

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

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

"My mother already left?" Evie asked.

"Yes, to the airport, to get Sabrina."

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

"No," Lindsay said. "She's picking her up at Santa Barbara airport."

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

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

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

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

"Hey, I better call you later," Evie told Raquel. "I gotta go."

"Uh, I figured that," Raquel said before clicking off.

Evie got up from her bed to help Lindsay in Sabrina's room.

“So, how long is Sabrina gonna visit?” she asked as she walked in. Lindsay was airing out the cream colored comforter over Sabrina’s queen-sized bed.

“I don’t know how long,” Lindsay said. “You should probably ask your parents.”

Evie looked around the room. Sabrina kept everything in such tight, impeccable order that you could practically bounce a quarter off the whole room - whereas Evie’s bedroom was constantly under construction. She did, however, pride herself in the orderly fashion she maintained with her flojos. All of them (eleven pairs in all) were lined up on her closet floor based on price, color, or jewels, in that order. *Que Kimora, no?*

Lindsay leaned up from the bed and glanced over at the photos of Sabrina and her now former boyfriend, Robert. They were tacked on Sabrina’s gingham cloth bulletin board. “Maybe we should take those down,” she suggested.

“Are you serious?” Evie looked over at the photos. She had just opened Sabrina’s vinyl CD carrier case, a relic before iPod nation took over, and winced at her taste in music. From Classical Piano to World Music, how could they possibly be related?

“I think so,” Lindsay started to pull out a white plastic thumb tack from the corner of one of the pictures. “Your mother said she was *muy triste*. We don’t want to make her more upset.” **DICHO**

“I think she’d be way more upset that we are moving things around in her room.” Evie closed the CD case. “She doesn’t like her things messed with. Neither do I, Lindsay,” Evie exaggerated in proper English enunciation to prove her point.

“Maybe you’re right,” Lindsay sighed. “But don’t blame me if she gets sad. I don’t want to be the cause of her tears.”

“Hey, Linds,” Evie started.

“*Si?*” Lindsay tacked the photo of Sabrina and Robert back up on the board.

“I just wanna say I am really sorry about the car accident. I mean, the fender bender. I know you went out of your way to protect me and everthing, and I hope I didn’t get you in too much trouble...”

“No, no,” Lindsay said. “Your mother was okay. But what you did Evelina was very wrong and I am very disappointed in you.”

Evie’s heart sank.

“You shouldn’t lie to me or to anyone. And you cannot break the law. I hope these are not habits that you are picking up and thinking of keeping.”

“No, no,” Evie tried to assure her. “I was just being stupid. It won’t happen again.”

“Okay,” Lindsay said. “I want to believe you. Do not make me out to be a fool.”

“I won’t, promise.” Evie badly about the fender bender and that she was eventually going to have to dole out some dough to pay for other driver’s car, but she felt worse that she had let down Lindsay. She lied to Lindsay and that was just plain shameful.

Lindsay put her hands on her hips and looked over Sabrina’s room one more time. The carpet was vacuumed, the stuffed panda bears were propped against the over stuffed pillows, and the TV remote, as well as Sabrina’s silk peach eye mask, was poised politely on the night table – cozy *cositas* ready to welcome Sabrina when she returned home.

“Well, I think we’re done here,” Lindsay concluded. “Let’s go see if your father needs any help.”

Evie followed her outside to the deck where her father should have been in the midst of barbecuing tri-tip on his new Viking Grange grill.

But when they got to the outside deck, Ruben Gomez had yet to even fire up his new Ultra-Premium. He did, however, look the part of Grill Master Ruben in a Q-tip white chef's hat, practically two feet in height, and a stiff red and white striped apron.

"You are *so* not wearing that," Evie looked her father over disapprovingly as Molesto came **trotting** up towards her.

"Why not?" her father frowned and positioned his hat to peak higher.

Is it even possible to explain the **etiquette of cool** to a middle aged parent?

"Because," Evie leaned over to scratch under Molesto's collar. "It looks lame."

"Lame?" Her father asked.

"Silly."

"I know what lame means." Her father looked at Molesto. "I think he knows Sabrina is coming back today. He's had this energy, excitement, all morning."

At least someone was excited about Sabrina's return.

Evie watched her father take a wire scrub brush to the encrusted grill of his old One Touch Weber. The legs of the grill were rusty and the grill was tar black, charcoal ghosts of BBQs past.

"Why aren't you using your new grill, the Grill Grandioso 3000?" she asked sarcastically as she took a seat on a deck chair and helped herself to some tortilla chips.

"The *Ultra Premium*," her father corrected her. "I wanted to use it, but we don't have enough propane, and the extension cord doesn't reach out to the deck. It's all just a mess."

"I can go get some propane, Senor Ruben," Lindsay offered.

"Nah, it won't be necessary," Evie's father continued to scrub the Weber's grill. "It's been a while since I've used this. It should be fun, like old times." He looked over at Evie. "Like when we used to go camping, remember?"

"Camping?" Evie squinted her eyes at her father. It was now nearly one in the afternoon, but the sun was blazing. How utterly sweet, **Evie** thought bitterly, it would've been to be out with Alex and then watching Los Olvidados play at the Seaside Park street fair. Stupid Sabrina, her little melt down just effed up her whole day.

"Yes, " her father said. "We used this grill when we used to go camping at Leo Cabrillo? How can you not remember?"

"Easily," Evie joked as she crammed more chips into her mouth. Leo Carillo was a state beach between Malibu and Rio Estates, right off the Pacific Coast Highway. The highway divided the hiking trails of the canyon and the sandy coastline of the beach, making Leo Carillo truly a place in the best of both worlds, depending on what side of the highway you were on. Evie realized it had been years since she had thought of Leo Carrillo.

"Those were some good times," her father continued. "Remember you and Sabrina would take the boogie boards out and would be in the ocean all day? We couldn't get you out of the water for nothing. You girls were so waterlogged that you'd look like those Californian raisins when you finally came out."

“Dad, we didn’t even camp,” Evie **rumpled her lips**. “We slept in the Vacationeer, and half the time mom would get so annoyed with all loud campers and the mosquitoes that she’d drive me and ‘brina back home so we could all sleep in our own beds for the night. I wouldn’t exactly call that camping.”

“But you still came back in the morning,” Her father refused to let his positive memories be swept away under Evie’s moodiness. “We’d spend the whole day at the beach together. It was so fun. You and your sister were **inseparable**.”

Evie looked at her father struggling with the Weber grill. It was not getting any cleaner. “Do you even know what you’re doing?” she asked.

“E-vie, ” Lindsay shot her a look as she arranged utensils on the patio table

Evie knew she was sounding **bratty**, but she couldn’t help it. She was still annoyed that she had to waste a full day at home, and she placed the blame not only on Sabrina, but also on both her parents.

“Yes, Evie. I do know what I am doing.” Her father didn’t mind her sass. “It’s pretty simple. I just have to get the coals going, which... might...” He read over the bag. “Take a little bit longer than I thought.”

“So, how long is Sabrina gonna stay?” Evie asked her father. Molesto had now rolled over. He wanted his belly rubbed.

“I’m not quite sure. You might want to ask your mother.” He added more lighter fluid to the coals and then re-read the charcoal bag. “You know, we might be eating a little later than I thought. I hope Sabrina isn’t too hungry when she gets here.” He looked over at Lindsay. “Hey, Linds, did you make your salsa? The **verde picante**? It’ll go great with the tri-tip.”

"*Si, si.*" Lindsay brushed some leaves off the chairs with a kitchen towel. "I also made avocado pie, Sabrina's favorite."

"You didn't use any of my mom's organic Rancho Palmillo avocados, did you?" Evie asked as she scratched Molesto's belly.

"Of course not," Lindsay said. "I couldn't if I wanted to. She has those under lock and key, along with all her winning Bunco money."

Before they knew it, Molesto's ears, as if on cue, pricked up and were followed by the purr of Vicki Gomez's Mercedes pulling into the driveway. Molesto rolled over onto his feet and took off for the front yard.

"They got back quick," Lindsay looked at her watch.

Evie got up from her chair, wiped the tortilla chip crumbs off her shorts, and went to the front yard.

"Tell 'em I'll be right there," Evie's father called out as the flames roared to the height of his chest. "I don't think I can leave this... right now."

Evie came around the house just as her sister was getting out of her mother's Saab, but as soon as she saw her sister, she was taken aback. Sabrina, how could you say it nicely, looked really bad. For one thing, Sabrina relished sunshine and poo pooed any suntan oil that contained the socially deadly SPF. Now she was pale, almost a sickly white pale, and she was very thin. The dark roots of her blonde hair were an inch deep, exposing a form of laziness that Evie had never known existed within her sister. Evie knew Sabrina would never leave the house, let alone take a trip, looking the way she did. She was one of those girly girls who actually dressed up for travel, in fact, the joke of the

household was that Sabrina's accessories practically had to match the interior of the airlines she was flying, which is why she rarely flew Southwest. She looked horrible in red, blue, and gray.

"Hey, Sabrina..." Evie started as she walked towards her sister. She suddenly felt guilty about the earlier resentment she had felt towards her. Sabrina suddenly looked frail and so alone.

"Hey, Eves." Sabrina's face was flat and emotionless. She clung to the strap of her shoulder bag as if it were a life preserver, and she paid no mind to Molesto, who eagerly vied for her attention.

Evie noticed that their mother didn't pop open the trunk and that there was no luggage in the backseat of the Saab.

"Where's all your stuff?" Evie asked as she awkwardly clutched her right elbow with her left hand.

"I only have my carry-on." Sabrina tugged at her large green suede shoulder bag. "I didn't pack a lot."

"Why not?" Evie asked. "How long are you staying?"

"*Evie,*" Her mother came around the Saab. "Enough with the questions."

"Senorita Sabrina!" Lindsay extended her tanned, wrinkled arms to embrace Sabrina. "Oh, look at you!" She gave Sabrina a long, hard embrace. "*Ay, que flaquita!* Oh, I'll take care of that!"

Sabrina didn't say anything, pretty much resembling a limp, lifeless rag doll.

"I'm going to make my special *fideo* for you," Lindsay chatted excitedly as she took Sabrina's bag and slung it across her own shoulder. "I'll make it with fresh tomatoes from the garden."

"It's really okay," Sabrina mumbled softly.

"Oh, but it won't be a bother."

"But I'm not hungry, Lindsay," Sabrina replied, this time more curtly.

"That's because you haven't had good food," Lindsay said. "Up there at school they don't know everything. But let me —."

"Lindsay!" Sabrina snapped. She rubbed the right side of her temple, hard, as if she was trying to put out a fire under her skin. "Stop it!" she snapped again. "Just *stop* it!"

And indeed everything just stopped. Everything and everyone.

"Oh," Lindsay pulled back from Sabrina. "*Lo siento...*" She turned to Evie's mother for guidance. "I didn't, I..."

Evie looked over at her mother, who immediately went to Lindsay's aid.

"Oh, it's okay," Vicki Gomez tried to assure Lindsay that she was not the cause of Sabrina's upset, but she appeared to still be shaken. "No worries," she said as she went over to Sabrina.

It was unsettling to say the least. Sabrina's disposition was always as sunny as, well, her name, and Evie couldn't recall when she had ever raised her voice to anyone at all, and especially not to Lindsay.

Sabrina bowed her head onto her mother's chest. Her mouth creased downward at the sides, and small tears percolated from the corners of her eyes. Her whole body began to tremble.

"Oh, oh..." Evie's mother said, but she seemed at a loss as what to do. "Lindsay, here," she quickly handed over her own handbag and car keys to her. "I'm going to take Sabrina up to her room." Evie's mother put her arm around Sabrina and led her up to the stone steps and into the house.

"*Si, claro,*" Lindsay took Vicky Gomez's purse and keys. As she watched after Vicki and Sabrina, her face was combination of worry, fear, and confusion.

"What happened?" Evie asked Lindsay as soon as they were inside. "What's wrong with Sabrina?"

