

“Ay, no,” Lindsay took a seat at the edge of Evie’s bed. “There was a foot, *como se llame?*” Her wrinkled hands made a rubbing motion across her **Aerosoles slip ons**. “A massager? But the lady wanted too much for it. No way.” She turned around to look at Evie, **but her eyes shifted** above Evie’s bed. “Why is **all that scribble** around that boy?” she asked.

Lindsay was referring to Paul Rodriguez, Junior. Evie had Sharpied **elaborate red hearts** around his image on **his skateboard poster**. P. Rod didn’t surf, as far as she knew, but he did skateboard and he did have a “Z” in his name, just like Evie’s. Oh come on, **who was she kidding? P. Rod was fine**. **She was crushing him, hard**.

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

“Ay!” Lindsay stood up, her **hand clutching her thin gold necklace**. “Evelina, what did you do? Your hair!”

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

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

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

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

Evie immediately felt embarrassed and tried to explain. “It’s not just for a cut. I mean, I get it washed, and they give it a blow-dry and style. Plus I sometimes get a one-

“Evelina?”

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

“*Si, si,* Lindsay,” Evie called out, making sure to keep her head still covered. X

“Come in.” She told Raquel she had to hang up.

“Yeah. Oh, hey . . .” Raquel started. “One last thing.”

“Yeah?” Evie asked.

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

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

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

“No, I’m awake,” Evie answered, peeking out from under the covers. “I’m just laying here.”

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

“Lindsay, I really don’t *care* what makes my mother happy.” Ever since Evie and X (her sister Sabrina were young girls, it has always been Lindsay’s concern to their mother.) X

Evie figured, it was her (), not hers. “So,” Evie started. “Did you buy anything off of *El Mercadito*?”

on-one consultation, a lot of times with Viggo—he’s the salon owner.” But the more she said, the more Evie knew how shamelessly VH1 diva it all sounded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, *tonight*.” Evie’s mother knelt down and fingered the stained carpet.

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

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

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

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

In seconds, Evie was on the phone with her father. She pointed out that there were house rules and regulations for her recreational interests—how much time she could spend at Sea Street, absolutely no drinking, the number of hours viewing MTV2—but no mention of cutting her hair and dyeing it blue. No rule, no violation, so no punishment, right? Surprisingly, her father agreed.

“Ay, Vicki.” Evie handed her mother back the phone, but she could hear her father talking to her mother through the receiver. “The color’s not permanent and the hair will grow back. What teenager doesn’t experiment with change? Remember when we were dating and you wanted to look like Teena Marie?”

And so Evie was sprung. She actually wanted to click her heels (if she only knew how) with joy as she waited in the front driveway for Mondo. She was finally out of Warden Vicki’s tight-fisted control and soon to be far, far away from the suffocating security gates of Rio Estates.

But eight turned to eight thirty, and eight thirty turned into 9 p.m. Evie grew impatient and then angry as she paced back and forth across her circular driveway. Where the hell was that Mondo? Finally, by nine thirty, his black Mercury Marauder slowly eased up the Gomez’s’ driveway. Evie was ready to pop a fuse.

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

“Oh, you know Mondo,” Jose started to explain as he got out of the front seat and took over the back with Raquel and Alex. “He ain’t called Fed Mex for nothing.”

“That’s right.” Mondo smiled unapologetically into the rearview mirror. “When you absolutely, positively gotta be there on time, don’t be calling me. Besides, beggars

can't be—" He noticed Evie's hair as she got into the front seat. "Whoa, what did you do to your hair?"

Jose actually snorted. "Hey, yeah. Blues Clues!"

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

"You guys, shut up already," Raquel said from the backseat. She looked shocked at the first sight of Evie's hair but tried to offer encouragement, the best way, well, Raquel could. "You can't help it you fucked up your hair," She leaned over and stroked Evie's bangs. "Don't listen to them. We'll take you to Viggo and he'll fix you up."

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

"Oh, like you are *so* concerned about breaking the law." Evie said as she fastened her seat belt and crossed her arms.

"Man, Evie," Mondo looked at her as he stoked his own hair, which went slightly past his shoulder. "You ain't never gonna get a hold of my hair."

These were the so-called friends she was just dying to be with? She looked back at Alex and glared. "Don't even say anything," she warned him.

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

\* \* \*

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

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

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

The party was at Pacifica Abalone Farm, out at Bard Beach, one of the local beaches just west of Rio Estates. Bard was a part of town known for hard living, where dime bags and Hawaiian Tropic suntan oil was a way of life. This was perfect for Evie. She felt quite the *scandalosa* spending her first night out at Bard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evie followed Raquel and Alex headed down the sandy path toward the party. It was a typical fall evening in Southern California. The Santa Ana winds were already kicking in, but the residue of summer was still in the air. Evie suddenly felt less irritated and more excited. *Yes, she thought. Tonight, the switch is ON!*

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

“I can hear the band.”

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

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

Raquel put her hand into the tank. “Man, this water’s cold—oh my God!” Suddenly her whole arm was pulled into the bubbling seawater. Her expression changed from curiosity to sheer terror. “Oh my God! Evie, my hand!”

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

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

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

“You guys are such jerks.” Evie ~~wiped her shoulder with her jacket.~~

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

Evie took the shell in her hand and nodded. “Yeah, it’s ~~pretty.~~”

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

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

“No problemo.” ~~He took the shell back from Evie.~~ “Think of it as a peace offering, plus it would look good on you.”

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

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

\* \* \*

Alex was overreacting about Evie and Raquel needing an escort to the party, but that was Alex, always the overprotective gentleman. He wasn’t as fine or tall as Jose, and

he wasn't as funny as Mondo, but between all the Flojos, Evie guessed she needed someone like Alex around.

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

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

"Hey Evie."

X ✓ Evie looked up and at first didn't recognize Mikey Regalado. "Mikey?" she asked. She hadn't seen him since they were both in grade school. X

"Yeah, Mike," He pumped the keg and directed the spout into a waiting cup.

"How are you doing?" He looked Evie over. "Check out your crazy ass hair and shit."

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

Mikey's own head was now shaved. Was he with the Bard Boys? Evie wondered.

"Nah, it's looks good," he told Evie. "You've always been so crazy."

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

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

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

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

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

As Alex went to watch the band, Evie and Raquel left to look for an outhouse.

“With all the fine boys here,” Raquel scanned the crowd, “I don’t know why you’re flirting with some gang member.”

“Gang member, Mikey?” Evie said. “And I wasn’t flirting.”

Moments later, they found a Porta Potti and Raquel rattled the white plastic door. “Dude!” she called out. “Come on, already! You got a line out here!”

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

While the Flojos were one of many, how would you say it, “social groups” at Villanueva, there was actually another group that, at least, *seemed* similar to the Flojos. That group was the Sangros. The Sangros, (short for sangrona, Spanish for full-blown bitch) were four girls from Mexico City. They were *born* in Distrito Federal, meaning they were *Mexican Mexican*, unlike the Flojos, who were born in California and were Mexican American. While the Flojos were known for their flip flops, the Sangros signature was their stripes, as in their perfectly calculated highlights, blonde highlights. Not blended or, woven but rather ( ) stripes the width of a straw that made for severe

contrast to their **dark layered hair**. Until Evie's newest look, she and Raquel had always thought the Sangros had the tackiest hair imaginable. X

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

Even in the doorway of an outhouse (and even with those horrid stripes) Evie thought that Alejandra looked glamorous, a lighter shade of Beyonce, ready to give a Grammy acceptance speech. She sported the typical femmy Sangro look— leather knee-high boots, a low cut frilly blouse and, of course, **the hair**. In her Sanuk flojos and a tank top that she didn't quite fill out, Evie suddenly felt, **como se dice? Sencilla? Mierda? bland.**

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

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

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

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

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

"What did you do to your hair?" Alejandra asked. Her almond shaped eyes, topped with a glittery green eyeshadow looked straight into Evie's eyes.

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

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

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

"Doesn't your dad sell doughnuts or something?" Alejandra pulled out a carton of cigarettes from her suede bag.

"No, my dad owns a company," Evie she knew that Alejandra knew of her father's bakeries, everyone in the school that her father owned Conchita's Bread. "His chain, all four stores, sell *pan dulce*, not doughnuts."

"*Pan dulce*?" Alejandra laughed as she lit her cigarette. "You gotta be kidding."

"No," Evie said. "Why would I be?"

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

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

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

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

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

“*Frank de LaFuente?*” Evie asked.

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

But Evie wasn’t listening anymore. When she heard the name Frank de LaFuente, she felt her stomach drop *hard*. Frank de LaFuente was Dee Dee’s father. Dee Dee had been Evie and Raquel’s best friend when they were little girls growing up in Rio Estates. Raquel was Evie’s official best friend now, but Dee Dee was actually the closest friend Evie ever had. Evie had practically lived at the de LaFuentes’. Evie hated to admit it, but Dee Dee’s mother was the mother Evie wished she had. Margaret de LaFuente didn’t put on airs like Evie’s mom, and Margaret was always home, always around to talk instead of chasing department store sales. But when Dee Dee was twelve, Margaret got sick, like, really sick, and suddenly died. Then Dee Dee and her father moved out of California and Evie hadn’t heard from her in the last four years. Dee Dee never answered Evie’s e-mails

or returned her calls. To this day, Evie still didn't understand exactly what happened. Just hearing Dee Dee's name gave Evie a sunken feeling.

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

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

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

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

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

"Could you hear what Alejandra said?" Evie asked as they walked away from the Porta Potti. "About Dee Dee's dad, like, being at Channel Islands?"

"Yeah, I heard," Raquel said. "How come you didn't know?"

Evie shrugged. She felt foolish. "Doesn't your dad keep in touch with Dee Dee's?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, I guess."

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

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

Raquel made a face. "Nah, not feeling it."

Evie looked around. She didn't know what to do. She didn't want to leave the party, but she sure as hell didn't want to stand around talking with Raquel. She was making her feel worse. Evie looked at her watch: 11 p.m. She still had an hour and a half. Really, an hour when you counted how long it would take to gather everyone up and make the drive back to Rio Estates.

"You know what?" Evie said. "Let's go back to Mondo's car."

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

"Of course I know that," Evie snapped. "I'm not an idiot, Raquel."

"I'm not saying you are. It's just—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

3

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

“E-vie!” she announced. “Get up. It’s late.” She opened the bedroom’s white wooden shutters, flinching when her fingers came up covered in dark grime. “Ewww! Evie, this is disgusting.”

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

"Early?" Evie's mother crossed the now sun drenched room. She ~~wore plastic gloves and was~~ carrying some kind of liquid detergent. "It's already past eleven, and I've got to get in here to clean this carpet."

"Mom, no," Evie looked up from under the pillow and whined. "I don't want you rummaging through all my stuff. I can clean my own room."

"No, you can't." Evie's mother walked into Evie's bathroom and pulled a bottle of bleach from under the sink. "You know that it's Lindsay's today off and somebody's gotta work on these carpet stains before they set in." She came out of the bathroom and then spied something on the carpet. She crouched down, and pulled up a ball of surf wax embedded in the carpet. The wax seemed to have collected Molesto's thick long black hairs, Meho's cat duff and God knew what else. "Evie," her mother held up the wax. "What is this?"

Evie rubbed her eyes. "Sex Wax."

"Sex *what?*" her mother immediately dropped it.

"No," Evie couldn't help but laugh. "Mr. Zogs. It's wax for my surfboard."

"Oh, the board your father paid almost paid a thousand dollars for and you have yet to use?" She wiped her hands on one of the rags in the bucket.

Fortunately for Evie, the ringtone of "SONG" started up from her cell phone.

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

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

“Hey, it’s me.”

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

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

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

“Uh-huh,” she said. “And he confirmed it.”

“Confirmed what, exactly?” Evie asked.

“That the de LaFuentes are definitely moving back to Rio Estates.”

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

“Oh, you know how ol’ Charlie Diaz is.” Raquel yawned. “*With his money on his mind and his mind on...nothing else.* My dad isn’t concerned with long-lost family friends. In fact, he’s actually known for weeks—he got an e-mail from Dee Dee’s dad. And now my mom wants to have a little welcome-back party for them. She says it’s the proper thing to do, especially to introduce Dee Dee’s new mom to everybody.”

“*New mom?*” Evie repeated. The Gomezes had received an announcement of Mr. De la Fuente’s sudden second marriage but knew nothing about his second wife.

“*New madre?*” Raquel asked. “Does that sound better?”

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

“So,” Raquel said. “How are you feeling?”

“Totally dissed.”

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

“Oh. Uh, okay, I guess,” Evie told her. “Totally not worth it. Now I’m just really tired. Like exhausted, and my head is killing me.”

“That’ll wear off,” Raquel said. “Just drink lots of water. You want me to bring you some menudo?”

“No.”

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

Evie laughed. “No thank you, *tia* Raquel. I can do without cow tripe this morning.”

“No, but seriously,” Raquel changed her voice back. “You don’t need anything? I got my mom’s car today. More of the *perro* that bit you?”

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

“‘Frigging?’ Is that ‘fucking?’” Raquel teased. “But oh, yeah. Speaking of Room Raiders, my mom’s gonna be calling your mom about the welcome-back gig.”

“When’s it gonna be?” Evie asked.

“Next Saturday.”

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

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

“What kind of party?” Evie was curious.

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

When Evie finally hung up, she actually began to feel a bit anxious. Dee Dee was coming back. They were going to be neighbors, most likely classmates but maybe friends again. All three of them, she, Raquel, and Dee Dee. But who knows? It’s been over four years since she’s heard from Dee Dee and, she looked at reflection in the closet mirrors. Her hair was still blue and there were bags under her eyes. Yes, people do change.

4

RioChica ~~(6:01 PM)~~: Little party tonight. Should be fun.

ShaggyMA ~~(6:02 PM)~~: Have a beer for me!

RioChica ~~(6:03 PM)~~: I’m more of a bubbling girl

ShaggyMA (6:03 PM): Anything but Coors.

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

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

"Kitty's going all out." Evie's mother rolled her eyes. "Again."

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

As he rang the front doorbell, Vicki Gomez looked Evie over. "Oh, Evie," she shook her head. "I wish you would take care of that hair. This is bad."

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

Evie's mother continued to rag on her. "You could at least have put on some dress shoes."

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

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

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

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

“Evie looks fine. Just drop it.”

Evie’s mother started to say something, but just smiled as soon as Kitty opened the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" Evie suddenly felt insecure.

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

"*Actually?*" Evie asked. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"*Nothing.*"

But Evie wasn't convinced.

"Evie, I'm serious. You look cute," Raquel insisted. "Don't get all *sentida* on me."

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

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

"Whoa, slow down," Rachel said. "There's plenty more where this came from."

Evie took a smaller sip before giving Raquel back the bottle. "I just wanna loosen up," She got up from the stool and flopped down on Raquel's canopied bed. She picked up the *Kerrang!* magazine that was laying on it and started flipping through it. "It's so wrong that Dee Dee's, like, back in Rio Estates and still hasn't called."

"Have you called her?" Raquel asked.

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

"I don't have her number," Raquel answered.

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

"Ahhh." Raquel took a swig of champagne and looked dreamily upward. "And so the novella between the wayward friend and the forgotten woman left behind continues.

*Dos mujeres, dos caminos . . .*"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

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

“*Obsessing?*”

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

“That’s not true,” Evie pretended to be into an article on ()

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, I wonder," Raquel answered halfheartedly.

"Um," Evie scanned Raquel's room hoping to find something, anything for inspiration. She saw one of Raquel's fancy glass sand bottles. It was in the shape of a genie's lamp.

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

"Oh, yeah."

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

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

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

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

“Dee Dee’s mom was so cool,” Evie said. “She always threw the best parties.”

“My mom throws good parties.” Raquel frowned.

“Hey, Raq!” Jose was tapping on Raquel’s bedroom door.

“Come in,” Raquel called. “It’s open.”

Jose strutted into the room with an exaggerated pimp limp. Alex was close behind. Both of them had on stiff baggy cords, but only Alex wore a button up and, as Evie detected when he hugged her hello, wore cologne. *Cute.*

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

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

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

“Oh, he’ll definitely be by later.” Alex said. “He never turns down a party.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are the cutouts custom?” Evie asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Raquel said. “My mom went crazy finding someone who could do them so quickly. Each little papel has like a little scene from when the de La Fuentes lived here. There’s some when they lived here in Rio Estates, some from the summers we

all spent in Cabo, and oh, and a few of the Christmas we spent at Lake Tahoe.

'Member?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jose wrapped his arms around her waist. "Hey, I got nothing against necrophilia if you don't."

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

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

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

To Evie, getting up at dawn on a non-school day was entirely out of the question. But Evie learned that DP, Dawn Patrol, was the time of day any serious surfer got to the beach. Alex was the only Flojo who surfed and he not only helped Evie pick out her long board but he had promised to take her on DP, in this case, Sea Street.

**. You staked out your territory long before the line up got flooded with aggro locals (which they, living in Rio Estates, were definitely not—locals that is) and you nabbed hours of free parking, way before the meters inflated weekend rates.**

**Besides, as she served out her mother's sentence, she and her new Hanson longboard had been landlocked two weeks too long. Evie had actually begun to look forward to D.P..**

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

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

"Alex, I've been grounded."

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

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

"Man, I'd love to live in Mexico," Alex softened his eyes and suddenly looked dreamy. "Like down south, Puerto Escondido way."

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

“Yeah, and you know she had to hate it,” Raquel looked up from Jose’s neck. “Dee Dee’s a total country bumpkin. She’s scared of her own shadow.”

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

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

\* \* \*

Evie recognized many of party guests from the SCC, the Saticoy Country Club. Others were colleagues of the Diaz’s, fellow Hi Tech Aztecs, who’d also made their money through computers or some kind of software technology. A lot of men, robust in stature and liberal with the cologne, had families and homes in Rio Estates but held positions and, as Raquel claimed, *sanchas* up north, in their luxury Silicon Valley condos. Did a new hefty rock on Mrs. Coulhan-Reyes’s finger, Evie wondered, derive from new heftier guilt felt by Mr. Reyes’s conscious?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hey,” he warned. “Don’t *you* bag on the Bell.”

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

By eight o’clock, the appetizers of mini chalupas and the aforementioned quesadillas were almost gone and everyone was toasty from an hour’s worth of free booze. Charlie Diaz made an announcement to the crowd. “Okay, everybody, I just got a

call from Frank.” He was pink faced from the heat and excitement. “They’re on their way. They just turned on Camino Coral. They’ll be here any second.”

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

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

“Ah, man,” Evie overhead Jose tell Raquel. “That’s *so* barrio.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, Evie!” Frank de LaFuente took her hands in his, stood back, and beamed. “*Mi’ja*, let me look at you! Such a beautiful young lady you’ve become! Look at this hair. It’s like the ocean!” He looked over at Raquel, who was standing next to her. “And Raquel, *tú también! Qué bonita! Mira*, I want you both to meet my wife, Graciela.”

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

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

“Oh, yes, of course.” Kitty put her arm around Graciela’s shoulders. “We’ve used this valet company for years.”

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

“Yeah,” Raquel added. “We’ve all been friends since we were, like, seven years old.”

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

“Uh, I’m Evie,” Evie started awkwardly. “And this is—”

“Evie?” Graciela asked. “What kind of name is that?”

“Well, my real name is—”

“Where’s Dee Dee?” Raquel interrupted, looking around Graciela.

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

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

“We’re just excited to see our little Dee Dee,” Evie’s father said quickly.

“Especially Evie.”

