. "Not too old...for *some* things."

"Grandma!" Evie leaned in to hug her grandmother tighter. Maybe she should hook her up with A through H?

Evie felt a nudge. Her grandmother had slipped a small, white envelope into her hand.

"Grandma ..." Evie knew what was in the envelope. Sabrina looked over at her and arched one eyebrow knowingly.

"Take it," her grandmother insisted as she patted the small envelope in Evie's hand. "But do something *fun* with it."

But Evie didn't need a birthday check to have fun at her own party. She could barely catch her breath for all the people wanting her attention. She was pulled by one friend from one side of the dance floor only to be yanked by another friend to the far other side of the restaurant. After all that had happened in the last couple of weeks, it was just so refreshing to have an entire evening just devoted to dancing, laughing, and of course *eating*.

The buffet was out of control — a mad fusion of *lechon*, Huli Huli chicken, Mango BBQ pork ribs, and pineapples filled with Mexican rice.

Even Sabrina couldn't resist. ~~She was the first~~ guest to help herself to a plate

"Damn," ~~she remarked, looking over the spread,~~ "I think I've gained, like, ten pounds just *looking at all this*."

Later, Evie danced in ~~the middle of the dance floor~~ in a circle with Dee Dee and some other friends from school. ^{room} The ~~dance floor~~ had become so hot that Evie's curls were limp and stringy even though ~~Dee Dee had her curls would retain their perfect spiral all night~~ ^{and her} back and neck ~~became~~ drenched with sweat. Every now and then, she'd grab her ~~gown~~ by the back zipper and tug at the ~~silk~~ fabric a bit, hoping to get some circulation going, but it just wasn't cutting it. She glanced down and noticed Mango BBQ

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sauce splattered ~~smack center~~ on her ^{pricey} precious silk gown. Oh, my God, how long had that *mancha* been there? She was formally defeated. She *had* to take a break from dancing. She left the dance floor and grabbed a cocktail napkin from the bar, dipping it into one of the many glasses of water that lined the bar. ~~She~~ then worked on the splotch, but it only spread out into a bigger and darker stain. Oh, well, Evie figured. Just add a dry cleaning ^{tab} bill to her already growing debt.

Evie ^{surveyed} looked around her party. As the birthday girl, she had taken the first whack at the custom made piñata, cut the two-foot high mango and whipped cream birthday cake (from her father's bakery, *claro*), and introduced the line of sexy Polynesian dancers ~~and~~ she still had to unwrap the pyramid of gifts piled up on one of the large banquet tables. She dampened another napkin and wiped her neck as she headed outside to the balcony. Some fresh air was in order.

"Where are you going, Evelina?" Lindsay asked. She was sitting with her husband Alfredo at one of the small booths.

"I need some air."

"~~Are~~ you okay?" Lindsay looked alarmed.

"Oh, yeah, Linds," Evie started. "Don't worry. Oh, also, don't worry about the car ~~bill~~. My grandma gave me the money for--"

Alfredo turned away from looking at the dance floor and looked up at Evie.

"Okay, Evelina," Lindsay interrupted ~~as she directed a sharp glance towards her~~ husband. It was clear that she didn't want him to know what had happened ~~a month and a half earlier~~. Perhaps she never told him that she had paid for body work at Williams. "Pues, enjoy the sea breeze!"

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the balcony, just like Tori and skater boy. Now, Alex was nowhere near the balcony, and she was, obviously, nowhere near his thoughts. He never responded to her letter. He hadn't even acknowledged its existence ~~even~~ after she had poured her entire heart onto paper? Paper lined with mangoes and pineapples?

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She looked back at her guests through the picture windows of Duke's. She had so many ~~cool~~ friends, yet not one of them really knew how she was feeling. Evie turned back to look out over the balcony's ledge. She folded her hands, rested her head on them, and took a deep breath. It was great, *awesome*, to have the sixteenera of her dreams, but the fun she was having just made her more aware of the party's two big, gaping holes. Alex was not with her, and neither was Raquel.

All of a sudden, Evie heard a long low whistle. She *knew* that whistle. *Ugh*, Mondo. She was not in the mood for him at the moment. She pretended not to hear him and didn't turn around.

Go away Mondo...

He whistled again.

Evie pushed up from the ledge. She got ready to throw him a smirk and a smart remark, but when she turned around, she couldn't believe who was standing in front of her.

It was *Alex*.

Evie's stomach flipped, and then it flopped. And then it flopped again.