"*Yo no se,*" Lindsay confessed. "I never want to make Sabrina upset or make her cry. I would rather die than cause either one of you girls pain."

At that moment, Evie's father, still in his apron and mile high chef's hat, came from around the side of the house.

"Hey," he looked around and found the driveway void of a heart-warming family reunion. "What happened to my little girl?"

Both Lindsay and Evie were too stunned to answer.

Chapter 9

"So what do you think happened to her?" Dee Dee asked Evie.

The three girls, Evie, Dee Dee, and Raquel had gathered later that afternoon for another impromptu ER/RE! meeting and, again, at Evie's urgency.

As soon as her mother had taken Sabrina upstairs, the barbeque was, of course, off, and the house became oppressively quiet. Lindsay put the food away, and Ruben Gomez's enthusiasm, and chef's hat, came down. Evie took the opportunity to sneak out towards the far west end of the Rio Estates country club golf course, the regular **place** for their ER/RE! meet ups. All three lay flat on their backs, on the meticulously maintained lawn where any passing member might guess them to be just three young girls casually counting clouds or working on their mid-winter tans. Oh, if only life in the Estates was just that simple.

"Like I said," Evie repeated. "As far as I know, she and Robert broke up and she's all upset by it."

"But why?" Dee Dee exhaled smoke from her flavored Californian Dream. "I mean, who broke up with who?"

"It's not who broke up with who," Raquel held her cell phone inches above her face with both hands as she texted. "It's who broke up with *whom*."

Evie ignored Raquel. "*She* broke up with him."

Dee Dee rolled over on her side to face Evie. "That makes no sense. Then why is she the one who is all sad and crying?"

"I have no idea," Evie waved Dee Dee's cigarette smoke away from her face.

"He probably cheated on her," Raquel said. "And then she broke up with him after she found out."

“How could you say that?” Evie looked over at Raquel. “You’ve never even met Robert, and why would anyone ever cheat on Suprema? She’s like perfect.” Evie was surprised that she would even be cheering for Team Suprema, someone who definitely didn’t need anymore PR work.

“Look, they’d been going out for almost two years.” Raquel thumbs were on fire as she continued typing rapid text. “He was probably bored. Big time.”

“Could you *stop*?” Evie looked over at her fingers and cell phone.

“I’m just giving it to Davey,” Raquel explained. “We were supposed to hook up today, ‘member? But *now* he’s saying it’ll be later tonight.”

“You know,” Dee Dee started. “I agree with Raquel. I think there is more to the story. Maybe Sabrina was, like, caught in a tragic love affair with one of her professors or something.” She sat up. “Ooh, and then the wife confronted Sabrina at her sorority house, in front of all her sisters. Oh. *My*. God.”

“*You*,” Evie looked at Dee Dee, “read too many of those **Mexican soap periodicals.**”

“Well, I just don’t get it.” Dee Dee lay back down on the grass. “How could Sabrina leave Stanford and break up with her boyfriend just like that? **I mean, Sabrina is, like, my role model, and, *yo no se*, I’m just surprised, I guess.**”

“I don’t believe you guys.” Evie felt annoyed with Dee Dee and Raquel. She expected better advice from her two ADAs.

“Hey,” Raquel said. “We only know what you tell us, and you’re the one who sent the emergency text. You wanted our opinion on what we think is going on with Sabrina.

It's not our fault you don't agree with what we think." She got a new text and sat up quickly. "*Shit!*"

"*Que pasa?*" Dee Dee looked over at her.

"Friggin' Davey." Raquel fumed at her cell phone. "He's *such* an a-hole. First he flaked on me today, and now he's bailing on me tonight."

Evie couldn't help but feel slightly relieved. One less night with Davey Mitchell was one more night of safety for Raquel. Evie had finally seen who Davey Mitchell was. He had picked up Raquel from school one day in his huge white four-by-four truck (LOCO LFE). The words, *In Loving Memory*, in Old English script, were adhered across the truck's back tinted window. Directly below *In Loving Memory* were the names of three of Davey's friends who had died in who knows what kind of way. When Evie had asked Raquel about it, she simply shrugged her shoulders and said the three friends had been at the wrong place at the wrong time. Evie couldn't imagine dating anyone who had an abridged obituary on his truck, and God forbid if Raquel's name got added to Davey's rear window list by merely being at the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Hey," Evie suddenly remembered her own evening duties with the reserve.

"What time is it?"

Raquel checked her cell. "Almost six, why?"

"Ah man, I gotta go." Evie stood up and slipped on her *Trovata flojos*. She had to meet Ana in less than an hour.

"And where you going, Miss Thang?" Raquel inquired with a suspicious tone. It was she, not Evie, who usually had to take off for somewhere on a Saturday night.

"Nowhere exciting," Evie cracked her knuckles as she stood up. "I'm on volunteer duty."

"Ew," Dee Dee wrinkled her nose at the sound of Evie's popped fingers. "I *hate* when you do that." She put out her cigarette in patch of dirt. "You're going to work on a Saturday night? I thought you had the whole day free."

"I did," Evie said. "*The day*. But tonight I gotta go to some charro rodeo."

"You mean a *charreada*?" A smile spread across Dee Dee's face.

"Yes, exactly," Evie said. "How do you say it, again?"

"A *charreada*," Dee Dee repeated. "You're going to one? Tonight? *Que chido!*"

"What is it?" Raquel asked. She was on a fervent texting roll, composing scorned woman payback to Davey.

"It's a rodeo," Dee Dee started to explain. "But a Mexican rodeo, with more synchronized competition, and everyone is dressed in traditional Mexican clothing. It's really festive and colorful. Rocio and I used to go them when we visited his cousins in Jalisco." She suddenly got that "woe is yo" look. "But wait, how does going to a *charreada* work into your volunteer credit?"

"You got me," Evie shrugged her shoulders. "But I ain't asking. As long as I don't have to clean up at the reserve, it's fine with me. It's a fundraiser, and Arturo said if any of the volunteers wanted to buy a ticket and go, we could still get credit."

"Ah," Raquel smirked. "The virtues of capital gain in an altruistic society."

"And this girl, Ana, who I volunteer with, is gonna pick me up," Evie went on to explain. "We're gonna go together."

“If I didn’t have to to write my essay for Las Patronas, I would definitely invite myself,” Dee Dee said. “Charreadas are *so* much fun. They have live mariachi music and lots of food. You aren’t taking Alejandro?”

“I would,” Evie started. “But he’s decided to drive down to San Diego tonight. He and Bien, that guy from Buena, are gonna stay the night in S.D. so they can go surfing in Baja tomorrow morning. Dawn patrol.”

As soon as she spoke, Evie could already sense Dee Dee feeling sorry for her. *He’s going away. Again. Without you. Porbecita.*

“I was actually gonna go with him,” Evie lied. “He wanted to do this whole day thing with me, down in Baja, but I had to work at the reserve.”

“Plus,” Raquel added. “I really can’t see your mom letting you cross into Mexico with Alex. No way would Vicki G stand for that.”

“Right,” Evie raised her eyebrows and nodded. Although Raquel’s observation validated her little fib, she resented it slightly. Why did Raquel *always* have to point out just how strict her mother was? Just because Kitty, Raquel’s mother, was too busy with her software business, her La Madrinas mentoring network, and hosting her over-produced Bunco parties to never notice the craziness Raquel was up to, it didn’t make Evie’s mother a complete tyrant.

“But Baja isn’t Mexico,” Dee Dee felt the need to point out. “Everyone thinks it is, but it isn’t. It’s really just an extension of California.”

“Oh, yeah?” Raquel asked. “If it’s just an extension, why do *I* get sweated at the border when my Cabo tan and I are just trying to make our way back into Cali?”

"Maybe it's not your dark tan," Dee Dee mused, "but maybe your dark, moody attitude."

"Yeah," Evie laughed. "Or, maybe it's the fact that you're always trying to smuggle tequila in your handbag or pot in your panties."

"Excuse me," Raquel informed Evie. "I do *not* drink tequila. That crap is nasty."

"*And*," Evie looked at her. "You don't wear panties."

"You know," Raquel threw Evie a sideways glance. "I *was* thinking of tagging along with you to your little rodeo, but now I just changed my mind, thank you." She went back to texting.

"Oh, yeah, thanks for the offer," Evie smirked. "Now that Davey's ditched you."

"And Alex hasn't ditched you?" Raquel asked.

"*Not twice*" Evie said.

"Not twice *in the same day*, maybe," Raquel bit back.

"Chicas, chicas," Dee Dee interrupted with an authoritative, almost bored tone.

"How much longer is this juvenile sparring going to continue? If we're done here, I need to get back home and work on my essay."

"No, but really," Raquel said to Evie. "I'll go with you to this charreada. I could be into getting my mariachi on." She extended her elbows and flapped them around a bit.

"*Serio?*" Evie asked.

"Why not?" Raquel asked. "Can I catch a ride with you and your horse friend?"

Ana, Evie remembered, was also a classmate of Jose's, and she could only imagine an evening of severe grilling a' la Raquel. She made a mental note to warn Ana -
- 'Ixnay on the Jose'. But other than that, Evie thought it would be fun to have Raquel to

herself for the evening. Since she had been going out with Davey, it seemed like forever since they had any QT together on a weekend.

“Of course,” Evie said. “You should totally come with us.”

“Oh,” Dee Dee pouted as she put out her cigarette. “**I am so jealous.** You are going to have *un* blast. *Charro* boys are so fine.”

“That’s enough for me,” Raquel slammed her cell phone shut in defiance. “I’m so over Davey.”

Chapter 10 Charro, *Claro*

Evie, Raquel, and Ana arrived at the *charreada* just as it was starting. Just about every seat in the small arena was taken up by large Mexican families, rowdy teenagers or glassy eyed men, already drunk on Corona. The walls of the arena were lined with *banderas* in red, white and green, the national colors of the Mexican flag and just about everyone in the bleachers furiously waved additional flags that represented their individual home states of Mexico.

Raquel scanned the bleachers. “Damn, I thought we were going to a rodeo, not some freakin’ *futbol* game. We ain’t never gonna find a seat.”

“Hey, there some space over there,” Ana tilted her chin towards the lower left end of the bottom bleachers. “I’m sure we can fit our asses in.”

Evie followed Ana and Raquel, each of them lugging clear plastic bags of kettle corn and *churritos*, as well as *elotes* slathered in mayonnaise and super sized sodas to wash everything down with.

As soon as she sat down, Raquel looked around and discreetly pulled out a small glass bottle of Jack Daniel's. She poured some into her soda.

Ana eyed the bottle and smiled. "Woman, I like your style."

"You want some?" Raquel asked.

"You bets," Ana answered.

Raquel passed the bottle to her and Evie couldn't help but notice that Ana poured even more J.D. into her own coke.

"Want some Evie?" Ana waved the bottle seductively.

"Uh, no, thanks," Evie **wincd with distaste**. "Whiskey gives me the runs."

"Ah, poor Evie," Raquel feigned sympathy as she took a sip of her drink. "*Lo Sient*. I forgot to purchase some of that fancy Vieve for you."

The first bull rider was released into the ring and the whole crowd jumped up from their seats to cheer him on.

"This is Jessie G from Fontana!" The announcer yelled into the mic. "And if Jessie can stay on Thunder 'til the whistle blows, well, Jessie G. is gonna be going home with his own bottle of tequila! What do you say, *hombres*?!"

Hombres? Where did they find this MC?

"Give *me* the tequila!" Raquel yelled out. She held her Styrofoam cup out towards the arena. "I'm running out!"

The crowd sitting closest to the three girls turned to look at Raquel and laughed.

"I thought you didn't drink tequila," Evie reminded Raquel curtly. She knew she was being a buzz kill, but WTF, she didn't have a buzz and she definitely didn't want to get popped by security just for being with others trying to get one.

MORE RAQ

Evie checked the time on her her cell phone. She figured they'd have to stay at the *charreada* at least for an hour to get credit.