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

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

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

\* \* \*

By 9:30 p.m., Dee Dee still hadn’t arrived and the party was already dying down. The singer of the band from *un trio* that Charlie Diaz hired had shaken her maraca one

last time and the caterers were gathering up the dessert dishes and what was left over from the *tres leches* cake. Evie was feeling as uptight as her mother looked. ) X

“This is very rude of Dee Dee,” she overheard her mother say to Evie’s father. Her arms were crossed and her cheeks and neck were flushed pink. “Very inconsiderate.”

Evie was surprised to find herself in full agreement with her mother. She couldn’t believe that Dee Dee was being so thoughtless on the night of all nights. Evie felt Dee Dee wasn’t just blowing off the party, she was blowing off *her*. Evie’s eyes started to burn with anger.

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

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

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

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

“*Quién?*” the woman asked.

“Oh.” Alex waved a hand dismissively. “He’s just some surfer.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Uh, yeah . . .”

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

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

“Evie! It’s me! Dela!”

“Dela?”

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

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

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

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

“Um.” Evie’s voice came out like a squeak. “Dee Dee, uh . . .”

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

“Nah.” Alex smirked. “We let our women go as far as our *leash* lets them.”

“*Ay!*” Dee Dee gave him a sideways glance. “Now you too?”

“Um, Dee Dee . . .” Evie tried again.

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

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

“Oh, yes, I—” Della snapped her fingers to get a server’s attention. “Over here,” she called, holding up her glass. “I’m done *here.*” She turned her attention back to Alex.

“Let me tell you, she was my best, best friend. We did everything together and—oh, wait,

I want you to meet Graciela, my stepmother. 'Ama!' she called. "'Ama, here's the friend I was telling you about. This is Evie."

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

"Already, 'Ama?"

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

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

"*Mande?*" Graciela looked at him, confused.

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

"Uh, Alex," he said, looking embarrassed.

"Alejandro?" Graciela asked.

"No. Just Alex."

"You mean Alexander?" Graciela asked again.

"No, Alex." He repeated, uncomfortably. "*Just Alex.*"

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

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

"Uh, Raquel," Evie started to warn her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Excuse me?” Dee Dee fumed.

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

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

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

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

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

“*Que es su problema?*” Dee Dee demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, I know that. I was just thinking of a coffeehouse or something?” She looked around. “Hey, why don’t you take me to that beach you were talking about.”

“Sea Street?” Alex asked.

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

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

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

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

“Well, where should I take her?”

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

“I mean,” Alex said awkwardly. “I feel like it’s sorta my obligation. She is a guest.”

“So then just go, *Alejandro.*” Evie dismissed Alex with a wave of her hand. “I didn’t *realize* you were the Goodwill Ambassador for Mexico.”

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

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

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

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

"Uh, which one?" Evie asked.

"La sangrona." She laughed lightly as she looked after Dee Dee and Alex.

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

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

After Evie took the slice, she took a deep bite. The sweet, milky moistness flooded her mouth, but she still couldn't shake off the bitterness that seared her whole body. What had happened to Dee Dee? MORE. She took another bite and tallied up the score. Sangros: one, Flojos: zero. And Evie? More than anything, she didn't want to be in the game.

5

For as long as Evie could remember, shake and bakes (Ca-lingo for earthquakes erupting during hotter weather) have always happened early in the morning. So the next

day when Evie woke up to her glass top nightstand rattling, she started to panic, only to discover it was her cell phone. She had left it on vibrate.

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

She also saw on her cell that it was already 11:03 am. The operative word here was *already*. When he'd left the party with Dee Dee, Evie knew that Dawn Patrol was definitely off. Besides, she looked at her vibrating cell, dawn had cracked almost five hours ago. So why was he even calling? But as soon as the vibrating stopped, Evie couldn't help but feel a pang of regret. Maybe she should've answered it. Maybe Alex wanted to apologize, beg for her forgiveness and admit he was a lousy friend at the party last night. Maybe – but then Evie stopped herself - who was she kidding? It was *already* three minutes after 11 am. If he had been so sorry, he would have called earlier.

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

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

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

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

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

Evie upped her playful challenge and said, as quickly and confidently as she could, “*Buenas dias*, Lindsay. *Como estas? Porque estas aqui?*”

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

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

“The one for the de LaFuentes.” She looked at her watch, the one that Evie’s mother had bought for her. “In about an hour.”

“*What?*” Evie felt creases form across her forehead. For all the times her face had went into shock over the last 48 hours, she figured she’d need some major botox by her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. “The de LaFuentes are coming *here?*”

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

“Is Dee Dee coming too?”

“I don’t know, Evie.” Lindsay answered half-heartedly, as if it was another chore for her to think of the correct answer. Her only concern at the moment was choosing the right color of soap for the guest bathroom.

Evie slipped on some sweat shorts, her favorite pair of flojos and headed down stairs. She had no choice but to ask her mother herself about the brunch. Wasn’t the welcome back party for the de LaFuentes last night enough? As a kid, Evie witnessed her mother trying to keep up with, well not the Joneses, but the Diazes and the de LaFuentes. Sure Vicki Gomez’s husband owned a few bakeries, but she could host a get together just as good as the wife of a scholar (e.g. Frank de La Fuente) or the CEO/owner of a software company (e.g. Charlie Diaz) and she always felt like she needed to prove it. Was her mother back to her old habit of competing with Raquel’s mother over who displayed more sophisticated social skills?

When Evie entered the dining room, she had her answer. For one thing, the dining table was free from clutter. Vicki Gomez always demanded that their Californian mission style table remained bare, all the better to showcase its classic style. But truth be told, it was always littered with bills and paperwork; Spa Ojai bills, Santa Clara Church donation requests, catalogues from PawPrints, the *only* guide for high-end pet accessories. But this morning, everything had been cleared away, and positioned dead center was an oversized clay vase filled with Eucalyptus leaves and Birds of Paradise. A definite sign of impending company, or as Evie feared, an oncoming collision. What would she say to Dee Dee when she showed up?

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

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

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

“What do you mean?” Evie immediately felt on guard.

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

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

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

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

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

“Alcohol poisoning? Mom, come on...”

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

“Me? No. And who even says it was alcohol?” She struggled to protect Raquel, as well as herself. “Maybe the milk in the Tres Leches was bad and.”

“Evie! Stop it. When your father gets back I’m going to have him talk to you.”

She pulled a paper towel from the roll hanging under the cabinet and wiped the Jolene off from above her lip. She went back to juicing, shaking her head. “I don’t know, Evie,” her tone softened. “Your best friend is back and I would think you would have wanted to

make a better impression. Granted she was rude, late to her own party, but we could be the more gracious ones. Dee Dee has gone through a lot, Evie. Losing her mother, moving to another country and that Graciela's no consolation."

Evie took over one of the red painted stools at the kitchen counter. She knew her mother was partially right, but she wasn't about to admit it. Yeah, she and Dee Dee, as well as Raquel, had once been the golden trio of Camino del Rio. The proximity of their three homes, side by side at the end of the cul de sac, made for obvious reasoning that the three girls would not only be neighbors, but friends. But once Dee Dee moved away, only Raquel and Evie remained close. After last night, Dee Dee's had made it so obvious that she had changed for the worse. She had become the type of girl Raquel and Evie despised -- the helpless giggling blonde, the too tight "hot" clothing. And those colored contact lenses! Was last night's reunion a retro '80s party and no one told Evie?

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

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

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

"The Diaz's are coming too?" she asked. "You said just the De LaFuentes."

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

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

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

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

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

The box was from one of the Gomez’s *panaderias*. Evie grew up with the white bakery boxes, each one stamped with the small shell on top. Evie went over to the table and lifted the box’s lid. She inhaled the aroma of fresh bread, but to her the *pan* looked no different from the sweet bread her father brought home practically every night.

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

“No lard.” Her father corrected.

“Huh?”

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

Evie took a bite. The *pan* was still warm, but tasted bland, like the Jenny Craig dietary loaves the whole family had to tolerate when her mother’s “no-carb” phase was yes-again.

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

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

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

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

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

*Yeah, as honest as her yearly bonus depends on it.*

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

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

And of course, Ruben Gomez just beamed, which made Evie wonder. *When was the last time she did or said something that made her father proud* was always someone else who made her father glow. *There was Sabrina, with all her achievements at Stanford, Molesto, chewing up all the Gomez’s unwanted junk mail, Meho who purred on command, and now Lindsay, with her little *cumplimiento insincero*. Blah, Evie rumbled* her lips. *Parental pride, it’s so overrated anyway, right?*

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

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

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

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

“Can I do anything?” Evie found herself asking meekly.

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

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

“Evie,” Her mother raised an eyebrow and motioned Evie to the backyard. “Just do it.”

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

“Yeah,” her mother added. “It’s the call of doodie!”

And of course they both laughed. As they did every time they repeated their corny catch phrases at the cost of Molesto’s overly productive intestinal tract. It was times like this Evie wished they had gotten that aquarium like her mother had wanted

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

By noon, the Gomez's foyer was taken over by Spanish, Spanglish and what Evie calls Ay Que - **that's when adult Mexicans elongate the exclamation of "Que" in regard to a simple observation.**

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

A slightly jaundiced looking Raquel was with her parents, but Dee Dee was not. **This was a relief to Evie, but made her a little concerned, just how pissed off could Dee Dee be? As kids they had their share of arguments – from who got to be cashier whenever they played "Tienda" to whose rightful turn it was to use the boogie board first at the beach -- but their fights never lasted long. Would this fight be any different? Last night was pretty harsh, but enough to officially sever all ties? And why did Evie even care so much? If anything, it was Dee Dee who owed her an apology, or at the very least, an explanation. It was Dee Dee who hadn't kept in touch while she lived in Mexico. It was Dee Dee who hadn't even bothered to call when she arrived to Rio Estates and it was Dee Dee, *again*, who took her sweet ass time arriving to her own party and when she finally showed up, took the seemingly evil pleasure of humiliating both Evie and Raquel. Yeah, it was Dee Dee who owed an explanation to both Raquel and Evie. Definitely.**

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

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

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

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

“My mom.”

“Well, I guess I could the chit chat won’t be so bad,” Raquel half smiled.

**In that relaxed post party kind of way,** the parents sipped mimosas on the Gomez back deck while **playfully** arguing over who could offer the de LaFuentes better floor seats to the Lakers. Evie hung back in the kitchen while Raquel tried to recuperate. If she knew her mother, there’d be at least half an hour before Lindsay served brunch.

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

“You need aspirin?” Evie asked.

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

“Yeah,” Evie pulled up a stool to sit next to Raquel at the counter. “You proved

The morning marine layer that often plagued coastal towns like Rio Estates had **burned off** making the afternoon, and kitchen, sunny, warm and, to Raquel's **annoyance**, bright.

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

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

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

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

"What **do** I make of her?" Raquel **whole face furrowed**. "She's such a friggin' FOTB Sangro, that's what I make of her."

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

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

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

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

“Stupid Alex,” Raquel shook her head in disgust. “That dude be dense. It’s a good thing she didn’t tell Jose to do anything. I’d have beat her ass.” Raquel put her head back on her folded arms. “We gotta steer clear of her. I mean it, Evie. She’s not the same friend we thought we knew.”

“It seems that way,” Evie reluctantly agreed.

“Seems?” Raquel lifted her head up again. “As if there was any suspicion she was? Evie, you have to realize that she *was* a friend, *used* to be a friend, but times, obviously, have changed. MENTION HOW DEE DEE WAS ON THE PARTY We gotta have each other’s backs.”

“I *know*, Raquel.”

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

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

Evie started to put some melon salsa on her plate.

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

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

As soon as Lindsay placed individual eggs benedict in front of everyone the brunch officially started. Evie's father welcomed the de LaFuentes back to Rio Estates for the **umpteenth** time and then Evie's mother got on her own pedestal.

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

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

Everyone laughed, **except for Graciela, who just smiled.**

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

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

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

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

Raquel nudged Evie and rolled her eyes. "I thought he was away running a **University, not writing corn ball jokes for the George Lopez Show.**"

While everyone was impressed with Sabrina's accomplishments, it was the debut of Ruben Gomez's pan dulce that garnered the most attention.

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

"With all respect, Senor Gomez—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Dad? Graciela?”

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

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

“*Aqui!*” He called out. “We’re out here!”

Dee Dee, in huge green tinted sunglasses and her blouse tied high, exposing **navel**, came out onto the Gomez’s deck. **Her blonde hair** was pulled into a pony tail and **she** carried a large paper bag.

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

Raquel nudged Evie, “And an even earlier morning... with Alex, I’m sure.”

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

“Oh, Dee Dee,” Evie’s mother stood up and took the bag. “How thoughtful. You didn’t have to do that.” She passed them on to Lindsay without saying anything which meant that the bagels would remain in the kitchen for the rest of the morning. There was definitely enough bread for one brunch. Besides, after Graciela’s sour comment, Ruben’s pan dulce didn’t need any competition.)

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

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

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

“Here,” Evie’s father passed the basket of pan over to her side of the table. “Try some of my new bread from the panaderia. It’s fat free.”

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

But Raquel, seeing Dee Dee’s interest and waiting until the parents went back to discussing the Ruben Gomez’s new business venture, grabbed the remaining piece of pan

and tore a bite off with her mouth. She crossed her arms and looked defiantly at Dee Dee. Not Raquel's most mature move.

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

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

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

Evie could still not speak. She picked at her melon salsa.

"*Put*?" Dee Dee narrowed her eyes at Raquel.

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

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

The earnest way Dee Dee asked Evie made her feel guilty. It was one thing to agree to Raquel's earlier smack spoken, but another to publicly agree to it. Besides, Dee Dee seemed so defenseless. Was it the lack of her alien colored contacts that made her seem more vulnerable, human? Dee Dee's brown eyes patiently waited for Evie's answer.

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

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

“I’m not saying anything,” Evie tried to back pedal. “I’m just agreeing that last night was craziness and that—”

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

“Nauseous?” Evie’s father was immediately concerned. “From what?” The last thing he wanted was a connection of nausea linked to his forward thinking, progressive pan dulce.

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

“What,” Raquel **challenged.** “You mean we need to *cross the street* together?”

“Raquel…” Her father started.

“Oh, Kitty,” Evie’s mother interrupted. “If Raquel still isn’t feeling well, she’s more than welcome to leave. I won’t be offended.” But Evie knew that her mother didn’t want Raquel, who was notorious for being so moody, around in the first place. God forbid she got all *asco* on the teak furniture.

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

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

“Or afternoon or evening...” Charlie Diaz looked upward in exasperation.

“And who isn’t a little tired the morning after such a wonderful celebration?”

Frank de LaFuente said as he tried to soothe the situation. He looked at Kitty Diaz and winked. “*Que una fiesta!* We can’t thank you enough.”

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

“On a Sunday?” Evie’s mother raised her eyes in suspicion.

“Well, if they don’t come today, we’ll be charged an extra day.”

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

“But it’s still early.” Vicki struggled to keep her brunch alive, or at the very least, end on a more **memorable**, positive note. “Why don’t we at least take our drinks down by the pool? It’s so nice out.”

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

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

“Oh yeah,” Kitty Diaz smiled. “Come on over.”

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

As the four parents left the Gomezes to cross Camino del Rio to go over to the Diazes, Evie actually felt sorry for her mother. She could see the dejected look in her and her father's face. Their only consolation seemed to be that Dee Dee, strangely enough, stayed behind.

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

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

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

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

"Nah..." Evie's father shook his head, but then, "Really?"

"Yes, really," Dee Dee smiled, assuringly.

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

"That is so sweet of you to say," Evie's mother told Dee Dee once her husband was on the phone. "Ruben really needed to hear that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah,” Dee Dee said curtly. “It was.”

As her mother and Dee Dee reminisced, Evie started to see past the blonde hair and mascara laden lashes that as a sixteen year old she and saw the Dee Dee she remembered as a childhood friend, her best friend. The de LaFuentes, like her father said, were like family and Dee Dee had been like a sister to her. Dee Dee made for a better Placida Dominga than the one from the night before. Also, the way her mother was talking to Dee Dee reminded how her mother can be – calm, caring and attentive. Why is, Evie wondered, that it was always other people who brought out the best in her parents?

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

“Are you sure you don’t need my help?” Dee Dee looked up.

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

“Uh,” Evie was caught off guard. “Right.”

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

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

Who was Dee Dee trying to fool? Did she think Evie was just gonna forget about last night?

“So,” Evie crossed her arms **firmly**. “What happened at Raquel’s? At the party?”

“Yeah,” Dee Dee still didn’t bother to look at Evie. She was ~~now text messaging someone~~. “That Pansita has always been so bossy and aggressive, especially to you, Evie. I don’t know why she attacked me the way she did.”

“Well, for one thing, you were **macking on** her boy.”

“I was what?”

“You were flirting, with her boyfriend.”

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

“Quien?”

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

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

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

True, Raquel had been chubby as a child, but now four years later, well, what could you say? *Real Women Have...()*?

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

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

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

“Get away?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evie laughed. It had been so long since she had thought of that party. As she had told Raquel, Dee Dee’s mother always threw the best parties, especially for Dee Dee. It was something Evie always envied about Dee Dee and missed about Margaret de LaFuente.

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

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

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

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

7

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

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

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

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

“I was so worried,” Dee Dee held a lit cigarette out the driver’s window. “When my dad and Graciela told me I’d be going to Villanueva I thought that I’d have to wear a uniform or something. In Mexico, you have to wear one if you go to a private school. But we can wear anything at Villanueva A, no?”

“Yeah,” Evie looked over Dee Dee disapprovingly. “Anything.”

Could Dee Dee be anymore Sangro? Was it her too tight designer denim or the super sized hoops that practically pulled her poor ear lobes past her shoulders? Evie caught a look of herself in the side mirror. *Could you be anymore judgmental?* What if all the students at Villanueva had to wear uniforms as Dee Dee incorrectly thought? They’d be sporting the school colors of black and red, or as Raquel says, the garter belt colors of midnight black and hootchie red. With a school dress code, even the Flojos would have to wear shoes every day (Eew) and how long would it take for any of them to figure out who was worth each other’s time or not? Would someone like, say, Mondo, truly be Evie’s friend?

“So, what are the people like at Villy?” Dee Dee took a pull from her cigarette.

“Lots of cute boys, like Alejandro?”

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

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

“Oh, that’s just how Alex is. Besides, he’s just a friend.”

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

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

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

“Why?”

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

Evie playfully pushed her. No doubt about it, she had made the right choice to ride with Dee Dee. She was just as silly and fun as she used to be. **SHOW DON'T**

**TELL**

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

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

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

Evie continued to look around Dee Dee’s car and noticed that ~~the dashboard~~ flower vase, a nicety that all the new Beetles had, held a **arranged bunch of unlit incense sticks.**

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

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

“When did you start?”

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

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

“Was I?” Dee Dee teased.

**Raquel**

As Dee Dee’s VW Beetle exited the 101 Freeway and entered onto Highway 33, reality finally bit Evie hard...right in the ass. **WHAT BRING THIS ON?** She was going to school with Dee Dee. What could she be thinking? There was no way this was gonna fly with Raquel. Raquel was card carrying grudge holder. Right between her fake ID and JambaCard, you could actually see a laminate that logged long, hard residual resentment. The last thing Evie wanted was Raquel on her bad side.

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

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

“Yet?”

**NEED MORE**

Evie looked out towards the lemon groves that lined Highway 33. She definitely was not ready to make a grand entrance at Villanueva with Dee Dee. Maybe she could

suddenly claim sick and ask Dee Dee to drive her back home? Suggest they both ditch and head out for a day at Sea Street? Hmm. That was something Raquel would be down with, but with Dee Dee? She wasn't so sure. Could she ask Dee Dee to drop her off on the edge of Ventura Road so she could walk up Villanueva Road by herself?