"Hey, Evie," Alex smiled, hesitantly. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I haven't returned your calls and texts and everything." He looked around the balcony.

"No, no," Evie started "*I'm* sorry!" She wanted to reach out and embrace him but wasn't sure if she should. He just stood there and she just stood there, as if they both really didn't know what to do.

"Please, Alex," she continued. "You have to know that it was nothing with Arturo. I know that sounds cliché, but really, I was just stupid and maybe I was a little mad about that night with Mondo and the night--."

Alex held up his hand. "No, no. I haven't been the best boyfriend. Really. And *I'm* sorry."

"No, *I'm* sorry," Evie practically cried.

"Okay," Alex laughed. "We're *both* sorry."

Alex reached for Evie and put his arms around her shoulders. He held her tight, and Evie was overwhelmed with how good he felt. His hair was slightly damp, and she smelled the tiniest hint of cologne (fresh and sea breezy!). He was wearing an oversized sports jacket and dark slacks that had that painfully soft hand new look to them. Evie glanced down and saw he was wearing flojos, brand new O'Neills. *Cute*.

"Oh, Evie," he whispered into her ear. "I got your letter. I have never gotten anything like that before. I mean, all the things you said, what you wrote. I couldn't believe it, and I didn't know how to respond. I mean, I didn't wanna just call or send a stupid text. I wanted to see you in person, I guess, I wanted it to be perfect, and I wanted" he paused, "to give you this."

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He reached into his jacket's pocket and pulled out a small white box. His neck instantly turned pink. Evie knew that shade of nervous pink. "I think this would *really* go with your outfit." He looked her over. *Man,* "Wow, Evie. You look *so* beautiful. Really."

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Evie now felt as though *her* neck was turning nervous pink. Alex had never called her beautiful. He had called her cute and, one time in a text, he had called her sexy, but never beautiful. She loved hearing I am say it. She took the box from him, and when she opened it, she couldn't believe what she found — set on a blue velvet backing was a single gold charm - two miniature flip flops, one slightly over the other, and each topped with a small pearl where the straps connected. The charm was attached to a thin gold chain.

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"Oh, my God, Alex," Evie's mouth dropped open. "This is *so* cool. I can't believe it. I've *never* seen anything like this."

"I was hoping you'd say that," he scratched the side of his face nervously. "I drove down to LA after I got your letter, and I was looking through all the shops on Roberston, trying to find the right thing. I know you've been into horses lately, and I wasn't sure if I should have gotten you a horseshoe or something."

"No, I *love* it. And I'm glad you didn't get me a horseshoe or something. I mean, I love horses, but flojos are, like, *our* thing."

"Yeah," Alex said as he removed the necklace from the box. "I found it at this place called Dakine. It was totally a cool shop. Even Mondo thought so."

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Evie smiled, "Mondo went with you? To shop for me?"

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"Yeah, but he's never gonna be with us," Alex explained quickly. "Like when we are together on a date or something."

She looked at the charm. "Will you put it on me?"

"Totally," Alex moved behind Evie and fastened chain around her neck. "I wanna be your boyfriend again, and I want to be the boyfriend you deserve."

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"I would like that," Evie smiled at him. "No, I would love that."

"Hey, but then *I* wouldn't get to go," Dee Dee said.

"Okay, Okay," Evie laughed. "Let's all just go, but let's go *now*." She took Alex's hand and headed back into the restaurant.

"Yeah, we better hurry," Dee Dee checked the time on her cell phone as they pushed through the crowd. "We have just about an hour."

"We are *so* not gonna make it," Alex shook his head.

"Yes, we will," Evie yelled over the music. "We gotta at least try."

Evie, Dee Dee, and Alex sped north in Junile on Pacific Coast Highway towards Isla del Mar.

"God, I hope we make it." Dee Dee said

"We will, we will," Evie said.

"So," ~~Dee Dee asked~~ *can't we* "Do you think that Cherry Bomb will be waiting for you when you get back to Duke's?"

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"I have no idea," Evie said. "I haven't even been able to think. I mean, I just can't believe I still got my party."

"Why?" Dee Dee asked. "You worked your *nalgas* off. You did your work and you wrote, well, most of, your essay and by the deadline. That was the deal, right?"

"I dunno," Evie said. "Just everything has been crazy and it was such a last minute sprint to get this party. My parents were so stressed."

"Well, you could have turned your work a bit earlier," Dee Dee said.

"I know, I know," Evie. "But you know how plans can get rearranged at the last minute."