She also saw that there were no messages from Alex and she wondered if he had already arrived to San Diego. A little text, something, would have been nice.

"Man," Raquel practically inhaling her drink through her straw. "Check out the *hombres* 'round here! *Que* fine, right Evie?"

Evie looked around and had to admit that Raquel was right. *Charro* boys, in their snug *charro* suits were *muy*, how do you say 'FAF' *en espanol*? Plus, there were just tons of other men milling about in their own mariachi inspired duds — bolero jackets and tight fitting pencil pants with silver conchas stitched along the side seams.

"Damn," Raquel nudged Evie and whistled. "Look at *that* piece of ass!"

Evie and Ana looked over. Ana laughed covering her mouth, but Evie was beside herself. The so-called piece of ass belonged to none other than the biggest *nalgon* himself, Arturo.

Evie almost didn't recognize him at first because he was so out of context. She was used to seeing Arturo at the reserve, cranky and sweaty and wearing a Pendleton and Wranglers and, of course, *those* boots. But tonight he was sorta dressed up in black pants, a black dress shirt and a cowboy hat.

“You’ve gotta be kidding!” Evie laughed at Raquel. “That’s, like, my boss at the reserve.”

“What, are you serious?” Raquel got a better look. “Damn, hook a sister up with some volunteer opportunities. I’m suddenly feeling in a very *giving* kind of mood.” She lowered her voice and ribbed Evie in the side. “Ooh, he’s looking this way.” She took a larger swig of her Jack Daniel and Coke.

Evie regretted that she had brought Raquel. Not only was she already getting loud and obnoxious, she was gonna make a fool of herself in front of Evie’s “like, boss” from work. She was also getting Ana drunk. Who was gonna drive them home? With all the chaos and confusion that going on with Sabrina, Evie didn’t want to call her mother or father and ask them to pick her up at the rodeo. What *had* happened to Sabrina? Evie wondered. Hmmm...maybe it would be good if she got back home as soon as possible.

Evie turned her head down and away, hoping Arturdo wouldn’t notice her or Ana.

However, Arturdo did see them and waved to over. They both waved back and Evie hoped that would be it. Eye contact made, credit issued. He had told the volunteers that they didn’t have to spend time together as a group, but the less time with *el jefe*, the better. But instead Arturdo, in his black badness, made his way directly towards to them.

“Hey, you two made it,” he actually smiled. “Nice.” He balanced one leg on the bleacher seat above them and leaned his whole body onto it.

Nice? When was Arturdo every happy to see them, let alone Evie?

“My name’s Raquel,” Raquel held her hand out, poised and dainty, as if she were actually expecting him to kiss it or something. “I’m Evie’s best friend.”

Arturdo took Raquel's hand, but merely shook it. "Oh, you're the one who's been living in Mexico City."

Evie was surprised that he remembered.

"Uh, *no*," Raquel shot Evie a look. "I'm the *other* best friend." She looked back at Arturdo and smiled suggestively. "The *pretty* one, *La Bonita*."

Arturdo looked at her drink and laughed. "You mean the drunk one, *La Boracha*!"

That, Evie had to admit, made her LOL.

"Well it's better than being named Ar-turdo," Raquel said under her breath.

Oh my God. Evie and Ana tried hard contain their giggles. He could *not* hear have that. **It would mean a scheduling and work**

"What did you say?" Arturo asked.

It was then that Evie, Raquel and Ana fought hard to contain their laughter to themselves.

Just then, Josephina, of all people, walked up to them. "Arturo?"

"Ah, Josephina," he turned to face her. He was caught off guard. "You're back already?"

"Yes," Josephina huffed. "Am I interrupting something?" She eyed Evie, Raquel, and Ana coolly.

"Oh," Arturdo suddenly seemed awkward. "You remember Evie and Ana, and this is their friend..."

"Oh, Turo just gave me a pet name, *La Boracha*," Raquel teased.

Josephina looked at Raquel's drink. "Are you drinking?"

"Yeah, you want some?" Raquel held out her cup towards Josephina.

"Uh, no?" Josephina wrinkled her nose. "There are already enough drunks here."

She turned to Arturo. "Turo, I *have* to use a bathroom? I am not about to use the outhouses they have here. Can't you take me somewhere?"

"Somewhere?" Arturo asked. "We'd have to drive into Moorpark or Camarillo."

"Well, let's go then, anywhere other than here," Josephina looked around and then at Raquel. "There's nothing but *borachos* here." She looked over at Raquel and Ana.

"*Pero querida*," Arturo looked at his watch. "We'll miss the *escaramuzas*."

Josephina looked back at him, her eyes demanding.

Arturo looked around and softened his tone. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable. I guess I can take you into Camarillo. We'll find somewhere for you."

"So you gonna leave?" Evie asked. As soon as Arturo bailed, so could they.
Cool.

"It looks like it," Arturo said as he put his arm around Josephina. "We'll be back. Maybe we'll see you later."

As soon as Arturo and Josaphina left the bleachers, Raquel dove in.

"Oh. *My*. God," Raquel **smirked**. "That girl talks like a total val and what's her name again? Horsa-phina? She's a dog!"

Ana almost choked, laughing. "Arturo and Horsa-phina! Perfect! A match made **in manure. I can't stand either one of them.**"

"And how whipped is that Arturo?" Raquel observed. "My mack is dry, ay, ay."

“Blah,” Ana waved her hand aside. “He just doesn’t wanna argue with her. She can be pretty high maintenance.”

“Or maybe,” Evie suggested. “He tries to be, like, ‘My Super Sweet Boyfriend.’”

“Please,” Raquel said. “No guy is *that* sweet.”

Evie didn’t have to think for a second. “Alex is.”

“Oh, yeah?” Raquel looked at her. “And where is Prince Charming now? He’s in San Diego probably partying with some surf honeys as we speak.”

Evie didn’t even bother to respond. She knew that was far from the truth. She watched Arturdo and Josephina walk from the grandstand arena towards the exit. She watched him take off his suede jacket and cover Josephina’s **bare shoulders** with it. He rubbed her back slightly. Even though Arturdo was one of her least favorite people, Evie couldn’t help but feel a twinge of envy. She couldn’t remember the last time Alex had been so chivalrous with her or the last time they had actually gone on a date. Yeah, they surfed all the time, or at least they used to, and sometimes they’d split pancakes at Pete’s Breakfast House or a burrito at La Gloria downtown, but those weren’t really dates. Now with her volunteer duties, she wasn’t even able to do those simple things with him and wasn’t like he was making any effort to keep up with the romance he used to initiate.

As soon as she was sure Arturdo had left the arena, Evie was so ready to bail. She really didn’t know what to expect from a *charreada*, but so far, it was just like any other yahoo episode of PBR, chock full o’ of bull riders, barrel wearing clowns, and drunken **drama**. “

“*Vamos a ir, hombres*,” Evie imitated the announcer.

"I *heard* that," Raquel echoed Evie's sentiment. "Just lemme just finish my drink."

"Hey, Eves, you got your learner's permit on you?" Ana tapped the remaining ice from her cup into her mouth. "Maybe you should drive."

"Totally, I'll drive," Evie offered. The night was not going to be such a big loss after all. She was gonna get to practice her driving and Ana had an automatic. Uh, yes.

"I don't know about letting Evie drive," Raquel said. "She got in a pile-up a few weeks ago."

"What?" Ana asked. "What do you mean?"

"She doesn't know what she's talking about," Evie insisted. "Besides, between you two stinky *borachas*, I'm the best driver there is between the three of us."

As the girls were getting up to leave, the announcer introduced a new rider and a young girl, dressed in a cream colored Victorian style dress, rode to the center of the ring on a dark carmel colored horse.

Hey," Ana said. "He sorta looks like Chamuco, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Evie agreed as she crammed the last of her *churritos* in her mouth.

"

. Evie didn't know all the different kinds of horse there were, but she remembered Arturo saying something that Chamuco was a draft horse or something. Maybe this horse was the same? She didn't know.

The girl trotted out to the center of ring and tapped the side of her horse with a leather riding crop. The horse instantly lowered his head as his front legs bowed in a courtesy. This, of course, garnered a tremendous applause from the adoring crowd.

“Aw,” Ana clicked her tongue. “He is *so* cute! Wouldn’t you love to have a pony like that, Evie?”

“Yeah,”

Raquel sounded bored as she swirled the ice in her cup. “Okay, I’m ready to go.”

“Wait,” Evie said. “I wanna see more. He reminds me of this one horse at the reserve.”

and the crowd was completely, totally *encantada* with the young rider and her horse.

her horse seemed to have a mind of his own. He started to charge towards the other end of the arena in lightening flash speed. Maybe too much speed? Evie thought. How was petite looking girl going to control a charging horse that was headed straight for a flag covered concrete wall?

“Whoa, she’s going a little too fast there,” Ana said as she took a swig of her Jack and coke. “If she doesn’t slow down, she’s gonna smack head on. Splat!”

Ana was right. The girl was clearly losing control of her horse, who was leading her right into the concrete barrier. Evie looked around the bleachers, but nobody else seemed to notice or even care. Flags waved, the drums rolled, people cheered. Was everyone **crazy**?

“Oh, my God,” Evie clenched Ana’s arm as she watched.

The girl was now a few yards away from the wall, then a few feet and then before anyone knew it, *BAM!* She pulled tightly on the black leather reins, and her speeding horse halted to a complete and sudden stop, seemingly inches from the thick concrete barrier.

The crowd went crazy! They thumped their feet on the floor of the metal bleachers and cheered even louder.

Evie exhaled. She couldn't believe what she had just witnessed.

Wow!" Even Raquel was impressed. "That horse is so cool!"

"Well, I'm sure the rider had something to do with it."

Evie continued to watch. All of a sudden she felt this newfound respect for horsemanship. It was pretty amazing. Compared to the horses at the reserve, she felt a bit naive. How could she not have known?

Ana stood up and stretched. "Okay, I'm so ready to bail."

"Me tambien," Raquel echoed.

Evie couldn't believe what she had just seen. The horse was beautiful, swift and graceful. Nothing like the horses she had to look after at the reserve. It was like she got to see how horses could be in a different light. No associated with work, after school hours or shoveling up poo.

It was from that night that Evie felt a new respect for what she was doing.

Chapter 11

"Brina?" Evie tapped softly on her sister's bedroom door, but she didn't answer.

She tapped again on the door, but when she heard nothing, not even the hum of the TV or the computer, Evie walked to the end of the hall and into her parents' bedroom.

"*Que te molesta, mi'ja?*" her mother asked. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, drying her hair from her morning swim.

Evie sat on the linen chest at the foot of the bed.

"What's wrong with Sabrina?" she asked her mother. "I knocked on her door, but she's not answering. And it was the same thing last night, when I came back from the rodeo."

"She's probably still sleeping," her mother said. "It's still early."

"Early? It's already 9 a.m." It was unusual that Evie would question someone else's sleeping habits. Until Sabrina arrived, she was the sole snoozer of La Familia Gomez.

"She's going through a tough time," her mother sighed as she put a plastic bag over her hair and read the instructions on the box. "It's something we all go through. Heartbreak ...loss." She looked at Evie and smiled. "But your sister is going to be fine. She has so much love around her, how could she not get better? And all she really needs is some good old fashioned Pilates. I'm going to take her with me tonight. Hey, why don't you come?"

"Nuh, uh. *No way*," Evie said. "The only way I'm ever gonna stretch like that is from a hearty nap."

"Evelina!" It was Lindsay calling out.

“God, does there have to be *so* much yelling in this house?” Evie’s mother remarked as she looked up towards the ceiling.

“You better get down there,” her mother said. “It’s Lindsay’s day off, but she came in this morning to help you with you your driving. She came just as a favor for you, Evie.”

“I know,” Evie got up slowly.

“Listen,” her mother could sense sadness still clinging to Evie. “Why don’t you practice in my car? Would you like that?”