Highway 33 soon turned into Ventura Road, a two lane highway lined with homemade painted signs that bragged of local produce and apple cider for sale by Oakview residents. "Wow," Dee Dee observed as they drove though Ventura Road. "Nothing here has changed. It's like the same when we came up here as little kids."

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

"Remember, when my mom brought us horseback riding?" Dee Dee asked.

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

"Her name was Blanca."

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

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

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

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

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

"Hmmm..."

“What?” Evie asked.

“Nothing,”

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

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

“Beautiful?” Villanueva was where Evie had to spend most of her waking hours. To her, Sea Street was beautiful, her cozy bed on a Sunday morning was beautiful, even the cheap looking, white plastic dome that capped the Pacific View Mall was beautiful. Any place was more beautiful to her than school.

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

“Not me,” Evie admitted. “With my GPA, I’d have been lucky to get into C school.”

“So how did you get into Villy?”

“Let’s just say,” Evie confessed. “My father donated a *lot* of dough.”

“I’m guessing not the same kind he uses for his pan dulce,” Dee Dee smiled.

“*Exactly.*”

“Ay!” Dee Dee slowed down and suddenly cried out. “*Dia de los Muertos?*”

“Huh?” Evie asked. “What are you talking about?”

“There.” Dee Dee s pointed her chin towards the front of the school.

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

"Oh, yeah," Evie didn't seem **what Dee Dee's drama was about**. "They have one every year."

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

"Why is that so funny?" Evie asked. ""

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

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

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

"Of course," Dee Dee **tried to** explain. "It's just in Mexico, we have church ceremonies, processions...to *really* reflect on the holiday. By November 2<sup>nd</sup>, the streets were flooded with cempasuchitl."

"Zempa- what?" Evie asked.

“Marigolds,” Dee Dee smiled as she pulled into the student parking lot.

*Ay dios,*” Dee Dee said as she drove through the rows and rows of parked cars.

“We are never going to find a space.”

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

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

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

Mondo’s car, as usual, hogged up two spaces, and he and Jose were leaning lazily against Alex’s truck’s flatbed talking to Alex. Evie immediately regretted that she hadn’t returned Alex’s calls. She could have used an ally right about then. He had called two more times on Sunday. He sounded so concerned that he had hurt her feelings, but her pride wouldn’t allow her to phone him back. What could he possibly have said to her to make her feel better? He had really betrayed both her and Raquel at the welcome back party and, in a way, she wanted him to know that was *not* cool. Fighting with Raquel was bad enough, but now, Alex too? Saturday night’s fight was the first official argument they ever had and she wondered if it had bothered him as much as it did her.

Evie got out of Dee Dee’s car and couldn’t help but notice Raquel. She was stretched out in the front seat of Mondo’s car, casually twirling strands of her hair with

her fingers and reading, possibly *Kerrang!*, just about the favorite magazine of the Flojos, except for Longboard which was Alex's. But for all Evie knew, it could have been a DIY manual on how to snuff out a former friend.

Evie kept her head down as she grabbed her **backpack** from the back seat. She'd have to pull Dee Dee the opposite way, around the other row of cars, to avoid meeting up with Raquel and the other Flojos. But as soon as Dee Dee got out of her Beetle, she excitedly started to in the direction towards campus, right towards Mondo's car.

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

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

"Alejandro!" She called out and started to walk over to his truck. "Hey!"

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

"Hey, Alex." Evie said, apprehensively.

"Hey, Blues" Alex smiled. So maybe Saturday night's **war of the words** had not been on his mind.

"Heey," Mondo gave Dee Dee the once over. "Who's the new fresita?"

"Oh, Mondo, *please*," Evie struggled to get her backpack actually on her back.

"This is my old friend, Dee, I mean, Dela. She just moved back from Mexico City." She then looked over at Raquel and lowered her voice. "She's Raquel's friend too."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shut up you two.” Raquel’s anger was igniting all over again. “You’re such idiots.” She turned her attention back to Dee Dee. “Dee Dee, don’t you have a nail to file?”

“Raquel – ” Evie started.

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

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

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

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

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

“A *what*?” Dee Dee asked.

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

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

"That's actually two words," Jose piped.

"How about these two words?" Dee Dee looked at Raquel. "Fuck you!"

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

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

"Dela," Alex called after her. "Wait!"

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

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

"Can you be any uncooler?" Alex looked at Raquel.

"Actually, yeah. I can," Raquel smiled. "You want to time me?" (KEEP. IT'S A CHALLENGE, TO ACCOMPLISH A FEAT IN A SHORT AMOUNT OF TIME)

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

"Dela," She called out. "Wait up!"

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

Evie looked at her. Says something

Evie held the straps of her backpack and sprinted after Dee Dee, past the final three rows of parked cars and up the stone steps of Del Norte Hall. By the time she had

pushed by all the other students and reached Dee Dee at the top, she was out of breath.

"Dela," she huffed. "Wait. Please!"

Dee Dee turned around. Her face and neck was flushed and streaked with stress.

"What?" Dee Dee snapped.

"Well, for one thing," Puffs of air came out from Evie's nostrils. "You're going the wrong way. Unless your first class is Boys P.E."

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

"Dee Dee," Evie started. "Look, try not to trip. Raquel's just being a bitch. You know it, I know it, everybody knows it." Evie was surprised how rational she sounded.

**FEELING?** "It's just, look, let me just take you the ad building. It's way on the other side, but I can help you get set up and we'll get you an official class schedule."

"Is there anyway I can officially not have Pansita in any of my classes?" Dee Dee exhaled. "In my life?"

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

They walked down Del Norte Hall, the main hall of Villanueva, among all the other students. It was already October, the second month of a new school year, but everyone's clothing still exuded that freshly cut tag smell and, with their iPod earplugs cramped in their ears, trudge along like zombie like Pedestrians. **Describe clothes. A few boys looked over at Dee Dee.**

That is, until the first bell rang and suddenly everyone **scattered like mice**. Soon it was just Dee Dee and Evie walking down the empty hall. The tap, tap, tap of Dee Dee's

high heel boots and the flip flopping flop of Evie's flojos, reverberated from the tile and off the walls. Neither of them said anything to each other.

Evie glanced over at Dee Dee as saw how uncharacteristically wounded she looked, a bit frightened and exhausted.

Maybe it would be good if Villanueva had a dress code, Evie thought. Something like a two set of steel armor. That would be suitable, because it was obvious that Raquel had already declared war. (WORK ON ENDING)

8

Dee Dee was right. Villanueva was a nice looking campus. If anything, it looked more like a Spanish style five star resort hotel than a mere high school. Small classes were held in charming stucco bungalows with red brick tile roofs and just about every window had a panoramic view of the Topa Topa mountain range. Villanueva also boasted an Olympic sized swimming pool (a three million dollar renovation/since the big earthquake of 1972) and beautiful, beautiful guests (er, students) checked in from all over the world. Headmaster Covarrubias took pride in a school that reflected, "a well rounded and diverse student body that didn't tolerate intolerance," At least, that's what the catalog claimed.

During lunch time students were free to come and go as they please, but since Villanueva was tucked so deep in the east hills of the county with only one road that led to one town that led to one Wendy's, so most students just remained on campus. The 30 minute trip took too long for a 40 minute lunch period. And really, how many square shaped burgers can you eat in a school year?

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

"Hey, Evie" Tracy Milne, another sophomore who sat next to Evie in Spanish class looked over at her. "You fixed your hair."

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

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

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

"Oh, is she like an exchange student or something? She looks like she's from Sweden or something." (YES, DEE DEE IS BLONDE, WANT TO WORK ON HER TAN...)

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

"Oh, she's really pretty."

"Uh huh," Evie said. "That's what everyone thinks."

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

U r a perv. B Nce!

But (oddy) Mondo, who uses any reason not to pay attention in class, didn't text Evie back once during the whole rest of the morning.

By lunch time Evie didn't have any big ideas or well thought out plans on how to keep harmony between the (). She slowly trudged down to Veranda Hall where the majority of lockers were assigned to sophomores. This fall semester, Evie didn't have any classes with Raquel, but they always met Alex, Jose and Mondo for lunch under Juniper's Tree. Juniper's Tree was a humongous oak with a commemorative plaque that claimed that Father Juniper Serra himself, along with local Chumash Indians, had actually planted the tree back in 1782, right around the time he was building Mission San Buenaventura. It was same plaque that Jose put out his cigarette butts on and where Mondo had extended his ommunity pride and carved "RxE (as in Rio Estates) to the left of it on the tree's trunk. So much for historical preservation and *respeto*.

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

She found Dee Dee and Alex, waiting for her at her locker. She was relieved to see that Dee Dee didn't seem as jolted as she had in the parking lot that morning. She was chatting in her trademark enthusiasm while Alex was propped against the lockers. He had one thumb inside of his front side pocket, while his fingers hung out. He held his books in the other hand. With his body leaned towards Dee Dee and the big, lazy smile on his face, Alex seemed to be listening intently to Dee Dee. And it hit Evie. *Wow, he is into her.* Of course, Alex was into girls, and when he was with Mondo and Jose, as Evie

X had witnessed at the Diazes welcome back party, he could mack like crazy. But as long as she has known Alex, well, all of last school year and over the summer, he had never had a girlfriend. But now, seeing the way he was with Dee Dee, Evie thought maybe that was going to change. She really didn't know how she felt about that. Maybe a little, and just a little, envious? DEFINE BETTER X

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

“Claro, porque no?” It was Dee Dee who answered, as she squeezed his arm.

T “Thank you again, Alejandro, for all your help.”

X As Alex had walked away, Evie thought, *at the tree?* Was he kidding? Had he not witnessed what went down in the parking lot? God, Raquel was right. Dudes can be dense.

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

“Everything is going great!” Dee Dee held her spiral notebook to her chest. Evie could see the names and numbers of a few students already scrawled across the back.

When Evie first started Villanueva she felt incredibly lucky enough when Raquel teamed up with Jose. It gave her three more names to add to her cell directory – Jose, Mondo and Alex, an instant double number of social contacts.

“I have Alejandro in two of my classes,” Dee Dee continued. “He is so sweet, really helpful and one of my teachers,” she looked over her course sheet, “A Mr. Guereca, actually lived in the Polenco District, my old neighborhood. *Que chido, no?*”

“Yeah, cool,” But Evie couldn’t really pay attention. **Physical manifestation of anxiety. She was more concerned how lunch was going to pan out.** “Since it’s so nice out,” she started. “I was thinking we could grab some grub and head out to the Art Den.” It was the only secluded area of campus she could think of, occupied only with horrible student renditions of Che Gueverra and the Ventura coastline.

“The Art Den?” Dee Dee asked. “We’re not going to meet Alex at the tree?”

“Nah, the tree is so played out.” Evie crammed her books in her locker.

**It was only the second month of school,** but already it was cluttered with her own issues of **SG magazine and Raquel’s Kerrang!** collection, also and useless accessories from her former long hair days. “It’ll be basically him and Mondo gabbing gears.”

“Gabbing *what?*”

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

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

“Oh, yeah,” Evie remembered. “And Raquel had that amazing beach umbrella? The orange one that her father got in Rosarito Beach?” **Too soon for nostalgia?**

Maybe it was. Dee Dee didn’t respond, **but rather,** looked around the quad at the other students, taking it all in. **More than a handful of interested guys looked Dee Dee over while, Evie noticed, more than a handful of annoyed girlfriends tapped the back of their heads for realignment. CHECK**

“Hey Evie,” Robert Karimi greeted Evie, but had his eyes on Dee Dee came up to them. Mark was a senior and rarely talked to Evie, but this afternoon he had all the time in the world.

. “Is this your friend from Mexico?” He asked as he adjusted his square frame glasses. “Alex mentioned her to me.”

“Yeah, Dee -- Dela,” Evie started. “But she’s actually from here. She just lived in Mexico.” She introduced Mark to Dee Dee. “This is Robert Karimi. He runs the student TV show.”

“Oh,” Dee Dee smiled and shook his hand. “Mucho gusto. You have your own show?”

“Just a small one,” Mark tried to play it down, but Evie could tell he was just bursting with pride. “It’s local, but it’s been the number one student run show in the tri-counties for the last two years. You should come on some time,” Mark looked at Evie, uncomfortably. “You know, so, we could, uh, get her perspective on what it’s like being a student from Mexico, that uh, used to live here.”

*You are so stretching.*

So, Mark smirked. “Your name’s Deedela?”

“No,” Dee Dee laughed. “My name’s Dela. Dela de Lafuente.” Dee Dee looked over at Evie. “Evie just gets sloppy.”

“Yeah, well let me know if you need any help with anything, like a tour guide or something.”

“Oh,” Dee Dee squeezed his arm. “You are *too* sweet.”

Evie didn't remember anyone being so willing and helpful when she was a freshman, navigating the overwhelmingly large the campus, which at the time, appeared. She quickly checked herself. *Don't hate!*

As soon as they left Mark, the walked in the cafeteria, they were hit with the assault of central air and G rated hip hop, Fake air and fake street cred. Evie surveyed the scene. She didn't see any of the other Flojos around and because it was a nice day (*duh*, California), most of the students were outside. That is except for one group -- the Sangros. They were at their usual table, at the far end of cafeteria, in the corner.

Alejandra, as usual, was the ring leader of story telling. She sat up on the cafeteria bench, while the other Sangros, Natalia, Fabby and Charlene listening to her. Last year, Raquel had coined their table "the stable." BECAUSE?

"Oh, God," Evie lowered her voice to Dee Dee as they started to pass the Sangro Stable. "You have to watch these girls. They --"

"*Ay dios mio!*" Dee Dee suddenly cried out. "Alejandra?"

*Huh?*

Alejandra looked over at Dee Dee and actually squealed. "*Ay, chica!*". Then all seemingly six feet of her, rose from the stable. "*Que onda, mujer?!!*"

She gave Dee Dee a double air kiss as she hugged her. "I thought you said you didn't know to which school you'd be attending?" She slapped Dee Dee's arm. "Why didn't you shoot me a thread, puta?"

"Don't be mad," Dee Dee pleaded playfully. "I didn't even know what was going on. Seriously. But I'm here now. Right? *Mira.*" Dee Dee put her arm around Evie. "You must know Evie."

Evie wondered if there was any way she could morph herself into the cafeteria's linoleum? Anything so she wouldn't have to be a part of this chica rica reunion.

"Yeah," Alejandra looked over Evie and then back to the other Sangros, who smirked in unison, tilted heads and all. "We know Evie." Alejandra leaned over and ran her hand quickly through the top of Evie's hair. "La Loca with the blue hair. Where your friends, Loca? *Donde estan los otros Flojos?*"

"The who?" Dee Dee asked as Evie jerked away from Alejandra.

"Los Flojos," Alejandra repeated.

"The Lazies?" Dee Dee asked Evie. "What is she talking about?"

"Oh," Evie started slowly. "She just means me and Raquel and you know, Jose and-"

"But why are you called the Lazies?" Dee Dee covered her mouth and laughed.

"What are you, like, a gang?"

"No," Evie tried to explain. "Flojos 'cause of our flip flops. Remember when we were kids, we called them flow-joes?" She lifted her foot and jiggled her silver metallic Havaianas in front of Dee Dee. "Remember?" But as she explained, it suddenly seemed all so juvenile to her.

"*Ay, que naco!*" Dee Dee clapped her hands and laughed. "That's right!"

"So," Evie grappled with her composure. "How do you know Alejandra?"

Dee Dee linked arms with Alejandra. "From Mexico. Her father is V.P. of U.N.A.M." She looked up at Alejandra and gleamed. "He helped my dad get the position at Channel Islands. She's the reason I'm here!" Dee Dee playfully squeezed her arm.

"*Thank you, Alejandra!*"

*Of course.* Alejandra did say she might be interning with Dee Dee's dad at Channel Islands. How could Evie be so *tonta*?

"So, Dela," Alejandra put her full attention back to Dee Dee. "You must sit with us." She patted the cafeteria bench. "You have to meet my friends. *Otras chicas de D.F.*"

"*Claro que si!*" Dee Dee looked at the girls and quickly took a seat at the table. "You don't mind, do you Evie?"

"But I thought you wanted to work on your tan?" Evie asked.

"Blah!" She waved her hand in the air. "*Ay, no quiero trabajar hoy. Ni si quiera en mi bronceado.*"

The Sangros all laughed outloud, throwing their heads back in synchronized precision and then immediately straightening their hair, almost like robots, back in place. Evie didn't understand the joke or the translation. Dee Dee didn't want to work today? Not even on her tan? What was so enormously funny about that? And since when did she decide to breakout with the Spanish IV? Yes, it was the perfect time to bail on El Stable, or should she say, **The Stable (Spanish)**

"Hey," Evie didn't take a seat, but rather looked around and placed her hand flat on her belly. "So, I'm gonna go get something to eat. I'm starving."

"Yeah, yeah," Dee Dee answered distractedly. "Go get some comida. I'll be there in a bit."

"Yeah," Natalia said. "Why don't you get us something too, while you're up? Do they sell your dad's pan dulce in the vending machine?"

More laughter.

As Evie left, her face burned with embarrassment. Who did the Sangros think

they were, making fun of her? And how could be Dee Dee be so flippant and naïve?

Raquel would *never* allow them to talk to her that way.

Evie escaped to the salad bar. At least a meal of mini meatballs and shredded () stuffed in taco shells, her favorite, would be comforting. She got a plate and picked two shells from the steel metal tray.

“Nice friends you got there.”

Evie looked up and saw Raquel. She was on the other side of the salad bar, picking croutons directly from the bar with her fingers and popping them into her mouth. She didn't look at Evie, but just glared over at the Stable

“Raquel-” Evie started.

“I've been watching the whole thing.” Raquel spoke slowly between bites. “It's so obvious that you used me just as a filler for Dee Dee. As soon as she moved away, I was “suddenly” your new best friend.” She used her fingers to mimic quotes when she said “suddenly.”

“*What?*” Evie couldn't believe what she was hearing. “That's so not true.”

“Even Jose agreed with me.”

“Raquel,” Evie was losing her patience. “Why do you always have to have Jose validate things about me? About us? What, like he's some expert on, like, human behavior?”

“What are you saying?” Raquel finally looked at Evie. “That he's stupid?”

“No, I'm just saying--”

“You know what, Evie?” Raquel clutched the strap of her shoulder bag tightly, disressing the distressed leather even more. She finally faced Evie. “It doesn't even

matter what you say because you've been *showing* what a lousy friend you really are...at the party, at your mother's little brunch and now, today. You show up to school with *her*? How do you think that makes me feel?"

"Raquel, she asked me if I needed a ride. What was I supposed to say? It's her first day of school and the way you just took off yesterday, I didn't think I had a ride with you and Mondo. You never called me back. I called you twice last night."

"Why should I have called you back?" Raquel huffed. "You know Evie, yesterday we agreed, *agreed*, that we would have each other's back. You said that she was not the friend we used to know. But as soon as she showed up at your house, batting her plastic blues, you fell for it. Just like always."

"Fell for *what* exactly?"

"Evie, she's been this way since we were little kids. She always had to get her way, she always had to have your attention. I was always the odd one out and you never cared."

"Oh my God, Raquel, what are you even saying? And even if that was true, we were just little kids. And if you wanna talk about the odd man out, I mean, what am I? It's always you and Jose, or Jose and you. *Or*, it's you, Jose and Mondo and I'm just tagging along. Besides, you haven't even gotten to know Dee Dee."

"Why should I?" Raquel clenched her bag strap tighter, her fingers revealing more tension/strain.. "Evie, people don't change But you know what? I don't know why I even care if you prefer Dee Dee over me."

"Who said I prefer Dee Dee over you?" Evie asked. "Who? Jose?"

But Raquel wasn't listening. She turned her body sharply away from Evie, and

almost shoulder slammed Alex, who coming up to both of them.