"Oh, yeah," Dee Dee raised her eyebrows in agreement. "I mean, I can't believe I didn't go back to D.F. with Rocio."

"You were gonna move back to Mexico?" Alex asked from the backseat.

"No," Dee Dee looked at Evie. "Not really. It was just a thought that I thought through."

"And I," Evie smiled. "Like when you think things through."

"Hey Eve," Alex started. "So what's the grand total from Grandma Chablis?"

"What, am I gonna be, like, your sugar mama now?" Evie opened her macramé bag and ripped open the envelope. There was no check, but rather sixteen one hundred dollar bills.

"Wow, *pretty* nice!" She held up a fan of bills. "Sixteen hundred buckaroos."

"That's a lot of *kana*," Alex said. "What are you gonna do with it? Down payment for private driving lessons?"

"Lifetime bus pass?" Dee Dee teased.

"Ha, ha, very funny," Evie said. "Well, first I gotta pay Lindsay back, like right away, and then," she paused. "I think I'm gonna donate the rest of the money to the reserve."

"*What?*" Alex exclaimed. "You gotta be kidding! The reserve? I thought you hated that place."

"No, not really," Evie answered slowly. "I mean, I hate that there was to be places like horse rescues and stuff because there are people who don't care about animals, but there is this one horse that I know and five hundred dollars could really help him out."

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"You are gonna give five hundred dollars to a *horse*?" Dee Dee asked. "But I overhead your grandma tell you to do something fun with it."

"I know," Evie looked at Dee Dee. "But it's not like Grandma Chablis is the only one giving me money. I saw a few envelopes on the gift table. I'll survive."

"Well, dang that's a pretty generous gift," Dee Dee said.

"Yeah, I don't know..." Alex started.

"You don't know what?" Evie asked

"I'm not into the idea of you working at the reserve again with ol' what's his name."

"Who? You mean Chamuco?" Evie asked playfully.

"Huh?" Alex asked.

"If you're talking about Arturo," Evie turned to look at him. "He most likely won't even be at the reserve by the time I start up again. He'll be starting UC Davis this spring. But Alex, you have nothing to worry about."

"Hmmm..."

"Alex," Evie looked into his dark eyes. "Nothing."

"Oh, I can't believe I forgot to tell you!" Dee Dee suddenly exclaimed.

"What?" Evie asked.

"Alejandra de Los Santos tried to get into the party!"

"*What?*" Dee Dee was right. Evie could not believe it. "When? Where was I? Did someone get it on camera phone?"

"I don't know where you were," Dee Dee said, "maybe dancing or eating more Huli Huli chicken or something. But she showed up with her three little *a-migas* and, of

course, she was denied access. Denied! In front of everyone, and was she so embarrassed!"

"Ha!" Evie laughed. "Okay, okay, birthday or no birthday, now *that's* the best gift ever!"

Dee Dee turned down RBD on her CD player. "I was just thinking I have no idea what to expect at Isla." *I hope I don't freak out.*

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"It's really not as bad as everyone makes it to be," Alex said. "I know this guy, through Gorby, and he had actually gone there. He said the staff was really cool and he got a lot of help. A lot."

"Well, that's a relief to hear," Evie said. She looked out the window at all the "Beach Access" signs that lining Pacific Coast Highway.

"Alex," she asked "Do you think we can go surfing out here sometime? For, like, a change?"

"I dunno, Evie," he looked out toward the ocean. "It gets pretty territorial the farther south you get and--." He stopped himself. "No, you know what? If you wanna try another beach, why not?"

"Exactly," Evie said. "Why not?"

² Evie read another sign on the highway. "Oh, hey, this is Leo Carrillo," Evie said *she mentions*
¹ as Dee Dee drove by. "Do you know I used to come here as a kid? My family used to go camping here."

"Oh, yeah," Dee Dee chuckled. "I remember that, but didn't you always come home to sleep?"

"Yeah," Evie laughed with her. "Hey, can you slow down just a bit, on the shoulder?"

"Evie, we don't have time for a little memory lane trip."

"Yeah, we're gonna be late," Alex agreed.

"It'll just take a second," Evie assured them.