“Uh,” Evie hesitated. Her mother’s Mercedes? She was *not* about to go there again. “No, it’s okay. I’m sorta used to Lindsay’s car, already. I mean, it’s the only car I’ve been using, besides when I’m with dad and using his.”

Her mother frowned as if she didn’t understand. How could anyone turn down her classic burgundy Benz? “Oh,” she replied. “Well, okay.”

Evie went downstairs to meet Lindsay in the kitchen.

“Are you ready?” Lindsay asked as she took her car keys out of her purse and handed them to Evie.

“Yeah,” Evie took the keys from her. She realized that the last time she had been behind the wheel was that fateful day in her mother’s Mercedes when she had gotten in that (que to lower voice) *accidente*. But today should be different, she hoped. She had Lindsay with her, and she wasn’t going to be distracted by a phone conversation with Dee Dee. Also, it was a Sunday, and according to Lindsay, Jesus and his “protective light” was around a bit more.

“Now,” Lindsay fastened her seat belt after she got in the car with Evie. “What’s the first thing you do?”

Evie reached for the radio dial. “Make sure I got some tasty tunes?”

Lindsay tapped her hand.

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

“I make sure all my mirrors are adjusted correctly to my height and for my vision.”

“*Correcto*, ” Lindsay pulled down the visor and put on her sunglasses.

Evie slowly backed out of the driveway and onto Camino Real. She felt a little shaky. The memory of that ill-fated Saturday was like damaged *de ja vue*. She just had to relax.

“So, Lindsay,” Evie started. “Have you ever been to a *charro* rodeo?”

“A *charreada*?” Lindsay asked. “*Claro*. We have them all the time in Mexico. My cousins were *escaramuzas*. ”

“Really? What’s that?” Evie turned to ask her.

Lindsay put her hand on the steering wheel. “Keep your eyes on the road, Evie.”

“*Escaramuzas* are team riders, women. A *charrita* is actually a cowgirl.”

“Oh,” Evie said. “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. “So, hey, how come you’ve never taken me to a *charreada*?”

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

“I’ve *always* been into horses,” Evie claimed. She looked down at her Rainbow flojos. She wasn’t about to trade them in for cowboy boots just yet.

“For today, let’s concentrate on the driving,” Lindsay said. “It’s my day off, but I promised I’d come in this morning to help you. The sooner you learn to drive, the sooner —.” She stopped herself.

“The sooner what?” Evie asked.

“The sooner you get to drive,” Lindsay **replied**.

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

“Turn here,” Lindsay ignored Evie’s question and pointed to **Calle Boca**.

“Evelina, remember to use your signal *every* time you need to make a turn or get into another lane. Give the other driver enough time to know what you plan to do.”

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

The sedan suddenly jumped forward.

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

“Oh, I’m *never* gonna get this!” Evie groaned. “I’m not good enough to get a driver’s license by my birthday.”

“You can get your license anytime,” Lindsay said. “You don’t have to get it by your birthday.”

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

"*Cherry Bomb??*" Lindsay looked at her.

"That's what I'm gonna name my car," Evie said.

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

"Oh, don't tell me you don't know anything about it," Evie smiled slyly at Lindsay. "But between me and you, Linds—."

"Mi'ja, don't...." Lindsay said. The car stalled.

"Oh, man," **Evie had let the sedan started up the car again.** "I'll never get it."

"You really are doing better," Lindsay said. "Much better than when Sabrina was learning."

Evie suddenly sat up in her seat.

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

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

"Really?" Evie suddenly felt gleeful.

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, Evelina. I think your sister is sick. She doesn't eat, and she just sleeps all the time." Lindsay looked at Evie. "It's a sensitive time, and you should try to be extra **nice and helpful.**"

"I *am* nice and helpful," Evie *frowned* at Lindsay. Why was everything thinking she wasn't. **From her counselor to her**

“Okay,” Lindsay leaned over and held the steering wheel again. “You are nice and help, but for now, please, just nicely focus on keeping your eyes on the road.”

Chapter 12

The following week at school, Evie couldn’t think of anything but the charreada.

“You should have been there, Alex,” Evie went on as he drove her to the reserve.

“It was amazing. **The horses were so beautiful. They really are these incredible animals. Did you know that FACT**

not like the old decrepit things I have to clean up after at the reserve.”

“Uh, huh,” Alex said. “You told me. So, I don’t get why you skipped Baja just to be out drinking it up with the girls.”

“I wasn’t drinking it up,” Evie said. “That was Raquel and Ana’s deal. And you know I had to go, to get the credit. It just turned out to be really cool.”

“Well, I’m glad it turned out okay for you,” Alex looked at her and smiled. “It just would have been cool if you had come. We made a bonfire and grilled corn on the cob.”

“We had corn on the cob, at the charreada,” Evie said. “Actually, *elotes*,” she **clarified**, “with mayonnaise and chili powder. Now *those* were good.”

Alex pulled up at the reserve, and Evie felt slightly more enthused about being there. She wanted to find out more about the charreada from Arturdo. How she would ask? But when she reached the stables, Ana had beaten her to the punch with **follow up charro chit-chat**.

“So, did you and Josephina have fun at the charreada?” Ana was in the middle of asking Arturdo, as **Evie walked over to pull out separate flakes of alfalfa and oat hay.**

“Oh, yes,” Arturdo cracked an uncharacteristical smile. “I love charreadas. They have them all the time in Pico Rivera, but I rarely get a chance to get out there. My father is a charro. So are my brothers.”

“And they do all those tricks?” Ana asked.

“They aren’t called tricks,” Evie joined in. “They’re called *suertes*.”

“Right,” Arturdo looked at Evie, slightly surprised. “You know, the Mexican charro was the first cowboy. Not that many people know that.”

“Really?” Ana continued to show interest, and Evie was a little suspicious. It wasn’t like her to be so conversational with Arturdo. “That is *so* cool,” Ana continued. “How come you aren’t one? I mean, you totally could be one. You know so much about horses.”

“It’s not really my thing,” Arturdo **confessed**. “I didn’t follow that tradition. Besides, my whole family is still back in Colorado and they all practice and perform together.”

“You came out to California by yourself?” Ana asked.

“Yeah,” Arturdo answered. “I really wanted to go to **Thatcher**.”

“And you left behind your whole family? And all your friends?” Ana asked.

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

“No, I was just wondering,” Ana said.

Evie couldn't help but feel a bit curious too. Arturo was a senior at Thatcher and only a few years older than her and Ana. She couldn't believe that someone would move halfway across the country at such a young age by himself. She loved to surf, but she couldn't imagine moving to, say, Hawaii, just to be closer to some choice waves.

"But come on," Ana tilted her head and smirked at Arturo. Evie wondered, was she actually flirting. "Don't they have horses in Denver?"

"Of course," Arturo furrowed his brow at what seemed such a silly question to Evie. Was she flirting? "But Thatcher is one of the best equine schools in the country and if I want to get into Cal Poly and study in their veterinarian school, I'm going need a high school that can give me the best transfer."

"Well, it was the first time I had ever been to charreada," Ana confessed. "It was really fun. Thanks for asking us."

"Well, thanks for buying a ticket. It all goes to a good cause. A small percentage helps rehabilitate injured performance horses. If they don't heal, they eventually get euthenized."

"What?" Evie looked over at him, alarmed. "Are you serious? They get killed?"

"Oh, yeah," Arturo said. "Their owners don't think they're as useful if they aren't out performing and making money."

"Wow," Evie **said solemnly**. "I didn't know that."

"Yeah, like Chamuco," Arturo said. "He used to be with the Conejo Drill Team, but now, he's old and blind, so I don't know what's going to happen to him. He is always passed over during our adoption days clinics."

Evie took a deep breath. It was all a bit too much for her. She looked over at Chamuco's stall. He was leaning into his trough, drinking up water. Her heart just broke. Sure Chamuco got frightened easily, and yeah, he was old, but he didn't deserve to be killed. Evie felt horrible, and a knot twisted in her stomach.

"Ar-turrrro!"

It was Josephina calling out for Arturo. Evie was surprised they hadn't heard **her** SUV pull up.

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

Josephina stood at the doorway in a form-fitting plum colored satin halter dress, beige fishnets that stood out against her tanned legs, and knee-high black leather boots. Her hands on her hips matched the attitude she was about to unleash.

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

"Uh, *hello*?" Arturo teased as he dropped **medicine pills** into the selected buckets.

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

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

Evie wondered if Ana felt as much of a third wheel as she did being in the middle of this **lover's disagreement**. She stayed silent as Arturdo and Horsaphina debated whether they would leave on time.

"I guess Evie and Ana can take over," Arturo suggested as he looked at Evie.

"You don't mind, do you?"

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

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

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

"Okay, okay," Josephina checked the time again. "But do it quick."

Did all things bitchy have first names that ended in 'A'? What a minute, Evie thought, her given name was Evelina. Never mind.

"I hope I didn't interrupt you guys," Josephina looked at Ana and Evie as Arturo went out to his truck.

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

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

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

"Oh, yeah," Horsaphina agreed as she smoothed out her dress and adjusted the silver **square shaped bracelet on her other wrist**. "Arturo's taking me to Koi."

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

“The Teppan Grill?” Josephina smiled when she **noticed** Evie’s **confused** expression. “They seat you in groups of twelve, and if we’re late? We have to sit at another table and get a regular chef. I like Mayru. He’s the owner?”

“Oh, right,” Evie nodded.

“I can’t believe you’ve never been there,” Josephina said.

Neither Evie nor Ana said anything.

Josephina looked around with an air of disapproval. “Don’t you guys ever get tired of working here?”

“Nuh uh,” Evie said. “Not really.” It seemed odd.

“Me neither,” Ana echoed Evie.

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

“Not really. We’re volunteers,” Evie pointed out. “I mean, I could have picked any organization for work.”

“Hmm - mmm,” Josephina wasn’t convinced. “That’s not what Arturo told me.”

“What are you talking about?” Evie asked.

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

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” Evie said.

No wonder Arturo had been tough on her, Evie thought.

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

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

"*Josephina*," Arturo started. She was working his last nerve. "There is nothing wrong with my boots." He looked at the ones she was wearing. "You're wearing boots."

"Yes, but mine were, like, four hundred dollars? They're not work boots from Will's Western Wear."

"Josephina, if you want me to change, it's only going to make us even more late. Is that what you want?"

But Josephina just looked up at the sky and surrendered. "What *ever*?"

As soon as they left, Ana spoke up. "So, that was real smart of us, huh?" Ana smiled smugly to herself.

"Smart of us, what?" Evie asked.

"Kissing Arturo's ass like that, pretending we were all into the rodeo and working here and stuff," Ana said.

"But I *did* like the charreada," Evie insisted.

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

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

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

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

She got Alex's voice mail.

"Hey, Alex. It's me," Evie started. "Hey, I'm wondering... this coming weekend. Do you think we can go out? Like not surfing, but go out, *out*? Okay..." she didn't know what else to add. "Just let me know."

Chapter 13 Eves-dropping

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

Sat. Nite. Cool. Smthin diff.

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

"I have to work all day tomorrow and then again on Sunday," she reminded him. "I really have only Saturday evening free. I also have to practice my hula **dance** with Dee Dee and Raquel."

"Now that, I'm very excited to see," Alex said. "You know, traditional hula dancers go topless."

Evie slugged him.

"You know, you sure hit me a lot," Alex rubbed his arm. "I could report you for domestic battery."

"And I could report you for perversion."

Alex laughed. "Okay, but listen, so no on surfing, right? Because we *could* do a twilight set. After you're done with your shift at the reserve we can head out to Sea Street. There's supposed to be a **south swell**."

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

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

But the following Saturday Evie felt far from quite the cutie as she and Dee Dee rehearsed their moves for the Hula Lua.

“Your hips still look **choppy**,” Dee Dee observed as Evie followed the music from her *Honolulu Now* CD in front of their bedroom mirrors.

“I don’t have hips,” Evie looked down at her straight, narrow boyish figure. “Unfortunately.”