“Man, “ Alex looked after Raquel as she pushed by him to storm off. “Looks like you’re up to your elbows in suds.”

“It seems that way,” Evie sadly agreed. It was all becoming a soap opera. She was tempted to call out after Raquel, but what was the use? Everyone was calling out to one another, but nobody was stopping to listen.

“You know how Raquel can be,” Alex tried to make Evie feel better. “You want me to wait for you?”

“Nah,” Evie half smiled. “I’m not that hungry.” She dumped her empty taco shells in the nearby trash and nervously scratched the side of her neck. “I gotta study for a test anyway. I’m gonna hit the library.”

“The library?” Alex looked out the cafeteria’s windows. “On a day like this? Evie looked up at him. “Alex, I have my whole life to work, even on my tan.”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” Evie patted him on his shoulder. “Just go out to the tree. I’ll meet up with you later.” Of course, she had no intention of doing so.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Totally.” She tried to brush it off. “No problema,”

But it was a problema. It was her big problema. She could tell Raquel was angry, but that didn’t give her an excuse to be so such an outright c-bag toward her. What was Raquel thinking? She and Evie have been best friends for years, just because Dee Dee was in picture didn’t take away from that. Besides, if she remembered right, it was Raquel who started it all, by making fun of Dee Dee’s eyes.

Evie looked over at Dee Dee, who was now laughing it up with Alejandra and the other Sangros, as if *they* were the old bestfriends **catching up on old times**. She definitely didn't want to go back and intrude on that little *comadreanda*. She looked around the cafeteria **once more**. *Nadie*. Nobody she really wanted to hang with for the remaining thirty minutes of lunch.

**Maybe she really would go to the library, she thought, and maybe she would get a book on Mexico and see for herself just what was so great about all things south of the border. But then again, she looked over at the Sangros, maybe she wouldn't.** NEW  
ENDING

9

Evie tried to remember how the battle between the Sangros and Flojos even started. As a freshman, Raquel had heard that Alejandra had been with Jose at some Sangro party, just a month before she, herself, hooked up with him. Jose had completely denied the whole thing, claiming it was **just some ego driven** rumor that Alejandra had started. But according to Jose, Alejandra was hot for him; **throwing** looks his way, leaning her body over his desk to ask a simple question in class, seductively nibbling the end of her pencil while her eyes burned **a hole** into the zipper of his pants. These candid reports from Jose, of course, drove Raquel **crazy. Just crazy** and she immediately issued a threat to Jose, Evie and all the Flojos; If any of them even associated with Alejandra, **as well as any** of her fellow slutty Sangros, there would consequences **to be paid**. And Evie, being a wide eyed **Freshman**, but **more importantly**, the best friend to Raquel, agreed to abide by such rules.

After their episode in the cafeteria, Raquel continued to not return any of Evie's calls or text messages. On Wednesday, Evie decided to call Raquel at home, on the land line, one last time. But she was curtly told by the Diazes' housekeeper, Vanessa, that Raquel was "ocupada."

Evie didn't believe her. She could hear Hidden Hand blasting in the background. Since when did Vanessa do her housecleaning to political heavy metal?

Evie also soon discovered that Raquel must have enforced a talk block on Jose and Mondo. Whenever Evie text messaged either, C St 2day?, her messages went unanswered. It was clear, so it seemed, that Evie was not welcome at Sea Street. It was odd for Evie not to be a part of something after school with her fellow Flojos. Sea Street was their hang out and after a few hours of surf lessons, she'd only have paddle ashore to deal with Raquel and her newly appointed velvet rope henchmen – Mondo and Jose.

*"You can glance at Ms. Diaz, but do not speak, touch, or look her directly in the eyes. Keep your eyes drawn down at all times."* Mucho bummer. HOW DOES EVIE FEEL?

Alex was not fazed by the Raquel induced drama. He was, however, concerned that Evie was going to give up her interest in learning how to surf.

"How are you ever gonna learn?" he asked on the phone one night that week. "You gonna be like everyone else in California, with the old school Senor Lopez pull over and that texturing surf paste in your hair."

"I don't wear surf paste!"

"You might as well," Alex clicked his tongue.

"Why can't we go somewhere else?" Evie asked.

“We can try somewhere else if you want,” Alex suggested, half heartedly. “But Sea Street has the best break and baby sets for beginners like you. But if you are so afraid of Raquel...”

“I’m not afraid of Raquel,” Evie insisted, if only to him.

Yes, Evie was, in a way, afraid of Raquel. And Alex didn’t bring it up for a while, anyway, and as it turned out, the opportunity for a surf lesson fell to the wayside and her expensive long board, shaped by the one and only Max, gathered dust in the corner of her room.

The following weeks, Evie and Raquel continued to avoid each other and, of course, Jose and Mondo, followed suit.

Evie started to wait for Dee Dee after school to get a ride back to Rio Estates and as they walked out to the student parking lot, she pretended they were engaged in super heavy conversation. But she couldn’t help but notice the Flojos prepping for Sea Street, as she used to do when she hung out with them. Alex would remove his long board from Mondo’s car, where he had it locked up during the day, and place it in the back of his truck. Raquel would already be tying up her long hair and applying Hawaiian Tropic to her face and arms. And then, the worst, they would all drive away as if they were forgetting nothing or no one. This dampened Evie’s spirits more than ever. Not only did she feel she was losing Raquel and her fellow Flojos, but she was losing access to the one thing she was actually beginning to feel motivated about. Would she ever step into liquido?

But as Evie soon found out, she wasn't the only one jonesing to get up all in water.

"I *have* to learn to swim," Dee Dee insisted as they were leaving Villanueva after school one Friday. "You won't believe what happened today in swim class."

"I didn't know you were taking swimming," Evie said.

"I didn't know either." Dee Dee pointed her car's remote to her Beetle and clicked the alarm off. Both she and Evie got into the car. "I got transferred in and guess who was there? In my class?"

"Who?" But Evie already had a sinking feeling she already knew.

"Pansita."

"Oh, yeah?" Evie tried to reply nonchalantly. She remembered what Alex had said about her being in the middle of a soap opera and she didn't want to be any part of an additional one. She already had to deal with Raquel on her own. "Hey," She unzipped the side pocket of her backpack. "You mind if I hook up my iPod?"

"You don't like Reggaeton?" Dee Dee frowned.

"No, it's just I'm sorta in the mood for something else."

"Okay. I guess." But Dee Dee didn't sound too happy as Evie unplugged her iTrip from her radio deck. "So, yeah," she continued. "Miss Riley brings me in and tells me to stay on the steps, until she can work with me and there's Pansita, *also* on the shallow end."

"Yeah," Evie smiled. "I'm sure she was crying cramps." She knew Raquel's gym excuses all too well.

"Exactly," Dee Dee nodded. "All whining of crampas y mas and then when I

come in, she suddenly feels better. Enough to tell me, in front of everyone, that I look like a prostitute in my bathing suit!”

“A prostitute? She actually called you a prostitute?”

“Well, she said, ‘So where’s your pole and plastic heels?’ In front of *everyone*.”

Evie couldn’t help but laugh, but immediately stopped when Dee Dee threw her a look.

“It wasn’t funny, Evie,” Dee Dee said. “Everyone laughed at me. Then I told her that she could only dream of wearing a bikini like mine and then –”

“Wait, you wore a *bikini* to swim class?”

“Well, it was more of just a two piece. Why? Miss Riley said our suits only had to be a solid color. She didn’t say one piece or two.”

“Nothing,” Evie looked out the window so Dee Dee wouldn’t see her smirking.

“Go on,”

“So, I told her, ‘Poor Pansita, Americans have such a problem with their weight. Maybe that’s why your man is always eyeing me.’”

“You said that?” She clicked her iPod wheel till she found Priestess. She cranked up the volume. *Nice*.

“Yeah, ‘cause it’s true, Evie. That Jose *es un fiero*, Mondo too.” Dee Dee pulled out onto Ventura Road and talked louder, over the music. “Did you know that they are *both* always hitting on me?”

“Who, Jose?”

“Yes, *Jose*. Eyeew, with that ugly spike in his chin. *Que cochino*.”

“Oh, he’s just stupid,” Evie said. “You just gotta just ignore him.”

“Well, Pansita’s gonna find out sooner or later,” Dee Dee predicted. “So anyway, before I know it, she just starts slamming water at me. I mean, not just squirting it, like when we were kids playing Marco Polo or something, she was totally out of control. Thank God Miss Riley came over and made her get out of the pool. That Pansita esta loca.”

“Slamming water into you? Are you sure you aren’t exaggerating?”

“No, ask anyone. She totally freaked out.”

“I dunno, Dela,” Evie started. “Even for Raquel that sounds a little bit crazy.”

It was all Evie wanted to say. She didn’t want to get into it with Dee Dee.

“I am not exaggerating,” Dee Dee insisted. “And I cannot bear another day sharing the kiddie end with that bitch. SPANISH. I have to learn how to swim.” She checked her side mirror and sped up on Highway 33. “What are we listening to? It’s sound like the Marilyn Manson on crack.”

“Dela,” Evie looked over at her. “How would you even know what someone on crack sounds like?”

“Well, who is this?”

“It’s Priestess,” Evie said. “They’re from *el otro lado*.”

“Oh,” Dee Dee suddenly looked interested. “de DF?”

“No,” Evie smiled. “Canada, the *other* otro lado.”

Dee Dee shook her head and rolled her eyes. “So, anyway, I asked Alejandro over tonight. He is so sweet. He’s going to teach me to swim.”

“You asked Alex over? To your house?” She hadn’t even been to Dee Dee’s house yet.

“Yeah, around seven.” Dee Dee said. “You should come over, too. My parents are going to the opening of the Hispanic Heritage Museum, in Santa Barbara, so we’ll have the whole house to ourselves.”

When did she and Alex get so chummy? Sure, he had offered to teach Dee Dee to swim at the welcome back party, but she didn’t think he was really serious. She felt a little left out. Dee Dee had already asked Alex, knowing they would have “the whole house” to themselves. Evie was just an afterthought.

**Evie couldn’t help but feel suddenly possessive. The Flojos were *her* pals, or at least, ¼ of them still was. They weren’t just some fast food friends that anyone, including Dee Dee, could drive up and order.**

“So, Dee,” Evie twirled the click wheel on her iPod, not really looking for anything in particular. asked. “How are things with you and Rocio?”

“Rocio?” Dee Dee looked over. “Buen. Why?”

“Just wondering. You haven’t really mentioned him, lately.”

“Well, I’ve just been busy,” Dee Dee said. “I mean, it has been my first week of school, but I still talk to him every night and --” She looked over at Evie suspiciously.

“Wait, what is this all about? Do you think I like Alejandro?”

“No, not at all.” Evie felt caught. “I was just asking.”

“Evie, I *have* a boyfriend, back in D.F., sounds like someone is a little *posesiva*, no?”

Evie shook her head quickly, “Me? With Alex? Please!”

“Evie,” Dee Dee started cautiously. “Don’t take this wrong...”

*Uh oh. Here we go again.*

“But have you had a boyfriend yet?”

“I’ve had boyfriends,” Evie got more defensive.

“I’m not talking Dean Paulger and his Valentine that you got all gooey over (SPANISH) in Miss Temple’s class.”

“No,” Evie said. “I know what you mean. I actually met a guy, just this summer and--”

“What guy?”

“Well, if you let me finish,” Evie tried to think. What was ShaggyMA’s real name? What *did* the MA stand for? For all she knew he could be Shaggy Married Already or Shaggy Mal Adjusted. Or worse, Shaggy Mammoth Monkey Ass. *Eew.*

“His name is Paul,” Evie lied. “And he lives in...”

Where did Paul Rodriquez, Junior live? He was a skateboarder, his dad was a famous comedien, so they must also have money. Skater, money...

In Venice,” Evie answered. There. Did that sound convincing?

“Venice?” Dee Dee’s face turned sour. “Evie, that’s, like, an hour north of here. When do you ever see him? How can he even be a real boyfriend?”

“Dela,” Evie said. “You’re one to talk. Rocio lives in friggin’ D.F.”

“Yes, but we were going to the same school long before I moved. We’re totally devoted to one another and we’ve been intimate and we’ve already scheduled all our school vacations so we can be together. Have you even *been* with this Dean?” She threw Evie a quick glance.

“None of your business,” Evie said.

“When we were kids, you and Raquel always tagged me as *la inocente*, guess I

proved you two wrong,” Dee Dee smiled smugly.

“Okay, Dee Dee. You’ve proven your point.”

“You know Evie,” Dee Dee continued. “I was talking to Alejandra and—”

“*What?*” As soon as she heard Alejandra’s name, Evie became livid. “You were talking to her about *me*? Dee Dee, *don’t*. You shouldn’t be talking about me to anyone.”

“Okay, okay...” Dee Dee heard Evie loud and clear. “You don’t have to get your *chones* in a bunch!”

Evie looked out the car window. Why was it that everyone felt it was so utterly important to have man in your life? Anot that she was so into Alex, but why would they be secretive towards here?

\* \* \*

Just to prove she wasn’t so *posesiva*, Evie passed on Dee Dee’s invitation to go swimming at her house.

“Are you sure you can’t come?” Dee Dee asked again later on the phone. “I was thinking you could sleep over and we could make Elephant Eyes for breakfast. Like we used to do as kids.”

“No, I can’t.” Evie lied. She didn’t want Dee Dee thinking it mattered to her what she or Alex did on their own time, even though a breakfast of grilled toast with an egg fried in the middle was enticing. “I’m really tired. Besides, I owe some emails.”

“Oh, to Dean?” Dee Dee teased.

When Friday evening came around, Evie logged on to her computer to check her MySpace account just to reassure herself that she did have people in her life. "Rio Chica has 120 friends." Yeah, right. So where are they now. As she looked over the **overtly artsy photos of all her overtly artsy "friends"** network, what did it really matter? She was, after all, home on a Friday night and she wasn't even **on restriction.**

But Evie's mood was lifted once she went into her favorite chatroom, Bonfire 13, and saw that Shaggy was in the same chat. So she didn't have a man in her life, but a little male attention never hurt anyone. **Shaggy was innocent enough. He lived far away and seemed only interested in early morning surf reports.**

ShaggyMA: Hey chica, long time no hear. Sup?

RioChica: School, drama, the usual. Hows surf in Norcal?

"Evie?" It was her mother, bringing in folded clothes. **Meh** was at her heels.

"You're not going out tonight?"

"Nuh-uh," Evie didn't look up from her screen. "Dee Dee asked me to sleep over, but I'm just gonna stay in." She anxiously waited for ShaggyMA's response. To be honest, she wasn't really interested on **how surf was in Northern California, but as a soon to be surfer, she had to get in the know.**

ShaggyMA: 4 ft. Cold as balls.

**Okay, so his webiquette could use some work.**

“How is she getting along at Villanueva?” Her mother put the clothes on the edge of the bed where she sat, uninvited.

“Who?” Evie asked.

“Dee Dee,” ~~her mother said.~~

“Oh, just fine,” Evie answered.

And she meant it, in most definite sense of the word. ~~Dee Dee~~ <sup>X</sup> ~~was~~ getting on divinely at Villanueva. She had a renewed friendship with Evie, her stable of Sangros, Alex’s attention, and she didn’t even seem to give a rat’s ass about Raquel or the inner turmoil she was causing ~~for~~ Evie because of it. Yeah, *que* fine.

But one thing that wasn’t so fine, as Evie saw, was who had just entered the chat - LadyLeche. Ugh. Evie was a hater of sexed up screen names. Milk Lady? What did *that* mean?

LadyLeche: I got something to warm you up!

ShaggyMA: I bit u do

LadyLeche: U wanna bite me? Where?

“We should really have her over again.” Evie’s mother continued ~~on~~ about Dee Dee. “She’s grown into one very lovely young ~~woman~~.”

“Uh huh,” Evie said absentmindedly. She tried to regain Shaggy’s attention.

RioChica: You should come to Sea St. You’d love it.

“You know,” Evie’s mother got up. “Sabrina called for you again. You should

call her.”

Evie rolled her eyes. The last thing she wanted to do was phone her sister and hear all about her super sized social life — sorority sisters, love sick frat boys she’s had to fend off and how she’s ~~on so terrified that~~ her precious GPA is dipping to a 3.96. She waited for Shaggy’s response.

“I’ll send her an email,” Evie said.

“Evie,” Her mother’s voice lowered. “An email’s not the same as a phone call. You should call your sister. She sounded a bit homesick.”

*Well, I’m home sick too. Sick of this home!*

But ShaggyMA was already in the throes of LadyLeche’s **fleshy** language. They both simultaneously logged off, indicating to Evie that they probably both took their conversation and libidos to a private chat room. **Humph.** So much for thinking his first love was the sea.

She felt deflated. She couldn’t even attract the attention of an anonymous online male. Was her font style or size not alluring enough? Should she upgrade from Times New Roman to something with more cleavage and curves?

“Okay,” Evie turned around to face her mother. “I’ll give Sabrina a call.”

“She’d like that,” Her mother smiled as she finally left the room.

But just as Evie was about to log off, she heard her buddy list **alert** go off again. Shaggy? No. Evie was surprised to see it was SexyMexy08. What was Raquel doing on her computer on a Friday night at, Evie looked at the screen’s clock, 9:13 pm? She was always, *always*, with Jose on Fridays. It had been a full week of school and neither one of them had even said a word to each other, unless you count what happened at the salad

bar. Evie was sure that Raquel knew that she was online. They were on each other's buddy lists. She waited. Maybe Raquel would send her a message? Most likely in all anger driven CAPS.

Evie waited and waited. Raquel did not send anything to her. Evie finally figured she would have to be the one to say hello. After all, they were on each other's buddies list for a reason

RioChica: Hi

Too Casual? She deleted the message and started over.

RioChica: Hello Raquel

Too formal. Maybe something more upbeat and silly? That'd be more Raquel's style. And after their argument on Monday, it might be a better ice breaker. She deleted and started over.

RioChica: Oh-lah, chica! Que onda?

Oh my God! What was she thinking? Super Sangro! She quickly deleted the whole thing. Sweet and sentimental was the way to go.

RioChica ~~(9:04 PM)~~: Hey, Rocky, I miss you.

Remember the time--

But it was too late. As soon as Evie sent the IM, Raquel logged off. Shit! Evie took too much time thinking for the perfect message. What was the quote Mrs. Mattis had used in Comparative Lit? “He who hesitates is...?” Well, something about how wasting time was not good.

Evie turned off her computer and grabbed P.Kitty off the ground.

“It’s just you and me tonight, precious P.” Evie snuggled her face into his fluffy gray fur. “Let’s go get us a snack.”

She carried Meho and headed downstairs to find something to eat when she noticed Lindsay in the den. She was folding more laundry and watching her favorite TV show, *La Tormenta*.

“Hey, Lindsay,” Evie started. “You’re here late,” She looked at the TV. “What’s happening now?” Not that she was so interested, but it’s always polite to ask when you’re barging in on someone else’s novela.

“I’m taking tomorrow off and I want to get this done,” Lindsay didn’t take her eyes off the den’s TV screen. “Oh, wait. Shhhhh – Tell you at commercial.”

Evie moved some laundry to the side and stretched out on the couch. Great, even Lindsay had her own Friday night gig going.

“You’re not going out with your friends?” Lindsay finally asked when a commercial came on starring Esai Morales with “an important announcement regarding home insurance.” She turned down the volume with the remote.

“Nah,” Evie dangled a sock in front of Meho. “Raquel’s mad at me.”

**"Imagite?"** Lindsay clicked her tongue sarcastically. "That's nothing new."

"Yeah, she's in hater mode"

"Mande?"

"She's all mad 'cause I'm friends with Dee Dee. She's a playa hater."

"Playa? Why does she hate the beach?"