Dee Dee slowed down, and Evie looked near Leo's main entrance kiosk. There were two wooden posts on the opposite sides of the dirt road. Each post was about four feet high and had a row of circular, yellow reflective lights attached to one side. ^{out} The bottom two lights ~~on one of the posts~~ were cracked, and the post also had a gash on the side. ^{Done} ~~the side.~~ ^{+ 1 1/3}

The cracked lights and the gash had been courtesy of Sabrina years ago, when she and Evie were still kids. Evie remembered sneaking out with Sabrina when Sabrina was fifteen and ^{she} Evie was eleven. Sabrina desperately wanted to take their parents' car for a little spin around the campground and had convinced Evie to go with her. They hadn't driven more than a few campsites away from their own before Sabrina hit the post. She was horrified. She had placed her head on the steering wheel and cried. It took Evie's urging to finally get her to wipe her tears, get the car in gear, and get it back to their own campsite before their parents found out. But they did find out. Their father was angry at Sabrina, but then calmed down as she continued to cry. Evie remembered how her father had put his arm around Sabrina and told her that taking his car without permission was wrong, but that she had to get over the fact that she had made a mistake. It wasn't the end of the world.

Deleted: Just like Lindsay had said, Sabrina was a horrible driver, nervous and timid.

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"You have to forget about what's in the rearview window and just keep forging ahead," Evie remembered her father saying. "Just focus on what's in front of you, what's ahead."

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"You know," Evie said, remembering her father's words. "I think I know what to say to Raquel when I see her."

"You think?" Dee Dee asked *drove back on to PCH*

"Yeah," Evie nodded. "I think so." She looked at the time on her cell. "*Oh, man,* we're *totally* gonna be late getting back to my party, my mom is gonna be totally stressed." *presents*

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"Not as stressed as she was trying to get that vanity plate in time," Dee Dee remarked.

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"*Huh?*" Evie's stomach flipped "*What?*"

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"The bow

"Oh, my God!" Dee Dee covered her mouth.

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"Dee Dee," Evie grabbed her arm. "Tell me,"

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"Dee Dee..." Alex shook his head *set*

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"Evie, stop it," Dee Dee pulled her arm from Evie. "I'm driving" *you're gonna*

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"Tell me, Dee Dee," Evie was not going to let up. *brise my arm*

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"I'm sorry, Evie!" Dee Dee *exclaimed*. "It was supposed to be a surprise. But your mother didn't even know if you were going to have your party or not and now, oh, she's going to kill me!"

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"Are you serious?" Evie shrieked. "I'm getting my car? I'm getting Cherry Bomb?"

"Evie?"

Dee Dee had pulled the sliding glass door open. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" She looked at Alex and seemed unsure of how she should react.

"No, not anymore," Evie looked away from Alex. "Look!" She held out the necklace for Dee Dee to see. "Look what Alex gave me!"

"Oh, my God," Dee Dee looked at the charm. "That is the cutest! It goes perfectly with your gown."

"I have to admit," ~~Alex told Evie~~ ^{said} "Mondo was trying to talk me into getting you a flip flop navel charm."

"Friggin' Mondo," Evie laughed. "~~But that is~~ a charm Raquel would wear."

Raquel!

"Dee Dee, what time is it?" Evie suddenly felt panicky.

"That's why I came out," Dee Dee said. "We should get going if we're gonna make in back in time for you to open presents."

"What, you're bailing on your own party?" Alex asked.

"We gotta go to Isla del Mar," Evie told him. "Raquel's there."

"What?" Alex's face dropped. "Are you serious? Since when?"

"Since last week," Evie answered somberly. "We ~~have~~ to see her, tonight."

"Uh, can I go with you?" Alex asked.

Evie looked at Dee Dee. She didn't know how to answer him.

"I don't know," Evie said. "It's sorta just a girl thing."

"Come on, Evie," Alex asked. "Raquel's my friend too. Can't you make it, like, a Flojo thing?"

walked towards me

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I specially want her to see that I'm wearing the gown

"I'm not saying anything else," Dee Dee ran her thumb and index finger across her closed mouth like she was zipping it closed.

"You don't have to," Evie's stomach continued to tingle with excitement. "If I'm supposed to be surprised, I will be."

She pulled down Jumile's sun visor and looked at herself in the ~~small~~ mirror. ~~She~~
~~was officially sixteen years old, but really couldn't tell the difference.~~ She raised her
eyebrows, widened her eyes and ~~stretched~~ her mouth ~~as wide as she could~~ into a giant O.
The look on her face was a cross between sheer astonishment and sheer ~~shock~~. She could
definitely look surprised. No problemo. no?

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lies could tell stories - break up heartbreak
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loss.

Thing her mother
had said me
always experience
in life.