“Well, you better get some,” Dee Dee said. “The Hula is all about hips.” She looked at the CD’s cover. “*Mira*, look at this girl. *These hips don’t lie*. (). So is Raquel showing up or not?”

“Not,” Evie said. “I even called her land line but her mom said she was still sleeping.”

“She’s still doing to do the dance with us, no?” Dee Dee asked.

“Uh, no. I mean, yes. She’s still going to do the Hula Lau with us.”

Dee Dee got up and practiced her arms. “So, where is Alejandro taking you tonight?”

“I have no idea where he made reservations,” Evie said. “But afterwards, we’ll probably take a walk around downtown or on the pier to watch the sunset.” Evie watched Dee Dee. How was it that Dee Dee could do everything so effortlessly? Even with her pale skin and blonde hair, she looked like an authentic Polynesian dancer.

“*Que romantico*,” Dee Dee sighed enviously, as her hips fell into the perfect rhythm of the CD’s **ukele**. “I can’t wait for Rocio to get here, and then we can start doing things like that again.”

“When does he come?”

“**In about a week,” Dee Dee said.** “And then he’ll be here for two weeks, but he’s staying a few days longer for your party. *Mira,*” Dee Dee’s tone changed. “You should have Alejandro take you to that new seafood place in the Channel Islands harbor. I went there with my dad and Graciela, and it was **sheer swank**. The shrimp scampi was so good. I haven’t had scampi like that since I was in Veracruz with Rocio.”

“Actually,” Evie hoped to sound nonchalant. “We might go to Koi.”

“Koi?” Dee Dee sounded surprised. “*Really?*”

“Yeah,” “Why wouldn’t we go to Koi?”

“I don’t know,” Dee Dee said. “It’s just sorta pricey, that’s all.”

“Alex has money,” Evie couldn’t help but feel a little defensive. Dee Dee always went on and on about how well to do Rocio and his family were and how he was able to buy her this **trinket** or take her to **that restaurant**. It was beginning to bug, big time.

“Well,” Dee Dee said. “You’ll have to tell me all about their sushi. I’m sure it’s awesome.”

“I’m sure it is,” Evie said.

Evie looked at her back in the mirror again. She added more Sexy Sunset and gave her back, as well as her neck, shoulders and face, a heavier dusting.

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

some borrowed espadrilles (*sorta* satiny) from Dee Dee. But as she laced the straps around her ankles, she was horrified to discover that by wearing her flojos 24/7/364, they had created a tan line on her feet, two conspicuous streaks between her big toe and middle toe that created a 'V' fanning out to the sides. It looked like she was wearing light beige flip flops, or worse, had tattooed white ink on the tops of her feet.

Evie looked through her bathroom cabinet for a tube of foundation. She knew she could easily touch up and even out the color of her feet, but when she finally found some cover-up, she discovered what she was afraid of. The foundation, called Sunburst, was too dark. Thanks to all the long hours at the reserve, Evie was losing her tan. She put the tube back in the cabinet. She needed a lighter foundation, a foundation for light skin, light for someone like...Sabrina. *Yes.*

Evie went down the hall to Sabrina's room, but, like always, found the bedroom door closed. Since her return home from Stanford, Sabrina's door was always shut.

But just as Evie was about to knock, she heard Sabrina on the other side of the door. She was crying. To someone, on the phone. Evie caught her clenched fist just in time, before it hit the bedroom door.

"But it's *not* getting better," Sabrina sobbed. "My family is driving me crazy. I should have just stayed back at Stanford. At least my sisters would know what to do, what to say. Here, I'm surrounded by *idiots.*"

Evie couldn't believe what she was hearing. *What? Her sisters? Who?*

"No," Sabrina struggled to catch her breath. "She's my only sister, but she's such a little spoiled brat that I might as well not have a sister at all."

Whoa. Evie pulled back from the door. Was she hearing right? How could Sabrina say, even *think* such a thing? She didn't want her as a sister? No. She *didn't* hear right. She leaned in closer to the bedroom door and strained to hear more.

"Evelina!"

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

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

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

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

Evie reluctantly moved away from Sabrina's door.

"I have to come in to your room." Lindsay heaved the box of tiles to her left hip. "Your mother wants to see which tiles she needs to order for your bathroom."

"Now?" Evie asked.

She didn't mind Lindsay being in her room while she was getting ready to go out, but this particular night, Evie had been looking forward to just blasting *Los Abandoned*, dabbling with make up and pin-up dos, and hogging the closet mirrors all to herself. At least that's what she *had* been looking forward to. She was stunned from what she had overheard Sabrina say.

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

“Okay...” Evie started back down the hall to her bedroom. There was no way she was going to argue with Lindsay. And God forbid, she didn’t want to come across as a *spoiled brat*.

Oh, *hurtful*.

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

“Hullo?” she asked.

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

“My cell’s charging.” Evie walked into her bathroom and past Lindsay who was lining up the tile samples on the counter. Evie grabbed her make-up bag and moved out of Lindsay’s way.

“And then I’ve been calling the landline,” Raquel said. “And it just rings and rings. I didn’t even get the voicemail.”

“Sabrina’s been on the phone.” Evie was half listening as she sat on the edge of her bed and squirted a glob of foundation on the tops of both her feet. She was going to have to settle for the Sunburst foundation.

“What’s wrong?” Raquel could sense the deflated tone in Evie’s voice.

“Nothing,” Evie tried to shake off the feeling. Sabrina’s words stung something fierce.

“You’re mad ‘cause I couldn’t make Hula dance practice, huh?” Raquel asked.

“Yeah.” Evie smoothed the cream evenly along the tan line on top of each foot.

"I'm sorry about," Raquel went on. "I just could not get out of bed today. I was so tired."

"Raquel," Evie started. "Do you think I'm spoiled?"

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

"No. Nobody." Evie lowered her voice again and looked over at Lindsay, who was now standing back and looking over the tile samples. She frowned and shook her head in typical Lindsay disapproval. "Actually," Evie went on. "I just overheard Sabrina on the phone and she told someone, I think one of her sorority sisters, that I was spoiled. A spoiled *brat*, to be precise."

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

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

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

"And more," Evie agreed. "That girl gets the grades she wants, the car she wanted, and accepted into the school she wanted. She gets everything her way. Like even now, with her being home and everything, I totally have to walk on eggshells around her."

“Ugh, I could *not* deal,” Raquel groaned. “That’s why I am *so* glad that I’m an only child.”

“You and Dee Dee, both,” Evie said as she held her feet up to observe **her work**. Both feet looked a little on the dark side, but Alex would never notice in the **candlelight** at Koi.

“But anyway,” Raquel said. “Don’t worry about Sabrina. From what you tell me, she’s just upset over that Robert dude.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Evie **said**. “It’s been a complete bumner of day. Lindsay just told me aobut the car bill, from, you know.”

“How much is it?” Raquel asked.

“Eleven hundred,” Evie said.

“Eleven hundred? Are you shitting me? I thought you said he had some crap little car?”

“He did,” Evie said. “But now he’s gonna have one fine ass bumper. I don’t know how I’m gonna pay for it. My Grandma Pama better come through.”

“Well, I’d ask for an invoice *and* a receipt,” Raquel said. “He’s probably just gonna keep the money and never have his car worked on.”

Evie got up from her bed and stood with her back towards the closet mirrors. She quickly looked over her shoulder, a` la red carpet *Teen People* pose. She had to do the check list. No VPL, *check*. No sightly roll of back fat, *check*. No bac-...wait. She peered closer into the closet mirrors and found a small, but still noticeable, blemish. It was right below her left shoulder. Argh! The curse of mid-winter bacne! Evie squeezed more Sunburst goop onto her finger and dabbed the offending violator. She re-checked, but the

foundation looked blotchy and uneven. She decided to pull off her whole halter and give herself a thorough application of **Sunburstt**, but just as she pulled her halter off, her mother walked in to her bedroom.

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

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

Evie was less concerned about modesty and more worried about the incriminating 'RxE' inked near her left breast. Last semester, she, Dee Dee and Raquel were the recipients of the fine artistry from **La Ley Cee**, who eschews the 'over 18' requirement and will ink anyone with an idea and enough cash. **She now regretted getting the permanent ink job, but at the time, it was a bonding moment for the three girls.** If Vicki Gomez ever saw that her youngest daughter had a tattoo, *anywhere* on her body, there would only be one kind of party for Evie...a good-bye party.

"So, I'm really sorry that I didn't make today's Hula practice. I promise, I'll work on the moves tonight.

"Okay, but I really hope you do," Evie said. "I want us to look really good at my party."

"Of course," Raquel said. "Hey, did you get your fancy manicure for your date with Alex?"

“Oh yeah,” Evie looked at her fingernails, painted the sheerest hint of pink. “I got a hand job by Jonathon, just like Dee Dee recommended. Oh man, he was great.”

“*Evie,*” Her mother, as well as Lindsay, looked over from the bathroom. “*Who* are you talking to?”

“Raquel,” Evie said calmly. “And I’m talking about the *manicure* I got at Michael Kelley. They call them hand jobs, just in case you and Linds were eavesdropping and misunderstood me, *mother.*”

“We weren’t eavesdropping,” her mother said as she glanced over at Evie’s nails. “But very nice.”

“Evie!” It was now her father calling. “Alex is here.”

“Hey,” Evie said to Raquel as she gave herself a third and final bronze dusting. “Romeo is here, gotta go.”

“Hey, Evie,” Raquel started.

“Yeah?”

“If you need to borrow money, you know, for that guy’s car, I can totally lend it to you, and you wouldn’t have to worry about paying me back for a while. Really?”

“Wow, really?” Evie asked.

“Yeah.”

“Wow, thanks Raq.” Evie was so touched by her offer. “But hopefully Grandma Pama will come through and I won’t have to put the **bite** on you.”

“Okay,” Raquel said. “Well, just let me know.”

“Thanks,” Evie got up. “Okay, I better go.”

"Lates," Raquel said. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

"Isn't it a little cold for a halter and a skirt?" her mother asked as Evie grabbed for her handbag.

True, it was the end of January, but with the weather still balmy, Evie felt she could afford to flash a little skin. Besides, Alex had called her cutie, and tonight she wanted to certify it.

"No, I'm fine." Evie turned around slowly and modeled her outfit for her mother and Lindsay. "How do I look?"

"Uh," Her mother looked her over. "Very *tan*."

"Good," Evie answered smugly as she applied gloss to her lips. There was no way her mother's lack of style sense was going to sober up her buzz. Evie felt cute; therefore, she *was* cute.

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

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

Evie guessed that he must've still gone to Sea Street to catch that "oh so important" late afternoon swell.

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

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

"Yeah, Evie," her father looked at Evie, as well. "And you got some color on you. Were you out in the sun today?"

Okay, maybe "dressed up" and "color" was male speak for cute?

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

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

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

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

"Do you think," Evie started. "That just tonight –"

"No," her father said. "You *have* to be home by 12:30."

As Evie walked alongside Alex towards his truck, she saw his longboard in the flatbed – evidence that he *had* just come from the beach. She felt her chest fill up with heavy disappointment. She looked over at Alex.

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

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

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

A long, slow whistle interrupted the **bodice ripping scene** in Evie’s head. The whistle came from the front of Alex’s truck. She squinted her eyes in the darkness and slowly made out the glow of a cigarette in the passenger seat of the cab. *No*. But yes. It was Mondo. She could *not* believe what she was seeing.

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

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

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

“Uh, yeah,” Alex sounded confused. “Why?”

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

“Evie,” Alex sounded even more confused. “What exactly does going ‘out, *out*’ mean?”

“Just *forget* it.” Evie was quickly losing her patience with Alex.

Mondo got out of the front cab just as they got to the truck

“Hey, G,” he looked Evie over, making her feel slightly **Sangro slutty**. “Look at you all gussied up.” He pulled the passenger seat forward so he could get in the back of the truck’s cab. “So you ready to give the horse gig a break and just chill with Alex and me tonight?”