"No," Evie laughed. "Playa, like player, like...a popular person."

"Oh." Lindsay still seemed not to understand. "and Dee Dee?"

"She's hanging out with Alex," Evie said as she finally clued in on **Meho**. He was not interested in exerting energy over some average gym sock.

"Oh, on a date?"

"No," Evie said. "They're just hanging out."

"But it's a Friday evening," Lindsay pressed.

Maybe it was better to leave **her** alone, engrossed in her soap?

"Lindsay," Evie was getting irritated. "Just because a **guy** and **girl** spend time together, doesn't mean they're on a date. It's not like that here. Nowadays."

"Hmmp." Lindsay said before turning the **volume up**. *La Tormenta* was back on "Oh-kay."

But Evie suddenly felt it wasn't simply okay. **Even Lindsay saw how it was so seemingly important to have a man. Was Evie such the loser? Was there something she didn't see and Lindsay did? And what did she care if Alex and Dee Dee were becoming more than friends? She should be happy for them. She was happy for Raquel when she hooked up with Jose, right? Even if she did feel like the third wheel at times.**

Evie gave up on **Meho's** finicky mood and before she knew it, she, herself, was

caught up in the torrent of *La Tormenta*.

The night's episode was about a beautiful, big breasted, wasp waisted brunette who had consistently ignored the advances of a dapper banker. He was the owner of pin striped suits and a thick, furry moustache. He had offered her his unconditional love, sparkling jewels and even a house by the sea, but the beautiful, big breasted, wasp waisted brunette wasn't interest in any of it or him. One night the dapper banker was alone, drinking sherry in front of the grand fireplace of his mansion. He was distraught that he would never win the love from the beautiful, big breasted, wasp waisted brunette but then, all of a sudden there was a tap at his door. What was this? Was it she, the beautiful big breasted wasp waisted brunette? No, it was a new neighbor who has just moved in down the road. She was a beautiful, big breasted, wasp waisted blonde and she needed help. His help. She couldn't light her pilot light on her new stove. '*Puedes ayudar con mi fuego?*' she asked in husky espanol. By the end of the episode, the dapper banker with the moustache and the pin striped suits had fallen head over heels in love with the beautiful, big breasted, wasp waisted blonde. And the beautiful, big breasted, wasp waisted brunette? She was forever alone...to lead the life of an old maid, with her mean, unattentive cat.

"Ay," Lindsay sobbed. "*La tormenta...*"

Evie looked up at Lindsay, then down at Memo

"Mom!" she cried out in a panic. "Can you drop me off at Dee Dee's?"

\* \* \*

When they were all kids, the de LaFuentes's house was on the end of Camino del Rio, right between the Gomezes and the Diazes. But now four years later, the de LaFuente's new home was on Calle Cortez, a somewhat posher street in Rio Estates. The home addresses were actually hand painted on oval ceramic plates and two large Royal Palms, at the street entrance, made for a grand introduction to the tree lined cul de sac.

Evie's mother pulled up to the de LaFuentes house where a number of shiny late model cars were already parked.

"Well," Her mother looked up in surprised envy. "I know Frank had done well in D.F., but *this* well?"

She was right. The de LaFuentes new home was large, with two prestigious columns on each side of a custom hand carved front door. In the middle of their circular brick drive way, spotlights showcased the family name, a fountain, three tiered flowing water. The de LaFuente's former house, like the Diazes and Gomezes, had been painted adobe beige, but now their new home was a light peach stucco, fresh and different than all the other houses. There was also enough foliage on the front lawn to re-create an entire native Mexican desert. From five gallon Agaves and Sago Palms to Beaucarneas and Mexican Grass Trees still packed in wooden shipping crates, the plans for a future landscaping extravaganza were definitely in the works.

"This must all be Graciela's doing," Evie's mother presumed with a slight air of disapproval. "Margaret was never so show offy with appearances. All this desert stuff... didn't Frank say she was from the North?"

"I dunno," Evie answered. She could really care less. Her mother was getting wound tight over a few measly plants?

Because there wasn't any room in the driveway to park her Saab, Evie's mother ending up parking down the slope on Calle Cortez. She looked up at the de LaFuente's home again and turned off the engine. "Maybe I should go in a say hello," she thought out loud. "I haven't really talked to Frank since my brunch."

"Mom, *no*." Evie pleaded. She knew her mother just wanted to check out their new digs. Besides, she didn't want her to know that Dee Dee's parents were out for the evening. "I'm already late. Please, can't I just have some time with Dee Dee? By myself?"

"Okay, Evie." Her mother put her key back in the ignition "Okay."

Evie grabbed her overnight bag and sprinted up to the house as quick as her Havianas could take her, before her mother could change her mind.

The de LaFuente's doorbell announced Evie's arrival with the somber sound of **church like** chimes. Moments later, a young woman in jeans and a Garfield sweatshirt opened the door. She was in her mid twenties and Evie assumed she was the de LaFuente housekeeper.

"Hi," Evie greeted. "I'm here to see Dee Dee?"

"Quien?" The woman's eyebrows creased downward.

"Oh," Evie corrected herself. "Dela."

"Oh, si," the young woman nodded as she let Evie in. "Soy Marcela."

Evie soon learned that Marcela didn't speak much English. But she didn't really need to vocalize her feelings. Her face conveyed annoyance as she led Evie through the de LaFuente's home, which was still pretty much empty from their move. Hundreds of

cardboard boxes of every size covered the newly waxed wooden floors and the stairway. The only piece of furniture in the Great Room was an oversized white leather sofa still covered in plastic, other than that, the whole house had a cavernous feel to it. A large framed portrait of a younger Graciela, with heavy lined eyelids, a' la the 60s, had yet to be hung and was propped against a wall which, like all the other walls in the Great Room, were dotted with spackle, waiting for paint. Evie also noticed a lot of indoor foliage in terra cotta planters and containers, large and expensive looking. Graciela *must* have a green thumb, Evie thought, or at least a thumb green from counting out all the bills to pay for interior plant maintenance.

As Evie followed Marcela through the kitchen, she noticed puddles of water on the beige tile floor, evidence that Dee Dee and Alex must have been rough housing it earlier in the evening. No wonder Marcela seemed aggravated. What housekeeper wants to work a Friday night, mopping up after some careless kids? Evie found herself, even a bit annoyed. Jealous, maybe?

But when they reached the back door, they both heard a scream. Evie jumped back. Marcela, however, just looked up in more annoyance. The scream was quickly followed by muffled laughter and Evie realized that there were other people, not just Dee Dee and Alex, out in the backyard. Perhaps Dee Dee's parents decided to stay in? But when Marcela pulled the blinds to one side and slid the sliding glass door open and Evie gasped. The backyard was full of tall, pushed up boobied, striped haired...*Sangros*. All four of them, there, in Dee Dee's backyard. Fabby, Charlene, Natalia and Alejand-rra.

Evie felt her mouth drop to the concrete. Her first instinct was to sneak back into the house, call her mother and make her drive back and pick her up as fast as her

speedometer allowed.

But it was too late. Dee Dee had already seen her and waved her outside.

“Evie!” She called out. “You came! Come join the party!”

“Well, I just came by to—” Evie started. But it was no use. She couldn’t think of a reasonable excuse quick enough. And to her surprise, Marcela had already shut the sliding door closed and pulled the blinds back in place.

Dee Dee sauntered over and like all the other Sangros, she was wearing a micro bikini (hers, hot pink) and large gold hoop earrings. The suit was *so* small, practically child size, and for a minute Evie thought that maybe it was the same **Garanimals** bathing suit that Dee Dee had worn as a kid.

“*Mira*,” Dee Dee held up a bottle in a paper bag and smiled slyly. “Natalia brought some Silver Patron. You want a shot?”

“Uh, not really.” Evie could detect a tinge of liquor on Dee Dee’s breath. “I really can’t stay long.”

Dee Dee looked over at Evie’s Weekender bag and tugged on the canvas strap.

“But what’s all this for? Aren’t you staying over?”

“Well...” What could she say? Her mother had already left.

“I thought Alex was here?” Evie scratched the side of her neck nervously and looked around.

“He is. There, with Charlene,” Dee Dee motioned with her chin. “She can’t swim either.” Alex was in the shallow end of the pool with Charlene who wore a metallic gold bikini, Metallic gold? It looked like it belonged more in a Mystikal video than in a Rio Estates backyard pool party. Charlene flailed about in the water as Alex desperately tried

to balance her with his arms under her back. Evie did a double take. Wow, Katie's C-cups overfloweth. And Alex? His neck was bright pink. That's one thing that Evie knew about Alex. When he got nervous, his neck turned the color of a Barbie convertible.

"Nice suit. Flojo," Alejandra approached Evie and Dee Dee. She was swirling the ice in her Styrofoam cup.

Evie instantly felt dwarfed between the towering, platform heeled Dee Dee and Alejandra. Evie glanced down and wished she had put on her nicer flojos. Her green Fur Real Snuks were comfy, but suddenly clashed with the swim lesson cum pool party cum beauty pageant. She also noticed that the blue nail polish on her toes was flaking off. Maybe she was truly a Flojo -- too lazy to even touch up her toes. Flojo. Sigh. She could only imagine how Raquel would react in the same situation.

"Now you be nice," Dee Dee reprimanded Alejandra with a sideways glance. "This is my house, and my friend." She threw her arm around Evie. The half dozen or so thin gold bracelets clinked on her wrist. "I told you that Evie's been my best friend since we were little kids. My very, werry best friend." Dee Dee cooed in baby voice. She pressed her cheek against Evie's. Was it the Patron that made Dee Dee lay it on so thick? All Evie could do was smile uncomfortably. Okay, so Dee Dee *did* have Evie's back, but not quite in the manner she was used to.

"Yeah, yeah," Alejandra clicked her tongue. "You know I was only teasing."

"Ay," Dee Dee peered into the bottle of Patron and saw that it was empty. "No *mas*, Evie," She made an exaggerated sad face. "*Lo siento, mi'ja.*" She then turned to Alejandra. "Ally, be a *chula* and go get Evie some Patron"

Alejandra gave Dee Dee a look.

“Oh, it’s okay,” Evie reassured Dee Dee. “It’s no problem,” She didn’t need no Sangro doing her any favors.

“Al-*leeee*,” Dee Dee cried. “Just goooo. Be nice.”

“Okay, okay.” Alejandra grabbed Evie’s arm. “Come on, chica.”

She took Evie to the pool house where another bottle of Patron was stashed, out of the possible tattle tale eyes of Marcela.

As Alejandra started to twist off the cap she looked sharply at Evie. “No offense, Flojo but...” she started.

*Uh oh.* Evie thought. Here it comes. Whenever someone started with “No offense”...it was usually an offense, a very offensive comment.

“But just out of curiosity,” Alejandra continued. “Why do you always dress like a boy?”

“A *boy*?” Evie *was* offended. “You think I dress like a boy?” Sure she had on baggy board shorts, but there were often times she wore skirts to school. And she did shave her legs. She wasn’t, like, Nor Cal, meaning all that *naturaleza*

“I *told* you not to take offense,” Alejandra said. “It’s not like you’re ugly or anything.” She took a swig from the bottle and winced. “Between Raquel and you, you are definitely the prettier one and I don’t know why-”

“Alejandra, Raquel is my friend.”

“Oh, really?” She raised her already arched eyebrows. “I don’t see you two hang out as much anymore.”

“Well, she *is* my friend.” Evie held up her cup. Hard liquor was definitely not her thing, but if anything, she’d need a little something to get through the evening. “I’m

basically a board girl.”

“*Que?*” Alejandra poured a small amount soda into Evie’s cup before adding the Patron. “*Aburrido?* With what?”

“No, not *bored*,” Evie half smiled. “Board, b-o-a-r-d, as in surfboard, skateboard, snow...”

Was she really explaining herself to Alejandra de los Santos?

“Aaah,” Alejandra laughed. “Si. I know. You like all that stuff.” She poured more Patron into her own cup. “So you surf? You actually stand up and everything?”

“Yeah, of course,” Evie lied. What did she think surfing meant?

“So I’m sure you’ve been to Puerto Escondido?”

“Actually,” Evie admitted. “My family . . . we . . . usually go to Cabo.”

“Cabo?” Alejandra laughed “Are you serious? *Que naco!* My family has a house in Puerto. It’s supposed to be the best place for surfers.”

“So I’ve heard.” Yeah, someday she would actually ride a board and go. Maybe a surf trip with Alex. He had mentioned Puerto Escondido. Evie took a sip of her drink. Yikes. No wonder Dee Dee was loopy. The Sangros were concocting a lethal syrup with the soda and Patron. Evie took another drink. She was instantly beginning to feel warm and toasty inside. “So,” she hesitated slightly, “You really think I’m prettier than Raquel?”

“*Ay!*” Alejandra put the cap back on the Patron and laughed. “Dee Dee is right!”

“Right about what?”

“You’re funny.”

“Oh, thanks.” It was all Evie could say. She was “funny” and “pretty” at the

same time, in one night. That was sometimes more than she ever heard over the course of one year from Raquel, who had supposedly been her best friend. And here the compliments were flowing easily from the mouth of a Sangro, the head Sangro at that.

“Hey,” Dee Dee came over with Alex to join Evie and Alejandra. “Alejandro’s leaving.”

“What? Already?” Evie hadn’t even said as much as hello to Alex.

“Already?” Alex said. “What are you talking about? I’ve been here since, like, seven.”

“Yeah, but I just got here,” Evie took a sip of her Patron. She didn’t like the idea of spending the rest of evening with the entire Sangro posse with not one fellow Flojo around.

“Yeah, well, I wanna get up early, to head out to Sea Street.” Alex looked at Evie. “You wanna go, Evie? You can finally try out that board of yours.”

“Tomorrow?” Evie got excited. There was no way Raquel would be at Sea Street so early on a weekend morning. “Uh, yeah, should I leave with you now?”

“Evie!” Dee Dee cried. “No. You promised. You said you were staying over. I have everything planned.”

“Everything planned?” Evie looked at her. “You didn’t even know I was coming over until I showed up.”

“Yeah, but, you’re here now, and now you are going to leave because you have better plans? That is so rude.”

“Yeah, but Dela,” Evie tried to explain. “I really wanna go to Sea Street, I haven’t been in, like, forever.”

“Evie,” Dee Dee insisted. “You can go to the beach anytime. This is my first slumber party in my new house and now you are just going to just leave?”

“Slumber party?” Evie asked. “You didn’t say you were having a slumber party.”

“Yes, I did. All the girls are staying. Right Alejandra?”

“Claro,” Alejandra agreed. She took a drink from her cup.

“Oh,” Alex grinned suggestively. “Maybe I should stay too.”

Dee Dee smirked. “No. Sorry Alejandro. Girls only. You’re already being bad enough, trying to lure away my best friend.”

Dee Dee was sure laying the best friend angle on thick. But Evie had to admit, it sorta made her feel, how would you say, *muy especial*?

Evie took a large gulp of her Patron. “Yeah, okay.” she said slowly, “I guess there will be plenty of other times to go to Sea Street.”

“Good!” Dee Dee smiled. “It will be just like the old days.”

“So, you’re not coming?” Alex asked.

“No,” Evie said reluctantly. “I guess not.”

As they all said good bye to Alex, Evie realized that Dee Dee was right. It was Dee Dee’s first slumber party in her new home and she should be there. Unlike the Diazes welcome back party, this was a party for Dee Dee and Evie needed to position herself as Dee Dee’s “very werry” best friend and to make sure the Sangros didn’t try to bite “the old days” away from her.

\* \* \*

It's a typical lazy Saturday afternoon. Nobody awoke until noon and nobody got out of bed until after 1pm. By 3pm everyone was still lounging in their matching cotton camisoles and boy bottoms, enjoying the music of Maldita (iPod), the saga of Laguna Beach (TiVo) and the satisfaction of Elephant Eyes (DiVoured).

"I can't believe I ate three Eyes," Evie put her fist to her chest and let out a long, low belch. It was less out of necessity and more to shock the room.

Dee Dee crinkled her nose and waved her hand in front of her face. "Evie, gross! How can I work under these polluted conditions?"

"Polluted?" Evie asked. "You're the one who lived in D.F. You should be used to dirty air."

"And L.A. isn't polluted?" Alejandra took offense at Evie's comment.

"We don't live in L.A.," Evie reminded her. "This is Rio Esates."

"Yes," Alejandra said with an air of city arrogance. "Unfortunately."

Amid spiral notebooks, loose papers and a few school books, Dee Dee lay across her chenille bedspread, re-doing Evie's Spanish homework. That was one of the perks of having Dee Dee back from Mexico. Not only did Evie get another best friend, but she got a best friend who had similar enough handwriting to hers and superior conjugation skills to whip through her Spanish II homework.

"Hey," Dee Dee asked Natalia who was sitting on the carpet painting her toe nails. "Would I use *por* or *para* in this sentence?" She read the sentence outloud.

"*Por*," Natalia answered off the top of her head, no pause, no guessing, no nada. Okay, so Dee Dee was a best friend who had good connections with someone who had

even better Spanish skills. NEED A BETTER EXAMPLE

While Dee Dee conjugated verbs, Evie was looking over all the single framed photos of Dee Dee and Rocio on the bedroom dresser. One photo, in particular, caught Evie's interest. It showed Dee Dee in a black knee length skirt. She was wearing pointed heels. Rocio was in a sport coat and had binoculars and a program in his hands. Both were posing on the steps of a fancy building, with the blur of other people rushing about behind them. Evie picked up the framed photo and studied it.

"Where was this picture taken?" she asked Dee Dee.

"Which one?" Dee Dee looked up.

Evie held the picture up to show Dee Dee.

"Oh, that was at Bellas Artes," Dee Dee said. "We had just seen a ballet. I can't remember the name of it."

"If it was Bellas Artes, it was probably El Flor de Xochimitlco," Alejandra was going through Dee Dee's lipstick supply. "That's *always* there."

"So," Evie put the photo back on the dresser. "How did you and Rocio hook up?"

It was still on Evie's mind, all the topics that had been brought up from the night before, not having a boyfriend and etc. She was feeling a bit out of the loop.

"What do you mean by hook up?" Dee Dee didn't look up from Evie's homework. She kept conjugating.

*Best friend and yes, a diligent cheater, too!*

"She means," Charlene said, flipping through a magazine. "When did you first fuck him."

"Oh, *that*," Dee Dee looked up and smiled coyly. "It was right away and then,

after that, all the time. I think we even did it that night, at Bellas Artes.”

“If I know you,” Natalia smiled. “You did with him in the bathroom, right in the men’s stall.”

*If I know you?* How well did Natalia *think* she knew Dee Dee? Evie was the established long time friend and this was all news to her – Dee Dee’s supposed sexual

prowess.

“Yeah,” Fabby laughed. “You did it with him right on the toilet, all *de perrito y mas!*”

“Fabby!” Dee Dee wrinkled her nose again. “Gross! I did not!” She sat up from her bed, stretched her shoulders and looked at the photo. “No, but really, it was love right away with me and Rocio. That’s how you know it’s real. We practically finish each other’s sentences. Also, he comes from a great family.”

“That seems really important, huh? In Mexico, I mean,” Evie asked. “Family.”

“It is to me.” Fabby interrupted. “I don’t want to be dating some *Indio pata rajada.*”

*Barefooted Indian?* What did *that* mean? Evie wondered. No wonder the Sangros looked down on Evie. In her flojos, she *was* practically barefoot.

“You know,” Evie thought outloud. “I don’t even think Raquel’s even met Jose’s parents and they’ve been going out for over a year.”

“Well, I’d keep her hidden.” Alejandra smirked. She had just outlined her thin lips with a dark pink pencil. She then tucked her lips together and rubbed them in front of Dee Dee’s large oval bedroom mirror. “Jose’s too good for her. I don’t know why he’s so into her.”