Alex and me? Grrrr. Evie couldn’t help but feel hot with anger. What was Alex thinking, bringing Mondo along at their date?

“So, check it out,” he took off the white **cap** he was wearing. “Chop job. I bit your style, from last semester.”

Last year, Evie had cut and dyed her own hair herself. She was now gratefully relieved that it was growing back to a length she was comfortable with. Mondo’s hair, however, was newly buzzed and dyed a Tweety Bird blond.

“Check out the back,” Mondo turned his head to show off a separate dye job, a large question mark in deep jet black, smack center on the back of his head.

Evie couldn’t keep from laughing. “Why would you have a question mark on the back of your head?” She asked. “What, are you trying to create some new Batman character?”

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

“Yeah,” Evie fastened her seat belt. “I guess. In Amsterdam.”

“So,” Alex rubbed his hands together. “What’s up for this evening?”

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

Evie feigned a smile. “I was thinking we’d go get sushi.”

“Sushi?” Mondo smirked. “Uh, no thanks,” He held his nose and dropped the sides of his mouth. “I had sushi last night, if you know what I mean.” He looked at Alex.

The look in his eyes said everything.

You have got to be kidding.

“Mondo,” Alex reprimanded him as he started his truck. “Come on, there’s a lady present.”

“Yeah,” Mondo looked at Alex in the rearview mirror. “That’s what *I* thought. Last night.”

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

Not after Mondo's lame little one-liner.

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

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

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

"Yeah," Evie said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Was Evie just being *sentida*, or was Mondo truly saying the most inappropriate things so early in the evening?

The wait list at Koi was over an hour.

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

“**You gotta be kidding,**” Mondo protested. “Dude, this is friggin’ South Cali, everyone wears flip flops.”

“Not during dinner hours,” the host held his ground.

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

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

“Dude,” Mondo pulled Alex aside. “That monkey totally dissed us. I ain’t gonna shoot my wad here.” He seemed to have already made the decision for the three of them as he started back towards the front doors with his fists deep in the pockets of his baggy cords. He killed all notions of romance Evie had fantasized **about**.

“Sushi is sushi,” Alex apologetically shrugged his shoulders to Evie. “We can come here another time, Eves. Promise.”

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

far end. The diners were far from SUV-scum and were made up more of aging surf *veteranos* and leathered skin longshoremen. Both group, Evie noticed wore tattooed sleeves depicting their life with the Pacific.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Do you mind if I wear it?” Evie asked.

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

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

“Oh,” Evie didn’t take the keys. “Never mind.”

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

“*Mondo*,” Alex threw him a sideways glance, but before doing so, Evie noticed that Alex did look over towards the women.

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

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

“Look,” Mondo counted the shrimp tails on her plate with the end of his wooden chop stick. “Alex and I only have three tails each, but you’ve got, like, five.”

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

“No, it ain’t.” Mondo pressed down on the tails with his chopstick.

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

“*Stop* it.”

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

“What’s up for the rest of the evening?”

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, I’m not really in the mood for a party, either,” Evie said as her stomach growled. “But maybe, if you really want to go, we could drop you off.” She looked over at Alex’s Nixon. It was only 10 p.m.. She still had a good two and a half hours before she had to be home. She and Alex could still have *some* time to themselves.

“*We?*” Mondo looked at Evie. “When did you start sharing Alex’s pink slip? You don’t even drive.”

“I know,” Evie said. “I’m just saying that we might do something else.”

“But Eves, if you don’t wanna go to a party,” Alex asked her. “What do you wanna do?”

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

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

“Who?” Alex asked.

“Our boy, Jose.”

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

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

“Maintaining,” Mondo casually pulled out a cigarette. “So he says.”

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

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

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

“Dude,” Mondo stretched his arm around the back of his stool. “You know, I’ll do whatever you want. I’m easy.”

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

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

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

“**That is so disgusting**,” Dee Dee said. “**What the hell is wrong** with Alejandro?”

"I have no idea." Evie was already in bed, nibbling on pan dulce, a **flakey hornito**, that her father had brought home. "So, what are you doing home on a Saturday night?" she asked. "No Patrona Pow wow?"

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

"*Another* brunch?" Evie asked.

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

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

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

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

"Huh?"

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

“Are you serious?” Evie laughed.

“Yeah, he isn’t allowed to go anywhere over 500 feet without checking in with his P.O.”

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

“Some place on Hemlock,” Dee Dee said.

“On Hemlock?” Evie repeated.

“Yeah,” Dee Dee said. “Why?”

Evie suddenly felt empty. “No reason.”

Chapter 14

Cool prty @ Hemlck. Srry u mssd it.

She was still tender from her Saturday date fiasco with Alex, and to make matters worse, he didn’t even apologize. Unless you counted the text message she received the next morning on Sunday, which was less of an apology and more of an observation. It was like Alex was so unaware of what had happened. So he went to a ‘cool party’ and he was ‘sorry she missed it’, BFD.

“Evie,” Alex threw her a sideways glance as they drove to school. She had remained silent for pretty much the whole drive. “How long you gonna beef with me?”

"I'm not beefing," Evie tried to answer casually, but it was no use. It was obvious she was still upset with him. She kept her arms crossed over her chest and didn't add anything to their conversation except a low energy "uh, huh" to any topic he introduced.

"Saturday night was so not my fault," Alex guessed at what might have made her so quiet. "I can't control Mondo."

"But you can control whether or not he comes with us on a date" Evie refused to look at Alex and on the fascinating scenery of oil derricks and lemon groves that lined Highway 33 into Ojai.

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

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

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

When Alex explained his concerns, it sorta made sense to Evie. Of course, she didn't want him to change. She liked him for who he was and what he was about. And that was the reason why she even wanted him as a boyfriend, her boyfriend.

"I don't get it, Evie," he said. "And sometimes I don't get you."

Evie looked over at Alex, who now seemed intent to use on focusing on the highway. He was really handsome, Evie thought to herself. How could she not have noticed it before, when they were just Flojo friends? Looking at his profile, one would never guess that he had broken his nose. When Evie had started Villanueva and had been

introduced to Alex, he had a wide medical bandage across the bridge of his nose and cotton splints stuffed up his nostrils. Evie had judged him to be just like some of the other **vanity plates** at Villanueva and figured he had gotten a nose job, as well. It wasn't until later that she learned that the bandages were from a surfing accident caused by some newbie's foamboard that had flung up right into his face, shattering his nose and cheekbones. Upon hearing, at the last minute, that some **south westerly swell** was coming in, Alex yanked the splints out himself after school, just so he could go surfing. Since then, Evie had thought that Alex was just about the coolest guy she had ever met.

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

But Alex didn't say anything back except "uh, huh" as he turned up the volume on his iTrip.

The news of Rocio's arrival to use at Rio Estates changed Evie's **train of thought** when she arrived at school. Dee Dee was **so excited** about having Rocio in Rio Estates and wanted to do a girl's only lunch, off campus. She needed to tell Evie and Raquel all about him.

Evie figured it would be a good breather from Alex, and she texted him by second period.

Goin to O-hi Frstie w/ the grls

To which he responded:

No prob

Of course she read more into his two-word text. *Much* more. ‘No prob’ as in ‘No problem. I really don’t care what the fuck you do?’ Any textlator could translate Alex’s simple six characters (seven, if you included the space) to mean that he was annoyed with Evie. It took everything in Evie’s power not to follow up with a second text. She kept reading and re-reading his two words every chance she got in civics class.

“Hey,” she finally leaned over and showed Alex’s message to **September Valdez**, who sat next her. “What do you think this means?”

“Who sent it?” September asked as she propped up her civics book, away from Vasquez. She held Evie’s cell phone behind it and studied the text.

“Alex sent it,” Evie whispered from the side of her mouth as she kept her eyes and attention on Vaquez. The last thing she wanted was for her phone to be taken away. Not at this crucial time in her life.

“Alex, as in your boyfriend Alex?” September asked.

“Uh, huh,” Evie said.

“No smiley face or heart,” September observed. “Hmmm...it doesn’t look good.”

That just about killed Evie. September Diaz knew what she was talking about. She was a junior and had had many boyfriends during her reign at Villanueva. **She was also assistant editor of the school’s newspaper, so she knew how to read between the lines.**

Evie took her cell phone back from September and immediately turned it off. She would definitely have to drown her doubt, misery, and insecurity in cheese fries and a Frostie with Dee Dee and Raquel at lunchtime.

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

“He slept at your house?” Evie asked.

“Yes, and it was ***unbearable***,” Dee Dee said. “I haven’t seen him in over four months, and I just wanted to sneak in the guest room and just be with him the whole night.” She pulled out on to Ventura Avenue and made a left, towards O-hi Frostie.

“So why didn’t you?” Raquel, who sat shotgun, asked as she moved the rearview mirror towards her face and picked at a scab on her chin. “If I had some fine ass *papi chulo*, as you claim he is, under my roof, that I hadn’t seen for months, you best know I’d be giving him a big ol’ grand welcome, *Americana* style.”

“Raquel, you’re scandalous!” Dee Dee laughed. “I can’t sleep in the same bed with Rocio! My parents would freak, seeing us come out of the same bedroom in the morning.”

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

“You’ve obviously done this before,” Evie noted from the back seat. Maybe it was good she was going off campus for lunch. Dee Dee and Raquel, especially Raquel, would keep her mind off Alex and his **subliminal Mex text**.

“You could say that,” Raquel claimed proudly. She re-positioned Jumile’s rearview mirror back for Dee Dee.

“Is Rocio gonna stay at your house the whole time he’s here?” Evie asked Dee Dee.

“Pretty much,” Dee Dee lit up a Midnight Berry at the first stop light they came to. “He’s gonna look at schools in San Diego and then in the Bay Area.”

“Ooh, is he gonna look at Stanford?” Evie asked.

“Yeah, in fact, he should talk with Sabrina,” Dee Dee said. “She would be the perfect person to talk with.”

“Not right now,” Evie looked out the window. “She not the best person for anything.” Evie still hadn’t talked to Sabrina about what she had overheard her say on the phone that afternoon, and it still stung whenever she thought of her sister’s harsh words.

“Sabrina is still depressed?” Dee Dee asked. “I can’t believe it.”

“I know,” Raquel said to Dee Dee. “And she’s like your idol”

“I wouldn’t say she’s *my idol*, but, well, yeah, she’s up there. Sabrina’s the best.” Dee Dee looked at Evie in the rearview mirror. “I was actually, sorta, hoping that she could write me a recommendation letter, for Las Patronas.”

“*No way*, Evie said. It bothered her how much Dee Dee looked up to her sister. She didn’t understand how Dee Dee thought that Sabrina was “the best.” “Now is not a good time to ask Sabrina for anything.”

“So,” Raquel changed the subject. “How’s Rocio gonna get around? Is he gonna rent a car?”

“No, you have to be, like, 25 or something to rent one,” Dee Dee said. “My dad’s going to lend him one of ours, or he’s gonna use Jumile.” She patted Jumile’s dashboard.

“Oh *really?*” Evie caught Dee Dee’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “So Rocio must have *good* insurance, right?” She couldn’t help but rib Dee Dee. She still didn’t believe that her father supposedly wouldn’t let *her* take Jumile out for quick fun spin once in a while because of the car insurance.

“Yes, *Evie*,” Dee Dee threw her a look. “He’s going to get good insurance. *International* insurance.”

“So when do we all get to meet him?” Raquel **asked**. “Rocio’s all we’ve been hearing about, like, “veinte-cuarto/siete.”

“Definitely at Evie’s party.” Dee Dee pulled into O-hi Frostie where the wooden picnic tables were already taken over by backpacks, skateboards, and an overflow of Del Mar public high school students.

“Ew,” Dee Dee looked them over. “*Del Mar*. ”

“Wait, Evie’s *party?*” Raquel balked as she got out of the car. “We gotta wait until *then?* What, you ashamed of us or something?”