Evie suddenly felt awkward. *Why* did she say that about Raquel? She didn't want to start capping on her in front of the Sangros. She and Raquel were, still in a way, friends.

"I know what he sees in her," Charlene started. "Or should I say, what he *feels* in her."

Alejandra laughed.

"That's cold," Evie frowned. What was this anyway? *Mean Girls, Mexicana Style?*

"No, it's not," Alejandra applied more lipstick. "It's warm. At least mine is. Very, very warm."

"Ay," Natalia laughed. "*Que mala!*"

"Ally," Fabby looked at Alejandra. "We don't wanna hear about your purple taco."

"How do *you* know it's purple?"

"Well," Fabby said. "It sure ain't virgin white."

*More laughter.*

"Ay," Dee Dee was actually coughing and tried to catch her breath. "You guys are so bad SPANISH!"

The Sangro *were* bad, Evie thought, but not in the same amusing way that Dee Dee had thought. Last night all the girls had seemed so fun and funny and she felt like she was a part of their group. Now, in the morning, in the daylight, their discussion of THIS AND THAT made her feel out of the loop.

"So, Evie," Dee Dee's caught her breath. She had a tone that suggested she had

something else on her mind. . “Have you thought about a touch up?”

Evie looked down at her exposed toes. She was hoping no one had noticed. The chips of blue paint from last night were now specks. God, what had she left floating in Dee Dee’s pool? “Yeah, I guess I am in need of a paint job. “

“No,” Natalia laughed when she saw Evie looking at her feet. “She means your hair.”

“My hair?” Evie touched the side her head as she looked at herself in Dee Dee’s mirror. Her hair had been blue for a few weeks and she had a good amount of black roots showing, but with all the Raquel and Flojo drama she hadn’t really thought about her appearance. She turned her head to one side. “I hadn’t really noticed.”

“Well, it’s *very* noticeable,” Alejandra looked at her through the mirror. “How about not just a touch up but something completely cool and *en la moda*?”

“*En la moda*?” Evie asked. She didn’t like the sound of that. “I can tell you right off I am *not* getting braid extensions.”

“No,” Alejandra said. “We’re are not talking those cheap trenzas that turistas get in Acapulco.” She fluffed the top of Evie’s hair. “But what if you went with a different color, right, Dela?”

“Like *what*?” Evie became more suspicious.

“Some highlights?” Dee Dee offered cheerfully.

“No.” Evie pulled her head away from both Alejandra and Dee Dee. “No way,” At Villanueva, highlights were the bona fide mark of a Sangro. It was one thing getting to know the Sangros, accepting the Sangros, but to look like one of them. No way. She had her own style, her own fashion sense, besides, Raquel would have a fit and really never

speak to Evie again. "I'm *not* going blonde. You gotta be kidding."

"Not really blonde," Dee Dee assured her. "We could dye your hair back to brown, a light brown, and then give you some highlights, just like a half crown, and overall, it would look -- "

"Blonde," Evie said matter of factly.

"But not just blonde," Alejandra tried to persuade her. "Like those bland *blanquitas* at the Pacific View mall, but **mas exciting**. You're a surfer, right? Don't you want to be blonde?"

"Like blonde supposedly defines a surfer?" Evie said. "Alejandra, OG wave riders were brunettes. Besides, blonde stands for everything Raquel and I --"

"Who?" Dee Dee interrupted.

"No one. Just me," Evie finished. "Blonde stands for everything *I'm* against."

"Oh?" Dee Dee raised an eyebrow and crossed her arms. "And blue stands for everything you are *for*?"

Just then, Graciela tapped at the side of Dee Dee's bedroom doorway. "Dela," she asked. "***Estas ocupadas?***"

"No, *ama*," Dee Dee called out. "*Entre*."

Graciela walked in. She was dressed in a narrow dark skirt and sweater with three quarter sleeves. A short strand of pearls completed her very polished look. Evie wondered where she was off to in the middle of the **afternoon** dress like that.

"***Hola, Senora de LaFuente***," Alejandra moved away from the mirror. She gave Graciela a quick peck on the cheek. It was obvious that she had been spending time at

Dee Dee's and had gotten to know Graciela better than Evie. "How was the museum opening?"

"Nice."

"Nothing like the openings in DF, huh?" Alejandra said as looked at her pearls. "I love your necklace. SPANISH"

"Gracias, mi'ja," Graciela fondled her short strand and smiled at Alejandra. She looked around the room. "Are you girls having fun? SPANISH"

"Oh, si," Fabby answered for everyone. "Lots of fun. Thanks for having us over."

"Si, anytime. It's nice to see Dee Dee happy, with her friends," Graciela then looked at Dee Dee. "I'm leaving on errands, mi'ja. *Necesitas algos?*"

*Errands?* Evie was surprised as she looked at Graciela. When her own mother ran errands she wore a simple sweat suit and T shirt. Granted, it was a Juicy Couture suit and an 80 dollar Ann Klein T-shirt, but still

"Are you going to Longs?" Dee Dee asked.

"Longs?" Graciela opened her black leather handbag and shuffled things in it.

"What do you need from Longs?"

Dee Dee nonchalantly patted her stomach. "Oh, just a First Response? You know, un pregnancy kit."

"*Mande?!*" Graciela looked up from her handbag, her eyes and mouth stretched wide in horror.

"Ha!" Dee Dee laughed. "Just messing, Gracie!"

"Ay," Graciela playfully slapped Dee Dee's arm. "*Que mala!*"

The whole room giggled. Evie couldn't quite believe that Dee Dee talked that way

with Graciela. She used to be playful with Margaret, her mother, but Graciela didn't seem the type to take such jokes lightly.

"No," Dee Dee threw her arm around Graciela's shoulders. "We just need hair color. She looked at Evie defiantly. "Right, Evie?"

"Dela..." Evie started.

"Come on, Evie," Alejandra joined in. "You'll look great...*un taco de ojo!*"

"A taco de *what?*"

"Ay," Graciela clicked her tongue and looked over Evie's scrappy blue mop.

"*Porque, no?*"

"See," Dee Dee chimed. "Gracie knows. She used to work in television and knew all the top stylists and hair dressers, right, Gracie?"

"*Graciela,*" she corrected Dee Dee as if she's had to a million times before.

"You are *not* coloring my hair," Evie said as if she had to correct Dee Dee a million times.

"Yeah," Dee Dee said. "I guess Raquel wouldn't like it."

"It has nothing to do with Raquel," Evie insisted. "This is *my* hair."

"Okay, okay," Dee Dee didn't sound convinced. "I'll drop it. Never mind '*ama,*'" she told Graciela. "We don't need anything."

As Graciela left the room, Dee Dee looked Evie over one more time. "I really wish you'd rethink it, Evie."

"Well, I won't, thank you," Evie was adamant. She joined Charlene on the carpet and started to go through Dee Dee's supply of nail polish. The least she could do is cover up her tacky toes. Dee Dee had dozens of bottles, at least eight of them were a different

shade of pink. Evie finally decided on the lightest shade, cleverly labeled, Lightest Pink.

Dee Dee walked over Evie and Charlene and reached down under her bed. "Hey, I have something for you."

"For me?" Evie looked up.

"Yeah."

"Dela, you ain't gonna bribe me."

"No, SILLY (SPANISH)"- Dee Dee said. "I was gonna give this to you next month, for your birthday, but I want you to have it now." She pulled out a small flat package.

"Hey," Fabby looked at the gift. "What about me?" She teased. "I'm the one with the birthday next week."

"Oooh," Evie eyed the package. "Seriously, I can open it now?"

"Yeah," Dee Dee handed it to her. "You know it's not like you haven't been blonde before."

"Huh?" Evie was confused.

The Sangros huddled around Evie as she started to unwrap the foil paper. The gift was a picture frame. Another picture of Dee Dee and Rocio? But when Evie flipped it over, she saw it was a color photo of Dee Dee and her, when they were young girls.

"Is that you?" Natalia asked.

Evie immediately covered her mouth. "Oh my God!" She laughed. "This is so funny. I totally remember this day!"

The photo was of her and Dee Dee, both nine year olds in costume for the Marina Park Beauty Contest. Just about every girl, including the two of them, dressed as the

Coppertone Girl. They all sported blonde wigs, pulled into pigtails and tied with blue ribbons. Dee Dee and Evie each wore a two-piece blue bathing suit and one of the girls, Evie remembered, even had a little stuffed toy animal, a small black dog, attached to the back of her bathing bottoms to reveal a “tan line”.

“I still don’t understand why we didn’t win.” Dee Dee smirked as she looked at the picture. “I mean, our tans were for real and they gave first place to a *gabacha!*”

Evie laughed and continue to look at the photo. She actually looked cute in the blonde wig. She looked at Dee Dee who had gone back to her bed and started in on doing Evie’s homework. Dee Dee *was* really a good friend, she thought. A very good friend. She then looked at her own hair in Dee Dee’s mirror. Blonde? *Nah*. Then she looked at herself again. Oh, what’s a few highlights really gonna do anyway? They could be done to look natural, as if she had spent a few days at the beach. They might even look cool. Raquel would *freak*, that’s for sure.

Besides, Evie thought, wasn’t it every girl’s dream to be a taco de ojo?

11

The next morning, Monday, when Evie got up from her bed and went to the bathroom, she startled herself in her mirror. She had forgotten about what she had committed the night before. She had messed with her flojo mojo. Her hair was now blonde.

She groggily leaned over the bathroom sink and squinted. Oh, God, was that CKaro (NEED EXAMPLE WITH SHORT HAIR) squinting back at her? What had she let herself get talked into? She was... *blonde*.

“Aaah,” Alejandra had raved when Dee Dee and Charlene were finalizing the blown dried touches on Evie’s hair the night before. “I wish I done my *pele* this shade. Que cool!”

But now, the morning after, neither Dee Dee, Charlene or Alejandra was around to **fluff** her hair or ego. Evie looked herself over and wondered if she truly looked *que cool*. She tilted her head from side to side and grimaced. Never mind Sangro stripes, she was blonde, all blonde, one hundred percent Honey Blonde *chica*. Maybe it was too early in the morning and too early in the process to embrace such change? Either way, she couldn’t help, in the back of her mind, wonder what Raquel would think.

When Evie came out of her bathroom, she could hear that Monday morning life had started as usual for the Gomez household. *El Mercadito* was on the kitchen radio and she could hear her mother downstairs, talking to Lindsay. This was going to be her mother’s first chance to see Evie. Last night, after Dee Dee had dropped her off at home, she went straight to her room. **Thankfully her mother and father were catching up on their TiVo** in the den. But that was last night, what would her mother say this morning?

“Well,” she yawned as she pulled up some draw string pants, her silver **Havaianas** and headed down to the kitchen. “Here goes **nada**.”

Lindsay, pulling a bolillo out from the toaster oven, was the first to see Evie. “Evelina!”

“Hey, Linds,” Evie tried to sound confident as she could as took over one of the stools at the counter. **DETAIL ABOUT THE KITCHEN**

Evie’s mother was still in her pool robe, her hair wet from her morning swim. She looked over at Evie. “Evie!”

Here it comes -- the Gomez *furioso*. SPANISH.

But to Evie's surprise, her mother's initial shock was not followed with criticism.

She moved from the coffee maker and smiled curiously at Evie. "When did you fix your hair?"

"Oh," Evie timidly played with the sides with her fingertips. "Last night at Dee Dee's." Then quickly added. "It was her idea."

"I like it." Her mother sipped coffee from an oversized mug she held with both hands. "Dee Dee did it? I'm impressed."

Which were the golden words? Evie wondered. 'Dee Dee did it' or "It was Dee Dee's idea?" She would definitely make a note of that. *But Dee Dee thought it would okay to take your Saab to Tijuana, so we could go night clubbing, and then when we met those men, they were just so nice that we decided to share a hotel room with them*

"You know," Evie's mother smoothed her own damp hair. "I used to be blonde."

"I remember Dad saying something like that." Evie yawned again. "I don't think I've seen any pictures of you with blonde hair."

"Evie," Her mother tapped under Evie's chin. "Cover your mouth when you yawn." She went on. "It was during my Teena Marie phase, just for a short time. God, maybe I should go back to blonde. What do you think, Linds?" She looked at her reflection from the kitchen cupboard's glass door

"Oh, si, Senora," Lindsay agreed as she brought Evie a small glass of orange juice. "You would look even *mas linda*."

Evie threw Lindsay a look. *God, can you be anymore mas falsa?/habladora hipicritora?*

But Lindsay just innocently smiled back. Apparently she could be.

With her mother's enthusiastic nod of approval, Evie felt even more unsure about her new hair color. The last you wanted was your own mother lifting your style. What if her mother *did* dye her hair blonde? What was next? Entry to the Mother and Daughter Look Alike Contest at the County Fair?

As Evie went through her closet in search of clothes to showcase her new look, she couldn't help, in the back of her mind, wonder what the other Flojos would think of her hair, especially Raquel. At Villanueva, Evie's always been known as her little shadow or, as of late, the freaky Flojo with the blue hair. Still, what better day than a Monday to introduce individualism/liberation, right? After all, she wasn't bland blonde, blanquita blonde, like the girls at the Pacific View mall, or just blonde blonde like Dee Dee and the Sangros, she was *Honey Blonde*.

Alex was the first Flojo to see Evie. She and Dee Dee walked up behind him while he was at his locker and Dee Dee covered his eyes with her hands.

"Can you guess what's behind Door Number One?" she laughed in his ear.

"Hey..." Alex slowly turned around.

Dee Dee uncovered his eyes and Alex paused for a moment when he looked at Evie. His face crinkled in disapproval. "What did you do to your hair?"

*Not* the reaction she had hoped for.

"*Que quapa, no?*" Dee Dee put one hand on her hip like a game show model and used the other to display Evie, as if she was a brand new Chrysler up for grabs.

“I dunno,” Alex continued to look Evie over. “But if that was the look you were trying for.”

*Trying for?* As if Evie was attempting to do something but didn’t quite accomplish it?

“It *was* the look I was trying for,” Evie snapped. “And the one I achieved.”

“Don’t trip, Eves.” Alex frowned. “Dee Dee just asked me a question.”

“And I just gave you an answer,” Evie was embarrassed, but didn’t want to show it.

“What’s up with all the changes?” Alex looked at Evie’s ears. Sure, she had last minute thrown on some hoop earrings, borrowed from her mother, but they weren’t *that* big.

“You know, Alex, you can be so dense,” Evie found herself saying. What, am I supposed to look the same every day? Every year?” Evie linked arms with Dee Dee.

“Come on Dela. He’s obviously not *en la moda*.”

Dee Dee giggled. “Sorry you don’t approve, Alejandro.” She tapped the left side of his head. “But call us if you ever wanna do something with that crazy cow lick.”

Evie vowed to herself that Alex’s opinion wasn’t going to ruin her morning, but, in reality, it did. His comments clung to her as she walked to first period. Why was she ~~was~~ so concerned about what *he* thought? What did he know about fashion or style? She never saw *Cargo* floating around in his truck. Him, in the same ol’ rubber flojos he’s worn since last year. His feet must surely stink awful.

“Oh, what do we have here?” Mr. McDaniel-Galvan, Evie’s Spanish II teacher, smiled widely as she entered class. “I almost didn’t recognize you. *Very* nice.”

“Oh, yeah,” Evie suddenly *felt on the spot*. Was she now truly a *taco de ojo* and he was suddenly hungry? *Not* the kind of attention she was thinking of. Mr. Galvan was, like, fifty years old. That’s one hundred in teenage years. “I went under the bottle,” she joked.

“En espanol?” he asked.

“Uh, *me dormí con mi botella*.”

A couple of students, two football players Evie knew only by the number of their jersey that they *always* wore, entered the class. They both overheard Evie and laughed.

“Dude,” Number 48 informed her. “You said, ‘I slept with my bottle.’”

“What, your *baby* bottle?” Number 9 quipped after him.

“Maybe her *beer* bottle,” Number 48 added.

“Yeah, her 40 ounce!” Number 9 laughed at his own joke.

*What*, Evie wondered, *were they the jock version of Mondo and Jose?*

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” Mr. Galvan directed both Numbers to their desks. “Just take your seats so we can start class.” He turned back to Evie. “Actually, you wouldn’t have a direct translation. You would say, “I colored my hair.”

“Right.” Evie nodded. “I colored my hair.”

“No,” Mr. Galva *smiled*. “*En espanol, por favor*.”

Evie repeated it slowly in Spanish. “*Me pinté el cabeza*.”

“Well,” Mr. Galvan sighed. “You’re *getting* there. You know, for a moment I thought you were your friend.”

“My friend?”

“Si, Dela de LaFuente.”

So much for liberated individualism, Evie thought as she took her seat.

After 4<sup>th</sup> period, Evie was finally free from so much time worrying about her hair and Alex’s fashion backward opinion of it. She welcomed lunch time and headed toward the cafeteria to meet up with Dee Dee and the Sangros for lunch. She hadn’t seen Raquel all morning, and for her, that was a good thing. The last think she wanted was another negative comments from another Flojo.

As she walked by the Boys PE building she was a bit startled by a long, slow whistle, coming from behind her. She turned around and was surprised to find Jose and Mondo.

It seemed like forever since any of them had exchanged words.

But there they were now, just the three of them in front of the boy’s gym.

“Hey, look at you,” Mondo half smiled as he pulled up his shades for a better look.

“Oh, hey,” Evie answered timidly. Was Raquel around? She didn’t know if she was ready she was to face her just yet.

“Nice hair,” Mondo admiration continued. “Very Cameron.”

“Alright...” Mondo was never this nice and looked far from Cameron Diaz. She waited for a cutting remark, Mondo style. “Go ahead and say it.”

“No, I mean it.” He got closer and looked her over like he’s never looked her over before. “You look hot.”

Hot? Ew, what was Paris Hilton?

“Oh, thanks,” was all Evie could say. She looked around. Raquel wasn’t anywhere near.

Jose came up on the other side and stretched his arm out against the wall, blocking her path. She was caught between the two, Mondo behind her and Jose in the front. Just a slight snug. As Flojos they’ve shared tight spaces together, in the front seat of Mondo’s car, the mosh pit of the last KaKooey show at the Fairgrounds, but this was definitely different. The energy was, well, felt too frisky for friendship.

“So,” Jose lowered his head and moved closer into Evie. “Have you found out?”

“Found out what?” Evie asked. Jeez, was he trying sniff her?

“If blondes have more fun?”

“Jose, stop it!” She pushed his arm away. “Quit being stupid.” She wanted to sound tough, but deep down she felt awkward. What had she told Dee Dee? To just ignore him? “So,” Evie looked down the hall. “Where’s Raquel?” What she meant to convey was: where is your girlfriend?

“Dunno,” Jose shrugged his shoulders casually. “My hip ain’t tied to hers.”

“No, but your dick is,” Mondo quipped.

Evie let out an unexpected chuckle.

“Hey,” Jose looked at Evie. “At least I’m not the one dumping my best friend for some Sangro slut.”

“Dee Dee’s not a slut.” Evie snapped. “Is that what you think or is that what Raquel programmed you to think?”

But before he could answer, Raquel was already coming towards all three of

them.

“Hey, Jose!” she called out. “I’ve been *waiting* at the tree. Where have—” She didn’t recognize Evie at first, Raquel’s mouth was wide open in disbelief.

“You have *got* to be kidding!” She came up to Jose and nudged him in the ribs. “Can you believe this?” She looked over Evie’s hair. “What are you? Some Pseudo Sangro now?”

“Yeah,” Jose half smiled. “We were just saying that.”

*Actually, Evie thought, you were not “just saying” that.*

“Oh, *my* God, Evie,” Raquel went on. “You have *totally* lost it. Totally.” She actually circled Evie. “Who do you think you are trying to be?”

“I’m not trying to be anyone,” Evie brushed back the sides of her hair. “I just changed the color. It’s no big deal, Raquel.” (Evie tried to stand up to her but it was something she definitely needed more practice with.)

“What, was this Dee Dee’s idea?” Raquel asked.

“No, not at all,” Evie answered.

“Yeah, I’m sure it was. **She’s always had you wrapped around her little finger. Even when we were kids.**”

Evie was getting pissed off. Raquel was having a field day in front of Mondo and Jose, again, at her expense.

“I think she looks hot,” Mondo squinted his eyes and caressed his chin. He continued looking at Evie. (“I definitely approve.”)

“Hot?” Raquel questioned.

“What, you jealous, Rocky?” (Mondo asked.) “Maybe you should think about

lightening up. In more ways than one.”

“Oh, shut up.” Raquel pushed her hands into Mondo’s chest. “Come on, Jose.” She put her arm around his waist. “There ain’t nothing to see here.”

And with her hand tucked in the back pocket of Jose’s cords Raquel led Jose from Evie and Mondo followed. But as they walked away, Jose looked back and over his shoulder he winked at Evie. This caught her off guard. Was it just more flirtation? Morse code to signal that he was still her friend? Either way, Evie couldn’t help but feel a bit triumphant. She finally had a little something over Raquel.

\* \* \*

By the time Evie reached the Sangro table, the heaviness of the confrontation with Raquel had slightly lifted, thanks to the enthusiasm thrust upon her by Alejandra and the other Sangros.

“Ay!” Alejandra twirled Evie around in Salsa inspired dance move, that almost made her stumble. Twirls did not come easy for Evie in flip flops and Alejandra noticed, as well. “Now we just have to do something about your chanclas!”

Evie looked down at her flojos and pursed her lips. Hmmm, not likely any time soon. Her flojos identified her more than anything. Blonde hair was one thing, but her beloved flojos? That would be like asking asking Dorothy to give up her red slippers.

“No,” Alejandra had a look in her eyes as though a light bulb had just been clicked on. “I know.” She looked at the other Sangros and Dee Dee with a mischievous expression on her face. We have to celebrate. “To initiate her, big time.”

“Basilio?” Natalia smiled.

“*Basilio.*” Alejandra affirmed.

Alejandra looked at Evie. “Do *not* make any plans this Friday, chica. **We are going to have some fun SPANISH..** I’ll see Basilio today after school and plan everything.”

**The week went well for Evie. Actually, very well.** The overall reponse she got for her hair was positive **MORE**

By Friday night, she had her Weekender bag packed and was all ready for, as Alejandra had said, “**fun**” **SPANISH.** The build up of Basilio was overwhelming Who was he and how was he connected to Evie celebrating a new hair color? Dee Dee knew nothing of him. Or maybe she was just keeping hush hush? Was Basilio, Evie feared, some back waxed male stripper? Were the Sangros planning a little dorm party and Basilio was gonna pop out of some cake shaped pinate cake and gyrate a g-string around to Reggaton? *Ew.*

Dee Dee, of course, was running late that evening and, of course, it bothered Evie. It was now *Evie’s* big night and here, Dee Dee didn’t even have the decency to be on time.

Evie paced around her bedroom, stopping only to brush and re-brush her hair in front of her closet mirrors. Thank God it **was growing** since that fateful night with the Ginghar scissors. **It now almost reached her shoulders.**

Her cell rang and she went over to pull it out from her bag.

*Yeah, yeah, Dee Dee, I know. You are running late.*

But it was Alex.

“Hey, you wanna head out to Sea Street tomorrow?” he asked. “It would just be you and me.”

“Oh, *tomorrow?*” Evie looked over at her longboard in the corner of her room. She had owned it a full four months and still had yet to even take it out of the house. “I can’t.”

“We don’t have to do DP,” Alex suggested. “We can go later in the day. I actually gotta help my dad in the afternoon.”

Evie hesitated. Alejandra had said to keep Friday night and most of Saturday afternoon free. She didn’t want to bail early and let all the girls down. She was the guest of honor. Besides, she was very intrigued to meet this Basilio. Maybe he was a surfer, too?

“Mmm,” Evie clicked her tongue. “I really can’t, Alex. I’m busy. Sorry.”

“So,” Alex started. “I thought you wanted to surf.”

“I do.”

“But every time I ask you, you can never go, or you don’t wanna go. What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Evie looked at herself in her closet mirrors. “Nothing’s going on and I do wanna surf. It’s just, it’s not a priority right now”

“Oh,” Alex’s enthusiasm dropped a notch. “Not a priority. O-kay.”

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

“Nothing.” Alex said. “I’m just agreeing with you. You know Evie. Surfing takes

a lot discipline. It's a lot of work. It's not like you are gonna have one lesson and be shooting the tube."

*Shooting the what?*

Evie could tell he was annoyed. What was he not understanding? She continued to look at herself in her closet mirrors. She *did* look good. "You know what, Alex?"

"What?" he asked.

"Can you call me by my proper name? From now on?"

"Your *proper* name?" Evie could sense a smirk forming on Alex's face.

"Yes," Evie said curtly. "Evelina."

Alex got quiet on the other end.

"Alex," she asked. "You still there?"

"Yeah," he let out an exasperated sigh. "I'm still here. O-kay, Evelina. I'll talk to you *later*."

And he hung up before Evie could even say good bye.

Evie looked at her phone What the hell was that about?. He hung up on her? She flipped her phone shut and looked at herself again in the mirrors. Why was he PMSing all of a sudden? God, didn't he know that sand and sea water were a lethal combo for chemically treated hair?

E-vie!" Her mother called from downstairs, announcing that Dee Dee had finally arrived.

Evie didn't want to give Alex's guilt tripping another thought. She tossed her cell back in her bag, slipped on her Havaianas and grabbed her Weekender to meet Dee Dee

downstairs.

“Hola, Vicki,” Dee Dee hugged Evie’s mother as she entered the Gomezes’ foyer.

Dee Dee looked up at Evie who was coming down the stairs. “Ay, lo siento, Evelina!

Rocio kept me on the phone and I couldn’t switch over to my cell—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Evie stopped her before she could go on.

“How are you, *mi ja?*” Evie’s mother kissed Dee Dee’s cheek and rubbed her arm. “Evie tells me you’re doing just great at school.”

“*Mom,*” Evie tilted her head in annoyance. “She wants to be called Dela. I’ve told you that.”

“Oh,” Her mother cringed, embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Dela.”

“It’s no big deal, not with you anyway, Vicki.” Dee Dee put her arm around Evie.

“But, yes. Evie’s been a big help at school and I’ve already made a ton of new friends, *otras chicas* from Mexico, too.”

“Oh, how wonderful.” Evie’s mother smiled. “Is that who you’re watching videos with tonight?”

“Uh huh,” Dee Dee said. “But it’s gonna be an early night, because we all have to study tomorrow. Plus, they live on campus and they have to be back at school by 9pm.”

“Oh, of course.” Evie’s mother looked completely charmed. Good girls who study and have an early curfew -- what mother wouldn’t want friends like that for her daughter?

“Is Raquel also going?”

“Oh, definitely,” Dee Dee said quickly. “Right Evie?”

“Uh,” Evie was taken by surprise. “Yeah.”

“And Gracie’s gonna order in from California Pizza Chicken,” Dee Dee added.

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“It’s no big deal, not with you anyway, Vicki.” Dee Dee put her arm around Evie. “But, *yes.* Evie’s been a big help at school and I’ve already made a ton of new friends, *otras chicas* from Mexico, too.”

“Oh, how wonderful.” Evie’s mother smiled. “Is that who you’re watching videos with tonight?”

“Uh huh,” Dee Dee said. “But it’s gonna be an early night, because we all have to study tomorrow. Plus, they live on campus and they have to be back at school by 9pm.”

“Oh, of course.” Evie’s mother looked completely charmed. Good girls who study and have an early curfew -- what mother wouldn’t want friends like that for her daughter?

“Is Raquel also going?”

“Oh, definitely,” Dee Dee said quickly. “Right Evie?”

“Uh,” Evie was taken by surprise. “Yeah.”

“And Gracie’s gonna order in from California Pizza Chicken,” Dee Dee added.

“Now *that* sounds like a nice night,” Vicki Gomez looked tremendously pleased.

As Evie and Dee Dee left the house and got into the Beetle, Evie turned to Dee Dee.

“Why did you tell my mom that Raquel was coming?” Evie asked.

“Oh, that was just to throw her off,” Dee Dee lit up a cigarette, before starting up her car. “Don’t you want her thinking that everything is all good and regular, like the old days?”

“I guess,” Evie felt weird. It was one thing for her to lie to her mother, but sorta painful to hear someone else do *so*, especially Dee Dee. “So, are we going to the Alejandra’s dorm? Are we gonna hang out there?”

“You’ll see.” Dee Dee started to pull out of the Gomez’s drive way. “Didn’t you hear Ally? Weren’t you paying attention? She wants to celebrate, something special.”

“Which is?”

“*Calmate*.” Dee Dee smiled slyly as she drove onto Camino del Rio. “You gotta learn to be patient.”

Dee Dee’s Beetle was soon on Ventura Road, the main highway leading into sleepy town of Oheigh, but as they got near Villanueva, Dee drove right by it.

“Wait, where are we going?” Evie looked over her shoulder as they passed by their school. With the orange sunset dissolving behind the red tiled roofs, their school looked inviting, almost desirable. “I thought we were staying at Alejandra’s dorm?”

“Evie....” Dee Dee glanced over at her as she turned off Ventura and drove onto a

residential road. "You are naïve as your mother."

The residential road was lined with Eucalyptus trees, and large painted stones to mark the addresses of the single story ranch style homes. Evie knew the road. It led right to the Ojai Valley Inn, her mother's favorite place to get, as she said, her "skin and soul rejuvenated." Before Evie knew it, Dee Dee stopped her Beetle in front of the Inn.

"Why are we stopping here?" Evie looked up toward the Inn's main entrance.

"Because," Dee Dee said, "We're staying here."

"We're staying *here*?"

"Yup," Dee Dee **smiled** as she got her shoulder bag from the back seat.

The Ojai Valley Inn was one of the ritziest hotels and spas in the whole county, maybe the whole state. Presidents, dignitaries from all over the world have stayed at the Inn. It was supposedly the hideaway for the infamous secret rendezvous between (), which of course killed his marriage, but skyrocketed her career.

A bona fide looking Ken doll came up to Dee Dee's car. "Good evening, ladies," he greeted on cue. "Welcome to the Ojai Valley Inn. He gave Dee Dee a ticket and took the keys to her Beetle. "Will you be needing any help with your luggage?"

"Oh, no," Dee Dee told him. "We're still waiting for more in our party."

"Dee Dee" Evie **felt** like an **adolescent** eyesore with her Weekender and Havaianas among all the adult Vuitton and Prada. "This place," she looked around, "is for high rollers."

"Yeah, it *is* pricey," Dee Dee agreed casually. "Specially the Presidential Suite."

"The *Presidential* Suite?"

"Yeah, it's over **three** grand."

“*What?*” Evie balked. “How do you know that?”

“Because that’s where we are staying.”

“Wait, who’s paying for this?”

But Evie soon got her answer.

“*Hola, chicas!*” Alejandra came up to both of them. She was with the other Sangros and kissed Dee Dee and Evie on their cheeks. “We just got here, *tambien.*”

“Yeah,” Natalia said. “Basilio went to get another golf cart for us.”

“Golf cart?” Evie laughed. “What, *we gonna do a ten hole* or something?”

But no one paid attention to the *supposed* guest of honor.

“Oh, there he is!” Alejandra looked over the parked Jaguars and Lexxuses and called out. “*Hola Basilio! Que onda, chulo?*”

*Chulo?*

Basilio was an old man. Make that, a very old man. Small, wrinkled, and missing a row of front teeth as well as a row of acrylic hair from the obvious piece he wore on his head. He pulled up in a beige golf cart, the same color of his uniform. He was followed by another cart, driven by another man, seemingly in his early thirties and with, seemingly, all his own teeth and hair.

“*Bueno, bueno,*” Basilio rubbed his hands together in excited nervousness as he stepped out of the cart.

“You have the room for us?” Alejandra asked.

“*Si, si,*” He wiped his forehead and looked over at the blonde team of valet parkers. “*Pero,* we can’t have any problems. Not like last time.”

“Now, Basilio,” Alejandra gave him a sideways glance and put her arm around

him. His perspiring face came up to her breasts. “What have I told you? That was *not* my fault and I told you my father would pay for it and didn’t he? Didn’t he pay for the entire hot tub?”

“*Si, si*, I know. *Pero, mis jefes*,” He looked over again at the main entrance of the Inn. “I can’t have any problems.”

“Oh, Basilio,” Alejandra smoothed the few strands of his hair that lay across his furrowed brow and looked right at him. “Am I a trouble maker? Do I cause problems? Should ~~we all~~ just go home now?”

Basilio looked alarmed. “Ay, no. No, Alejandra. Here, follow me. I have your room ready.”

“El Suite Presidente?” Alejandra asked.

“*Si*,” he nodded. *Claro*.”

Basilio got in his golf cart and Alejandra and Natalia and Fabby got in with him.

“Come on,” Charlene said to Dee Dee and Evie, as she got on the second cart.

Both carts putted slowly down the narrow strip of asphalt, the private employee’s road. They passed Suenos, the main restaurant, one of the Inn’s Olympic sized swimming pools, the tennis courts and the Inn’s renowned Chumash Indian sweat house. They finally reached the last building, separate from the rest of the Inn. It was a two story, Hacienda style bungalow, painted off white with green shutters on the outside of every window.

“Oh,” Dee Dee opened her mouth in awe. “It is so cute! Oh my god, *Como Guanajato!*”

“Yeah,” Natalia boasted. “It *may* look all cute on the outside, but inside it’s *laid down*.”

## EVIES THOUGHTS

Basilio got off of his golf cart and walked up brick stairs to the suite. All the girls followed.

“*Mira*,” Basilio handed Alejandra a set of plastic cards. “Here are the keys. Two extra for your sisters.” He looked over at Fabby and Charlene.

“Oh, you are a doll,” Alejandra cooed. “Too sweet for words SPANISH. Oye, mi’jo, one last thing...”

“Si?” Basilio asked.

“This time, can you make *sure* you keep the buckets of champagne coming? Last time we had to wait.”

“Oh, si. Claro.”

“And a late check out,” Charlene added as she took one of the cards and let herself in the suite. “We don’t wanna be rushed out of here tomorrow.”

As soon as Basilio left, Alejandra immediately took charge of the luxurious multi room suite. It was done up in presidential colors, that’s if the president was a Native American from a Californian tribe. Hand woven Indian blankets, textiles hung on the walls and deep red pottery accented rooms that were painted in Colbalt Blue and earthy beige tones. Alejandra pulled the cord of the overhead fan and drew back the heavy plush drapes of the main french doors, that let out unto a private terrace, incased with blooming dark red bougeanvilla.

“Ooh,” Evie stepped out to the terrace behind Alejandra. Below them was a spectacular view of rural Ojai Valley and above, a blanket of twinkling stars spread out

across the jet black sky.

How did you get this amazing hook up?" Evie asked.

But Alejandra didn't answer. She inhaled deeply and stretched her arms out. "I might just sleep out here," ~~Como naturaleza!~~ SPANISH. "Does anyone ~~want~~ to sleep out here with me?"

"Not me," Fabby flopped herself and her overnight back on one of the overstuffed white mini sofas. "I'm gonna sleep in the meditation loft."

"If anything," Natalia said. "Evelina should sleep up there."

"Up where?" Evie walked back into the main suite.

"There," Natalia pointed to an alcove, above the living room. A native American ladder, the kind used in kivas, led up to the private sleeping area. There were a dozen or so candles ready to be lit and pillows, the color of California poppies, were carefully arranged to convey that carelessly arranged look. It looked wonderfully calm and relaxing.

Fabby picked up the cordless phone. "I'm order order an in-room massage," She grabbed the service list off the glass coffee table. "With a Pixie Tangerine body scrub. Does anyone else want one?"

"We're already in October," Natalia went behind a mahogany wood bar and opened up the fully stocked liquor cabinet. She pulled out a bottle of Makers Mark and opened it as if it was all routine. "They won't have Pixie Tangerine."

"So, what will they have?" Fabby looked over the in room service list.

"Melon Pumpkin," Alejandra came in from the terrace. She answered as having one to know all the Inn's information had become tiresome. "Hey," she looked at Evie

and Dee Dee. “Do you guys wanna see the master bathroom? It’s got a sunken bath tub and a snail shell shower that you won’t believe.”

“Wait, wait, ” Evie was feeling overwhelmed. “How did you get all this ? With Basilio?”

“Yeah,” Dee Dee admitted. “I’m curious as well.”

“Oh,” Alejandra gave a deceptive grin. “*That*. Let’s just say, I’ve got my ways...”

“No,” Evie pressed. “Really.”

“You *really* wanna know?” Alejandra asked.

“Yes,” Evie insisted. “I *think* I wanna know. We’re not doing anything illegal, are we?”

“Illegal?” Alejandra looked at Evie. “Not *really*. Basilio’s been working here for years. He’s the head building and maintance supervisor. He can, at anytime, say that a room is being worked on and that it’s off limits for a while. No ones’ gonna check up on him, really.”

“But that’s not all,” Natalia started, “Alejandra has just led poor Basilio to believe that she is the one and only favorite niece of the one and only favorite sister of the one and only *Vicente*.”

“And” Charlene continued, “If dear Basilio ever, ever, needed anything, anything all all, Alejandra would do everything she possibly could to get it for him.”

“Vicente?” Evie had to think for a moment. “As in Fox? The *President* of Mexico?”

“What,” Dee Dee covered her mouth and laughed. “You gonna get dual

citizenship for him and his whole family?"

"No, tontas." Alejandra laughed. "Vicente *Fernandez*, the king of rancheras!"

"Ally!" Dee Dee cried. "You told him you were related to Vicente Fernandez?"

"Your horrible!"

"Yeah," Alejandra fell back into an Italian leather love seat, pleased with herself.

"At Vicente's, or should I say, *Uncle Vicente's*, next concierto at El Estadio Azteca, Front row, center seats and backstage passes are Basilio's.

"That's if," Dee Dee reminded Alejandra. "You actually *knew* Vicente Fernandez."

"Hey, what can I say?" Alejandra took an apple from the overfilled fruit bowl and took a large bite. She tossed the remaining apple back in the bowl. "Is it my fault that his line was busy everytime I called?"

"You are so bad," Evie shook her head.

"It works all the time," Alejandra said matter of factly. "Yeah, you know how it is. We all like to feel like we are one big happy *familia mexicana!*"

She got up and opened the suite's doors. She looked down the stairs and across the courtyard. "Where the fuck is that slow ass Basilio?" She complained to no one in particular. "I want the champagne already."

\* \* \*

Fortunately, for Evie, nobody had Vicente Fernandez on their iPod. "Uncle

Vicente's" ranchera music made Evie sad. Not in the "Ay, que triste my forlorn heart" kind of sad, but sad knowing when his music took over the Gomez household it meant that Lindsay was in a sad mood and she cleaned a lot slower. A lot slower. Which of course, upset Evie's mother. Not in the "our slow ass housekeeper" kind of way, but rather, "Ay, poor Lindsay. She misses her family in Mexicio. We should help her." Which meant Evie had to give up her weekend to pitch in and clean their two story house. Que sad, all right.

After Charlene and Fabby got their in-room, three hundred dollar authentic Chumash mud body wrap and facial, the night began to wind down.