“*Por fa’*,” Dee Dee furrowed her brow and shook her head. “Don’t be so *pinga*. It’s just that he is going to be so busy researching colleges and universities that I’m barely going to see him myself.”

The three of them got in line at Oh-hi Frostie. Two boys, **both dressed in low rise super tight black jeans and scrappy skater T’s**, approached Evie.

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

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

“Uh, yeah,” Evie answered cautiously. She looked over at Dee Dee and Raquel.

“Why?”

“We wanna know if your party’s open,” the other kid said.

“Open?” Evie asked.

“In fact,” Raquel suddenly leaned over Evie and took over. “It is. You can buy an invite. Fifty bucks each. *Cash*.”

“Fifty bucks?” The kid with eyeliner asked and looked back at his three other friends, similiarly garbed skaters boys, who were sitting on the picnic table.

“Yeah, we ain’t talking entry to a skatepark,” Raquel said. “This is the party of the year.”

“No, I just gotta just tell my other friends.” The kid with eyeliner went back over to the picnic table.

The other kid stayed with Evie and Raquel and Dee Dee. He crossed his arms and looked over Dee Dee, who seemed to pretend not to notice. It never failed. No matter what set a boy was with, Dee Dee was *always* looked over. “So, there’s gonna gonna be booze, right?” he asked.

“Of course, there’s gonna be booze,” Raquel frowned. “What, we’re gonna charge fifty bucks for Hawaiian punch?”

“Raquel,” Evie giggled and grabbed her arm. “*Stop* it!”

“Okay,” Eyeliner Boy came back with a wad of twenties. “How about one twenty-five for all four of us?”

Evie looked at Raquel and Raquel looked back at her.

“Sold!” Raquel grabbed the money from the boy’s hands.

“Hey, do we get a receipt or something?” he asked.

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

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

Dee Dee pulled Evie aside and looked over to where the boys were sitting. “Evie, you do *not* want those guys coming to your birthday party. And now they’re going to expect something for all that money?”

“Oh, they’re harmless,” Raquel said as she counted the twenty dollar bills. She glanced over at the boys. “And the one with eyeliner is *fine*.”

“Yeah,” Evie started hesitantly. “Maybe Dee Dee is right. What if they show up and get all pissed that we’re not serving liquor or anything?”

“Oh, *please*,” Raquel said. “They’ll probably show up so lit, that is, if they show up at all, that they won’t even remember any of this business transaction.”

Raquel shook her head and smiled as she looked up at the menu board. “Lunch is on you, Eves.”

Later that evening, Dee Dee called Evie on the phone.

“I need you to keep something on the DL,” she told Evie.

“Sure,” Evie lowered her voice. She loved playing the confidante. “What’s up?”

“Well,” Dee Dee started. “You know how Rocio is here and his parents are coming out in a few days, right?”

“Right.”

“And this is all a big deal for him, to find a school out here,” Dee Dee said. “I mean, he’s basically doing this for me, for us to be together.”

“Uh, huh,” Evie answered. Could it also be that California had some of the best schools to offer, than say, Mexico?

“So anyway,” Dee Dee continued. “My dad and Graciela want to have a little dinner party for Rocio and his parents and,” she paused, “I really want to invite you and Alejandro.”

“Oh,” Evie was taken off guard. She was expecting some big grand announcement. Like, maybe they were engaged and were going to run off together, or maybe Dee Dee wanted her to make crepe paper flowers for their getaway car. But it was just dinner, a dinner party, at the de LaFuentes. Cool enough. Very adult-like and, by bringing Alex along, very date-ish. “We’ll definitely come,” Evie said. “I can’t wait.”

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

“Why?” Evie asked.

“It’s not like I’m keeping something from her, to be mean. I just...” Dee Dee searched for the right words. “I just don’t want to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. You know how Raquel can be coarse and make a scene. I can’t have anything go wrong at this get together.”

“But can’t you just tell Raquel that?” Evie felt awkward. “Can’t you just make it clear to her that she had to be on her best behavior?”

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

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

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

"Are you serious?" Evie asked.

"Uh, huh," Dee Dee said. "And I'm not taking about d-dialing my cell. She called on the land line, like at three in the morning, and woke up my father and everything. In fact, he was the one who said it might be better if Raquel didn't come to the get together."

"Are you effing with me?" Evie couldn't believe what she was hearing. Dee Dee's father was the most accepting of Raquel, more so than Evie's own father who she had thought was very forgiving of Raquel's antics. Evie, herself, had received the drunk dials and tipsy texts from Raquel, but they had all been very amorous chatter, consisting of Raquel going on and on about how much she loved Evie and how Evie was her "bestest, bestest friend in the whole wide world." But thank God she never d-dialed the Gomez's land line. Her mother would shit *stone*.

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

"I guess not," Evie answered, feeling a bit deceitful. "I mean, I won't."

"Thanks Evie," Dee Dee exhaled. "You're truly are my *ADA*."

"I'm you're *fairy*?" Evie asked, confused.

"No," Dee Dee laughed. "My amiga de alma," Dee Dee said. "It's much more meaningful than a BFF. You're like my soul sister."

Dee Dee, however, forgot to mention keeping **dinner plans** on the D.L. might become quite a chore when all parties involved lived within the residential tract of a gated community.

"I still don't understand," Evie's mother started on Evie as she waited for Alex to pick her on Saturday night. "Why wouldn't Frank or Graciela invite your father and me to their party?"

"Mom, it's not a party," Evie tried to explain for the umpteenth time. Her mother had been on her case all week once she had mentioned the dinner to her. "It's just a little get together for Rocio and his parents."

"But I would think that after the brunch that I threw for them that Frank would want to return the gesture," her mother said. "Something like this would never have happened if Margaret were still alive."

Evie could not believe her mother was comparing Margaret, Dee Dee's dear belated mother, to Frank de LaFuentes new wife, Graciela. The cattiness belonged less in the Gomez's great room and more near **Alejandra de los Santos'** scratching post.

"Mom," Evie checked for wrinkles on her skirt in the mirror. It was the second time in less than two weeks that she was wearing a skirt for a night out with Alex. She hoped he noticed this time. "It's not even about or for the parents. I'm just going for support. For Dee Dee."

“You know, Evie,” her mother started to ask in a tone that indicated she had an idea, usually a lousy one. “Why don’t you take Sabrina with you?”

Bingo.

“What?” Evie looked over at her mother. The last think she wanted was mopey ol’ Sabrina barging in on her date. “Why would I take her?”

“Because it would be a nice thing to do,” her mother said. “Dee Dee and Sabrina have so much in common. Sabrina was a Patrona and now Dee Dee is going to be one, too.”

“We don’t know that yet,” Evie found herself getting territorial. Sabrina was a pain in the butt, but still, she was *her* pain in the butt. “Dee Dee still has to be nominated.”

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

“It’s *Rocio*,” Evie **corrected her mother**. “And I didn’t say he was *attending* Stanford, I said he was looking into their departments. Checking out a school is much different than attending one.”

“Well,” Evie’s mother said. “I just thought you’d want to help get your sister get out of her rut. But speaking of school...”

Uh oh. Here it comes.

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

She’s feeling pressure?

“Mom, I’ve got it under control,” Evie peeked out the great room’s window.

Where was Alex when she needed him? Her mother was getting under her skin.

“I hope so Evie,” Vicki Gomez said. “It would be a shame if we didn’t get to have your party. But if we do have it,” she raised her eyebrow, “I just *hope* I don’t forget to send Frank and Graciela an invite.”

When Alex came to pick Evie up for the dinner, she liked that he was in brown cords and a cream colored dress shirt. She looked down and saw that he wasn’t even wearing flojos. He actually had on shoes, black canvas Winos. *Too* cute.

Yes, it was apparent that a dinner party at the de LaFuentes was perfect in terms of mending the friction between Evie and Alex. Granted, it wasn’t a night out at a **super swanky** Japanese restaurant, or a **super romantic** poetry reading at the beach, but still it was dinner, a dinner date, and he had dressed up. The night seemed to be a precious maybe.

“You look really nice,” Alex said as he walked Evie to his truck. “You look cute in dresses.”

“Oh, thanks.” Evie smiled as Alex held the door open for her.

So far, so good, Evie thought as she got into his truck. She put the arm rest up and snuggled as close to him as she could.

“You know, I haven’t been to Dee Dee’s since last semester,” Alex said as he lowered the volume on his iTrip and pulled out of the driveway. “Remember? When I went over to give her swimming lessons last semester and Alejandra de los Santos and her little pack of *fresitas* were there?”

Evie grimaced. “Ugh. How could I forget that? I showed up thinking it would be just you, me, and Dee Dee and you’re, like, in the swimming pool, drooling all over Xiamor-*a*.”

“I really don’t remember that,” Alex smiled jokingly.

“Well, I do.”

“But I *do* remember,” Alex started. “That the de LaFuentes had a pretty posh pad. They’re probably gonna have some good grub tonight.”

“Totally,” Evie agreed. “But I can tell you one thing they aren’t going to have.”

“What?” Alex asked.

“They aren’t going to have *sushi*.” Evie playfully pinched his side.

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

“I was just messin’.” Evie cuddled up closer to him.

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

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

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

“Expecting too much?” Evie asked. “What, that I want to go out, alone, with my own boyfriend once in a while?”

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

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

“Alex,” she started. “If I’m your girlfriend, sometimes I wanna be treated like one.”

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

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

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“I mean, you were more of gentleman –”

“I know what chivalry means,” Alex snapped.

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

“For granted?” Alex asked. “Like what? When?”

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

“I don’t flake,” Alex interrupted. He leaned over and turned up his iTrip. “Maybe I change my mind or my plans change, but I never just not just show up. I never leave you hanging.”

“So you think you didn’t leave me hanging that night at Otani’s?” Evie raised her voice, if only to talk over the music that Alex had so rudely turned up.

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

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

“You know,” Alex said. “You’re acting like a nag. Like how Raquel would always be with Jose.”

“A *nag*?” Evie snapped at him, her eyebrows practically rising off her forehead. “Well, *you’re* beginning to act like Jose. When you’re not dribbling over big chested waitresses, you’re a flakey flojo. And who knows, maybe you’re seeing Alejandra de los Santos behind my back.”

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

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

“That makes two of us,” Alex bit back.

Evie could not believe what was happening. Tonight was supposed to be such a special night, a make up for the Saturday evening before. She looked up at Dee Dee’s house. Their **Malibu lights** showcased the three tier stone fountain on the front lawn. With its water cascading down to each each tier, Evie was reminded of the back patio at Koi, where water trickled from the decorative bamboo chutes into the koi-filled kidney-

shaped pond. And now, here was *another* night that was going to be ruined because Alex was being so insensitive.

Evie closed her eyes and took a breath. She reached around her neck and unhooked the clasp of her abalone necklace. “Here,” her hand was shaking as she gave the necklace to Alex. “Just take it.”

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

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

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

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

“I don’t know,” Evie said. “Maybe we should just take a break.”

“A *break*?” Alex asked

“Yeah,” Evie said curtly. “Time off.”

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

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

“Whatever,” Alex leaned over and stuffed the necklace into his glove compartment. It suddenly looked so oddly insignificant crammed between his empty CD jewel cases, misfolded maps, and miscellaneous paper trash. “If that’s what you want...time off.”

“Yes,” Evie got out of his truck and slammed the door. “It’s *exactly* what I want”

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

“Hey,” Dee Dee’s face dropped when she saw Evie at her doorway. “*Que paso?* What’s wrong? Where’s Alex?”

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

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

Evie went into the horrid details about her argument with Alex. She left out nothing as she recounted how Alex accused her of being a bitch, a nag, and a two-timing best friend. That’s all she pretty much remembered of the whole conversation.

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

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

“You gave him back his necklace?”

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

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

"He is, or was, I guess," Evie said. "I mean, he's not horrible, but he just acts so flaky and sometimes he treats me like just a dude. And sometimes, I just burn out. Is that so wrong?"

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

Princesa.

"You know, Josephina?" Evie wiped her nose. "At the reserve? The senior Patrona?"

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

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

"Arturo?" Dee Dee frowned in confusion. "That's hard to believe. I thought you said that he was a jerk, like a total control freak."

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

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

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

"**In so many words you did,**" Dee Dee said. "And when did you start calling him Arturo? I thought he was *Ar-turdo*."

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

“Everyone, but you,” Dee Dee said.

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

“Oh,” Dee Dee jumped up from her bed. *“Ay way! They’re already here!”*

For a moment, Evie was so drowned in her own sorrows that she had forgotten the whole reason why she was at Dee Dee’s. She sighed to herself. She was now going to have to fake pleasantries the whole evening, *sin* Alex.

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

Evie looked up at Dee Dee. **She hadn’t noticed how truly beautiful she had dressed for the eveing. She was wearing a soft pink knee-length dress with a cream-colored tulle edge. Her blonde hair had been to maintain their shape into perfectly styled ringlets.**

“Yes,” Evie managed to smile. “You look beautiful. No, better than beautiful. You look just like...Anahi.”

“Anahi?” Dee Dee’s face lit up. “Oh, my God.” She looked at herself in the bedroom mirror, placed her hand on her hip, and drew down her face, a total Anahi pose. “Really? You’re not just saying that?”

“No,” Evie promised. “And yes, *really*.”

Anahi from RBD was Dee Dee’s favorite, favorite singer/actress/chica *rubia* in the whole wide world of Telemundo, actually, Telivisa, the *other* Spanish station if you

wanted to get technical about it, but the whole wide *mundo* if you wanted to understand how much Dee Dee idolized Anahi and RBD.

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

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

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

“Sit,” Dee Dee patted the cushioned stool in front of her vanity table and mirror. As Evie sat down, Dee Dee laid out a line of small tubes, pencil sticks, and concealer airbrushes in a neat row on her vanity table. It reminded Evie of being at Dr. Mizrahi’s, where he lined up every shiny, important looking instrument on the **dental tray**, ready to tackle any problem.

Dee Dee looked Evie’s face over. “Ooh, you’ve lost a lot of your tan. We’ll definitely have to go with something *mas blanca*.”

Evie tried to relax and just let Dee Dee take over. Once she did, it felt soothing, almost therapeutic, to have her softly rub creams and lotion under her tired eyes.

“Drama should never drain the diva,” Dee Dee smiled proudly as she stepped back to admire her work. “*Bien. Mira*, now you look more like Maria Dulce to my Anahi.”

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

When Evie and Dee Dee finally **felt camera ready**, they hurried down the stairs, where they were met by Rocio, who was waiting in the foyer. He *was* quite cute, Evie thought when she first saw him. He looked just like the pictures she had seen of him with Dee Dee in Mexico City. He had a slight build and seemingly newly cut hair. His eyes were very dark and topped with thick, bushy eyebrows, almost like Dee Dee's father. And he was wearing a casual dark blue dinner jacket that made him appear mature and somewhat cosmopolitan. Evie had seen boys dress similarly, but they were the male models, posing on motor scooters or the steps of some historic looking building in the fashion magazines that Dee Dee had laying around her room. Evie had never seen a boy in a dinner jacket in person.

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

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

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

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

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

Lovelier? Evie couldn't ever remember being called lovely. Did people, boys, even talk like that? She guessed in Mexico City they did. And they kissed hands too? She could get used to this. She glanced down at her hands, relieved that she still had the manicured remnants of her hand job from Michael Kelley.

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

"Good things, I hope," he smiled. "Or at least, **not so scandalous**."

Dee Dee looked over Rocio's shoulder. "Where are your parents?"

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

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

As the three of them headed outside, Evie couldn't help but wonder where Raquel fit in between Dee Dee's 'two favorite people in the whole world.' Also, would she have been invited to the special dinner if she still had the stripped blue hair from last semester?

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

"Dela!" the woman stood up and held her hands out to Dee Dee. "Long time no see, *mi'ja*. We miss you in D.F."

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

Dee Dee went over to hug Rocio's mother.

"Oh, I miss you too, **Herminia**. I miss D. F. in general. How are Fred and Ofelia? Oh, and what about Café Blanca? Have you been there lately?" Dee Dee stopped herself and covered her face, again, in bashfulness. "*Lo siento*," she apologized. "I sometimes go on and on about Mexico."

Sometimes?

"It's just that I have such an affinity for D.F.," Dee Dee explained anxiously. "I really miss the night life. The U.S is nothing like Mexico, and California can be, *come se dice*, stifling, if you know what I mean. No theatre, no culture..."

No culture? Hadn't Evie just taken her to Skate Punk to look at their new line of knitted skull bags? Where was all this coming from? Evie wondered. And why hadn't she been introduced to Rocio's parents yet? She felt awkward just standing there.

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

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

"*Estamos encantados*," Rocio's parents nodded and smiled back.

That was pretty much the exchange between them and Evie for the rest of the evening.

Dee Dee sat down next to Rocio on one of the rattan benches and Evie followed. She was the solo act among three sets of couples, and she soon felt lonely and a bit out of place. It didn't help that her eyes still felt like two enormous soggy tea bags. Evie hoped she could keep up with an evening that already seemed filled with memories, social

etiquette, and proper Spanish. When she began to notice how Rocio practically finished Dee Dee's sentences and how Dee Dee advised Marcela what to keep out of Rocio's pasta (no peppers, no pine-nuts), it seemed so apparent to Evie that Dee Dee and Rocio were truly meant for each other. It was like they were already mini adults in the making, and it made Evie anxious. She was going to be sixteen years old. Would she *ever* meet the perfect guy for her?

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

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

Senor Fontes had a slight build, like Rocio, and he also wore a sports jacket. Evie noticed, he had on impeccably shined leather shoes. She looked over at Senora Fontes. She had on pricey looking leather shoes too. Thank God, Evie did not wear her flojos to dinner.

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

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

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

Graciela suddenly chuckled to herself.

“What is it?” Rocio’s father looked over at her.

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

“Now you *have* to tell us,” Rocio’s mother nudged with encouragement.

“It just reminds me,” Graciela looked over at Evie. “And I hope I don’t upset you, Evelina.”

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

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

“Oh, yeah,” Evie said. “I mean, yes.”

As Evie’s mother had said, she had hosted a small, intimate brunch to welcome the de LaFuentes back from Mexico. It was last October and the morning after the big party that Raquel’s mother had thrown them.

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

The eyebrows of Dos Fontes rose together, and soon enough both parents joined Graciela in laughter.

“*Sin manteca?*” Rocio’s mother looked at Evie. “Without lard? *Figate?* ”

But it was Graciela who answered. “*Si, si.*” She started to laugh so hearty that a cough erupted, and she quickly covered her mouth with a cloth napkin. Evie secretly hoped she would keep it there.

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

“Right,” Evie smiled meekly. Could she feel even more the ugly, hegemonic American?

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

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

“*Que te pasa?*” Marcela questioned Evie. It was apparent that she was hiding out. Why would a guest, after all, be in a stuffy kitchen when she could be outside enjoying another balmy evening in California, helping herself to quince paste and manchengo cheese?

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

insight than, say, the matronly madre judgement of Lindsay. “It’s just my boyfriend and I—”

Marcela’s cell phone suddenly vibrated from her hip. “*Ay, lo siento, Evelina,*” she apologized as she unclipped it. She read the text. “Oh, it’s my baby’s papa. I have to call him.”

“No worries,” Evie said. “Go ahead, make your call.”

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

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

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

Marcela’s helper soon came out with the tray of quincepaste and cheese. Evie looked the tray over, and each slab looked perfectly intact. *Whew*. She had done a good job with the cutting. No one would suspect her earlier therapeutic snacking.

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

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

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

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

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

Evie couldn't help but feel that Rocio was so mature and just, well, *capable*. He was barely eighteen years old and already thinking of a future with Dee Dee? In a way, he sorta reminded Evie a little bit of Arturo, even to the point that he was also moving away from his family and home to follow a dream, whatever dream that might be -- to attend an American business school or to be with an American blonde?

Evie opened her evening bag, discreetly checked her cell phone, and sighed. No new text or messages.

Chapter 16

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

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

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

Raquel peered over Evie and into Alex's locker. "You know, we could do some serious damage here. I could plant some lawn and then call the school, anonymously."

"Raquel, *no*." Evie slammed the locker door shut. "He's not that big of a jerk. Besides, he has the combination to my locker."

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

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

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

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

“I know, neither can I,” Raquel looked down at her own Rainbow flip flops. “And about Davey? We just hang out. I mean, it’s nothing *serio*. We’re just having fun.”

“But don’t forget about Dee Dee,” Evie reminded her.

“Dee Dee,” Raquel pulled down her Cop Out sunglasses. “Is in a team, a league, of all her own.”

Evie’s first days at school Alex-less were **unbearable**. She constantly checked her cell phone throughout her classes, every hour, every half hour. During lunch, she scanned the cafeteria for signs of him but found not one hint of his dark hair, **his camouflage cut offs**, or even of him flaunting the Bose headphones he had taken back from her. It was eery. How could Alex just possibly disappear from sight?

As she made her way to the salad bar, she saw Yvonne Tello with Tracy Williams.

“Have you seen Alex?” Evie casually asked as she took a salad tray after them. Alex had biology with Yvonne, just before lunch.

“You mean Alex, *Alex*? Your boyfriend?” Yvonne asked.

“Yeah,” Evie **said**. “Was he in class?”

“What, you don’t know if your own boyfriend is at school?” Tracy asked.

“Of course, I do,” Evie **fibbed**. “It’s just that I left my cell at home and I haven’t seen him since this morning. That’s all.”

Yvonne looked over at **Tracy Williams** with a questioning look.

“So, Evie,” Tracy started.

“Yeah?”

“So there’s been talk that you may not have your party,” she said.

“Who said that?” Evie’s body turned numb.

“Alejandra de los Santos,” Yvonne said. “She’s been telling everyone. Something about you having to work at the horse reserve and that they aren’t going to give you the night off. That you have to clean stables or something.”

“What?” Evie said. “Tracy, that’s *so* not true. That is a lie. Do you really think I wouldn’t have my party because I have to work? I’m totally having my party. It’s on.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Tracy said as she **scooped some seafood** salad onto her plate. “It did seem a little outlandish. But anyway, my aunt Anita is getting married in Mammoth that Friday, the Friday of your birthday weekend, and I was wondering if I should just stay up there the whole weekend and go skiing, or if I should fly back down for your party. But now I’ll come back for your party.”

“Yes, you have to.” Evie wasn’t even planning on inviting Tracy or Yvonne to her party, but now she felt she had to, just to spite Alejandra de los Santos. Also, she figured that two more guests on the guest list wouldn’t break the bank. “You definitely have to come back for my party.”

Evie stuffed meatballs into the two taco shells on her plate. **How does she feel?**

After three days, Alex still hadn't called or texted Evie and she wasn't about to phone or text him either. After all, he had left her hanging at the de LaFuentes dinner party and she, if anyone, deserved an apology. Since they were in the middle of a beef, it was Beetle Juice honking for Evie every school morning. On the fourth day, it was Jumile.

"You are so much better with out him," Raquel insisted from the front seat of Jumile as Dee Dee drove. "He's such a punk ass. I told you how he was at that party, right? The one on Hemlock?"

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

"So, there I was on the couch at Lil' G's mom's house," Raquel started. "Just kicking back, blazing some one hitters with some new friends, and here comes Jose, with Mondo and Alex. All three of them come in as if they owned the place or something. They don't even know any of the Bard Boys. I mean, *I* know the Bard crew, but they were acting as if they were part of the g-unit or something."

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

"Well, he comes in acting like it," Raquel claimed. "You weren't there, Evie. So, anyway, I'm looking around for Davey, because the last thing I want is Jose getting all up in my face without Davey around. I mean, we know how Jose can be. Remember Evie? Remember how he almost decked you in the parking lot last semester?"