Evie drank champagne on the couch, her body feeling tingly and refreshed from her own pumpkin melon body facial. Her mother claimed that a visit to the Inn's spa made her feel years younger. Evie wondered, should she be feeling nine or ten years old?

Natalia opened her metalillic gold fanny pack and all the girls gathered in a semi circle around her as if they all knew what was to come next.

"All-right," Fabby smiled as she eyed Natalia's bag. "You saw Mondo?"

Evie looked over. Did she hear right?

"Your friend, Mondo, has the best mota, no?" Alejandra asked Evie as she pulled out rolling papers.

"Mondo?" Evie asked. She did hear right. "You got this from Mondo?"

"Yeah," Charlene looked at Evie as though she was crazy. "Everybody does."

Evie wondered if Raquel knew that Mondo dealt dope with the Sangros. Well, she guessed, business is business, and dealers don't discriminate.

Dee Dee looked up at the clock above the **gigantic rock** fireplace. "Go ahead, start

without me.” She got up and went to one of the bedroom to get her bag. She pulled out her cell phone and stood in the doorway, checking for messages.

“Dela,” Alejandra looked after her. “Que rude! You are here, *with us*. Aren’t you going to party?”

“Yeah, it’s just, you know I talk to Rocio every Friday,” Dee Dee stood away from the group, listening at her messages. “And I don’t want to miss his call.”

“Dee Dee,” Alejandra started to roll herself a joint. “You gotta get yourself a side kick.

“Why?” Dee Dee scrunched her forehead. “I like my phone.”

“No, a *side kick*,” Alejandra said. “*Un sancho*. This “Dude en D.F.” is seco already.”

“But I love Rocio,” Dee Dee said a rehearsed tone. She continued to listen to her messages. “Is it my fault that he is so far away?”

“It’s nobody’s fault,” Fabby agreed. “But come on, be realistic.”

“It’s not about love, Dela,” Natalia agreed. “You don’t think he’s getting action back there while you’re out here?”

“What?” Dee was horrified at the thought.

“Pu-leeze,” Alejandra rolled her eyes.

Dee Dee looked around the suite, then up at the loft. “Evie, do you mind if I go up to the mediation loft? I think I should call him.”

“Oh, brother!” SPANISH Alejandra rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, sure,” Evie took a sip from her champagne. “I don’t care. Just move my bags and stuff to the side.”

“You are losing it, chica.” Alejandra told Dee Dee as she took a puff from her joint.

Dee Dee ignored her and climbed up the kiva ladder into the loft. Soon she was out of sight, but you could hear the multi-digits of a long distance number quickly being punched.

Fabby took a hit off of Alejandra’s joint. “That chica needs some help,” she told Evie.

“Yeah,” Natalia said. “She’s letting herself getting carried away.”

“Rule Number One, Evie,” Alejandra looked at Evie. Her eyes were already small, squinty and red from her first hit. “Do not get carried away over some boy.”

“Rule Number Two,” Fabby said. “Get it where you can. Anywhere you can.”

“Uh,” Evie wasn’t sure what “it” meant. “Get what?”

Alejandra tilted her head. “Evie, you know. *It*.”

“Oh, right,” Evie took another sip of her champagne. What exactly was *it*?

“You know, Evie,” Natalia leaned over and put her arm around Evie. “I really, really love your hair.”

“Oh, thanks. Me too.”

“No, really. You are a really, really pretty girl.” Alejandra’s words got muddled and soothing. “Right?” She looked at the other girls.

“Oh, claro que si” practically in a slo-mo chorus.

Evie took another sip of her champagne and suddenly felt so incredibly happy.

There was no other place she would rather be in the world, than in the Presidential Suite, with her wonderful, wonderful new friends. She looked around the room. They had

“Hey, sorry, I couldn’t call you back,” He said when he came by her locker. “I went out to Santa Rosa with my dad.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” Evie lied. He didn’t have cell coverage in Santa Rosa? Wasn’t that the point of having a cell phone? You can call anyone, from anywhere?

“Yeah,” Alex seemed nervous, like he had to explain more. “My cell line was shakey. I don’t know what’s up with my phone lately. I gotta get it checked out.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Eve shut her locker. “So, thanks for the text messages, the other night,” She started. Why was *she* the one to bring it up? “They were sweet.”

“Sweet?” Alex smiled uncomfortably. His neck turned a light pink. “Sweet, in what way?”

“I mean,” Evie stumbled over her words. “Just nice.”

*Why* did she feel so awkward? He was still “just Alex,” right? And why was he just looking at her, waiting? Say something, already!

So,” Alex had started slowly. “What are you doing tonight? You wanna hang out?”

“Hang out?” Evie asked. What exactly did that mean? “Hang out?” Hangin out pre-sexy texty meant to simply “hang out,” but now, *post sexy texty*, did hanging out mean a date?

“Yeah, I can hang out,” Evie said. Then she suddenly remembered. “Oh, wait. It’s Fabby’s birthday. I can’t.” She gripped her backpack tightly. “Uh, do you wanna come with? It’s gonna be at La Pantera Negra. I sorta have to go.”

“Nah,” Alex said. “I mean, no offense, she’s nice and everything, but those girls, I don’t know, they ain’t my tribe. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I guess.” *Tribe?* And what tribe did the Flojos belong to? They Who Do Nada Nation?

“Besides,” Alex said. “I’m gonna do DP tomorrow. I gotta get to bed early.”

Evie waited a bit. Wasn’t he going to ask her to go? But Alex didn’t. Maybe he was already losing interest in her?

Later that evening, Alex text messaged her.

Hve fun 2 nite

Evie: Thx.

Whre r u?

She waited and waited for him to text something back. But he didn’t. She finally closed her phone. That was it? Have fun tonight? No ‘sleep sweet?’ No ‘I wish I could see you tomorrow?’ What had happened between her and Alex?

Evie had to get Alex out of her mind. She decided the best thing she could do was to just and concentrate on Fabby’s birthday party. She went over Dee Dee’s to get ready.

“Clip or no clips?” she asked Dee Dee, as they elbowed each other for mirror space in Dee Dee’s bathroom.

“Either,” Dee Dee didn’t even look over at her.

Evie held up two different barrettes. “Velvet or rhinestone?”

“Neither.”

“You’re a lot of help.” Evie sarcastically complained as she tossed the barrettes back in Dee Dee’ rattan bin. “I thought short hair was easier.

“Beauty is never easy,” Dee Dee sighed as she looked over her profile and sucked in her stomach. She had removed her navel ring for the evening and clasped a thin gold belly belt around her waist. She had also put on her blue contacts. Something, Evie noticed, that Dee Dee did only for special occasions.

As soon as Evie figured out what to do with her hair, (more Garnier surf paste, no clips) she had a new problem to tackle. She sat on top of the toilet seat and looked down at the silver two inch sandals that Dee Dee strongly suggested she wear. They were already clenching into the sides of her feet.

“I still don’t know about these,” Evie referred to the borrowed slinky slinks. “Don’t you think they’re a bit too much?”

“Of course they are!” Dee Dee agreed as she sprayed more Curious in the air and walked through it. “Remember when were kids? You always talked about wanting to wear your sister’s heels all the time. I don’t understand what the problem is now.”

“The problem is I think they *are* my sister’s heels.” Evie crossed one foot over her thigh and inspected the semi spike heel. “You don’t think they’re a little dated?”

“*Dated?*” Dee Dee was surprised. “Evie, they’re retro. I got them in L.A. You of all people should know that. Besides, and don’t take this wrong, but have you ever thought of dressing up a bit more? I mean, you look **so pretty** with your new hair and, I don’t know, I’d think you’d want to spice it up a bit.”

“Spice it up? What am I? A buffalo wing?”

Dee Dee threw her an exasperated look. “Never mind. Wear what you feel comfortable in.” She held a cord up to the front of her neck and turned her back toward Evie. “Here, can you help me with this?”

Evie stood up and clasped the black silk cord around Dee Dee's neck.

Dee Dee then turned around to show the pendant off to Evie. "Cute, huh?"

But when Evie looked, she saw that it was no mere pendant. It was small shell. A small iridescent abalone shell, just like the one Alex had found at Bard Beach. Did Alex give Dee Dee the shell he found back at Bard Beach? **Evie's heart dropped.** How could he have given *her* shell to Dee Dee? What *was* going on between them?

"What's wrong?" Dee Dee held the pendant out and looked down at it. "You don't like it?"

"Oh, no," Evie looked away. She wasn't about to admit jealousy and she definitely couldn't go into feelings she hadn't even sorted out yet. "It's just these sandals," She brought her foot up. "They really hurt and I don't wanna get blisters. I think I'm gonna change back into my flojos."

"Evie, *no.*" Dee Dee looked down at Evie's feet. "They look so sexy on you. Here," she opened up the bathroom cabinet and pulled out some Band-Aids. "I'll bring supplies, just in case."

As Evie wobbled what seemed the long journey from Dee Dee's bedroom to her car in the driveway, she still couldn't take her mind off the necklace. When Alex had found the shell at Bard beach, he had promised, *promised* to "polish it up real good" for Evie and, at the time, she thought it was a sweet gesture. **She didn't even wear necklaces, but now, more than anything she wanted to be the one wearing something from Alex. How, how could he have given the shell to Dee Dee? This was going to be a long night...**

Negra. I even fantasized about someday having my wedding reception there. Que chiste, huh?"

Evie said nothing. She just wanted the night to be over with as soon as possible. As she followed Dee Dee to the back area, she pulled out her cell phone. No new message from Alex.

The lounge of La Pantera was already packed with people but Evie and Dee immediately found Fabby at the head of a long banquet table. She was surrounded by all the Sangros, some other friends Evie didn't recognize, and a mountain of wrapped gifts. Everyone was dressed to the nuevas, silky camisoles and short skirts on the girls, sport coats and polo shirts for the guys. The air had a mixture of cologne and perfume. Well, it was called Mexico City, and city people *did* dress up. Maybe it was a good thing that Evie wore the slinky slinks.

"Feliz Cumpleanos," Evie kissed Fabby on the cheek.

"Thank you, chica!" Fabby seemed high from all the attention. She wore a pearl studded tiara, a smashed purple bow was taped to the side of her head and her face was covered in red and pink lipstick kissy marks. "You know I'm having my real birthday party in Mexico. A big bash at my parent's ranch, near Lake Chapala!"

"Oh, really?" Evie smiled.

"Yeah, we're all flying back for the three day weekend. You should come!"

"When?" Evie asked. But Fabby was pulled in another direction before she could answer.

“You want any thing to drink?” Dee Dee asked Evie. “I’m gonna go to the bar.”

“Uh,” Evie looked over at the drink menu above bar. “What do they have?” Her feet and her heart were aching. What, was she gonna drown her misery in a diet coke?

“Oh, we can get anything!” Dee Dee started swaying to **the music**. “You know how La Pantera is with their drinking policy.”

It was true. Pantera did have a lax ID check. Evie remembered, even as a kid, overhearing Sabrina talk about getting drunk at La Pantera while still a student in high school.

Dee Dee headed towards the bar without for Evie and she soon disappeared into the thick of the party. Evie suddenly found herself feeling uncomfortably alone. She looked after Dee Dee, but soon lost sight of her. Hey, wasn’t *she* the one who was going to skip out on Dee Dee?

Within a short time more **fancy dressed** people who Evie didn’t know arrived and with all their additional body heat, it soon felt as if the entire oxygen supply from La Pantera was being sucked out. Soon, everyone was fanning themselves with the plastic dinner menus and wiping their foreheads with the **thin** cream colored cocktail napkins.

Evie soon began to feel even more out of place. None of the guests made attempts to meet her and all Sangors -- Fabby, Natalia, Charlene -- appeared to be **engaged in an exclusive conversation**. Alejandra was now no where to be seen.

Evie finally saw Dee Dee again, wedged tight between two unknown revelers in a small red leather booth, laughing and looking like she was having a grand old time. Evie was about to make her way towards her when she suddenly noticed the abalone shell, dangling precariously from the thin cord around her neck. It upset Evie all over again.

She would definitely rather be alone than be with Dee Dee, that's for sure. What was that saying that Lindsay had told her? *Vale mas sola que mal a companado*? It's better to be alone than with bad company? Yeah, something like that.

Evie continued to walk around the dimly lit lounge, trying to not look *so* aimless.

"Hey, Evie!" It was Fabby calling out to her.

"Yeah?" Evie asked eagerly.

"Have some pastel!" Fabby handed her a small plate with a slice of chocolate cake on it, but didn't ask her to join her in eating the cake together. "And please," Fabby looked at her. "Try not to look *tan seriosa*. This *is* a celebration, chica!"

Evie took her slice of Fabby's birthday cake and walked away, trying hard to look less *seriosa*. She figured, as long as she looked like she was enjoying the birthday cake, she *was* part of the celebration, whether or not anyone talked to her. However, when she was finally scraping the side of her desert plate with her fork, she knew it was time to find a new focus for the evening. Fortunately, that's when she saw it - the old jukebox in the far back corner of the lounge. It looked like the same grand gaudy jukebox she remembered as a kid. A bit smaller, of course, but that's what happens when you grow up, things shrink up on you.

Evie went over to the jukebox and flipped through the choices that ranged from Los Tigres del Norte to Green Day. The old juke had been updated with CDs rather than the vinyl 45s that once slid out onto a turntable. She finally found something she wanted to hear. She put in two coins and pressed down on two separate buttons, G and 4.

"What did you pick?"

Evie looked up and found a guy looking over her shoulder. He looked down at the selections with her and she quickly glanced over at him. She didn't want to blatantly check him out. He was tall with short dark hair, dark eyes, thick eyebrows and had a small mole on the left side of his chin. Okay, maybe it was obvious she was looking him over.

“G 4.”

“Ah yes,” He smiled. “G 4. I just downloaded them.”

“No,” she laughed. “I mean Audioslave.”

He smiled wider. “What’s your name?”

“Ev...Evelina”

“Do you want anything to drink?”

“Me? Oh...”She then noticed that he was wearing a black quayabera and a pair of Ben Davis work pants. “Oh,” she laughed to herself. “I’m sorry. I totally thought you were a guest.”

“What?” The boy seemed confused.

“Yeah, can I get , um, some champagne?”

“What do you mean, you thought I was a guest?”

“Wait, what do you mean?” she asked.

“I don’t work here,” he said.

“Oh,” Evie covered her mouth. “I’m sorry, I just thought—”

“The way that I’m dressed, that I look like I work in the kitchen or something?”

“No, it’s just...” Evie felt stupid.

“What,” He said sarcastically. “I’m Too rasquache for your Chilanga taste?”

“Chilanga?” Evie frowned. “I’m not from Mexico City.”

“You could have fooled me. I guess you’re like all my cousin Fabby’s friends.”

You’re Fabby’s cousin?”

“Yeah, I’m from DF too, La Zona Rosa, but I don’t go around flaunting it like all these fools.” He looked around.

“No,” Evie started. “I mean, yeah, I totally know what you mean.” My parents, they also have money but—“”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“No, nothing.”

He looked around. “Yeah, well, need to get going anyway. See you around Evelina...”

“No, wait...”

But it was too late...He already went back into the crowd. Her eyes followed him and saw him hug Fabby tightly before heading for the front exit.

Evie felt horrible. This guy was misjudging her for misjudging him! She didn’t care how he dressed. She was alone again. Could this Sangro party get any worse?

Evie made her way back through the crowd as the slinky slinks pinched the top of her feet more. She had thought that she and Dee Dee wore the same size, but it didn’t *feel* that way. Does a size 7 Mexican narrow translate to a size 7 American wide? Yes, *wide*. That’s the problem with wearing flojos all the time. The feet, they expand mucho.

Even through the dim lighting of the lounge she could see a large blister beginning to form on her right foot. She remembered the Band-Aids that Dee Dee had brought, but now she was nowhere to be seen. Evie decided to head to the restroom

where she could at least get some toilet paper to cushion the throbbing. But on her way, when she passed by La Pantera's retro photo booth. She was surprised it was still there, in seemingly working condition. When they were kids, she and Raquel used to beg their fathers for quarters so they could take their picture in it.

### Thoughts of Raquel.

The pain on her right foot worsened and Evie bent down to loosen her sandal strap and when she did, she couldn't believe what she saw. There, on the other side of the photo booth's curtain, were two pairs of feet wearing flojos. She *knew* those flojos, one was a pair of faded suede Sanuks and the other -- brand new red Roxys. The Sanuks belonged to Jose. Evie could barely believe it. What was *he* doing at La Pantera? Anywhere, she guessed, there might be access to easy booze. She looked closer and yep, the feet were definitely Jose's. Who else had a beaver's tail tattooed on the outside his ankle? And Raquel's? Evie couldn't help but notice how uncharacteristically pale they looked.

Evie felt an immediate bond of familiarity. Jose and Raquel were her friends, really. If anything, they were outnumbered this evening and probably feeling it. After all, why were they holed up in a photo booth? Waiting to make a clear escape from the Sangro convention? After all, hadn't Jose thrown a wink to her the other day to say that everything was possibly okay, cool?

Before she could even think about it, Evie pulled the curtain open, and all, but toppled right into Jose. Damn those slinky slinks!

"Whoa, whoa, Blondie," Jose looked up in surprise. He leaned over from the

booth's stool and helped Evie up. "Someone's had a little too much to drink?"

Evie helped herself up, "No, no, I just..." She tried to recover from her embarrassment. But to her horror, she discovered that the girl enveloped around Jose was not Raquel. It was Alejandra de los Santos.

"Evie!" Alejandra exclaimed. "Ay! You scared me! Hey, take a photo with us!" She moved over from Jose's lap to allow more room.

"Yeah," Jose patted his free knee, indicating Evie should sit on it. "I'm down for a ménage trois."

Both of them looked disheveled, Alejandra's always straightened hair was tousled and the top buttons of her blouse were undone. Jose's Trunk Limited T-shirt was pulled up and out of his cords.

"Evie!" Alejandra continued to gush. "Come on, let's take a photo together!"

Evie looked behind her at the crowd. Were people oblivious that Jose and Alejandra were practically having sex in the photo booth? Didn't any of the other Sangros see that Jose, who they all knew was Raquel's boyfriend, was with Alejandra? Is this how guys were? How the Sangros were? She looked over at the booth where Dee Dee was sitting, still laughing with two strangers she had yet to introduce Evie to. Did she even notice that Evie was gone? It seemed as though everyone went after what they each wanted. Maybe it was time, she did too.

Sangro Rule number One, Don't Get Carried Away Over Some Boy and Rule Number Two, Get It Where You Can.

That was good enough for her.

Evie stepped back into the booth.

“Yeah,” Jose smiled and patted his left knee again. “Sit down and tell Santy what you want for Christmas.”

Evie positioned herself on his thigh the best she could and Alejandra took over the right side of his lap. It was a tight fit for all three of them crammed in the small, narrow booth.

Alejandra lifted her feet up to show off her flojos. “Look, look what Josito bought me! *Muy chiste, no?* And it’s not even *my* birthday!”

“Yeah, cool,” Evie ooked down at Alejandra’s feet.

“Let’s take the picture!” Alejandra pulled out her wallet from her handbag.

“Yeah,” Jose looked over at Evie. “Let’s capture the moment, right Blondie?”

“Right.” Evie smiled back at Jose. If Alex wasn’t gonna own up to his text messaging or give her the attention she deserved, well, why not have some harmless cutesy time with Jose? She tapped the Le Bret on his chin. “So, does this ever hurt?”

“Depends on how much pain your inner thighs can take.”

Evie laughed and squeezed his arm. “You are *so* bad!”

Jose winked at her. He *was* cute!

“Okay,” Alejanda was not paying attention to them. She positioned a quarter near the machine’s slot. “I gonna put the money in and then it’s gonna be fast, so get ready.”

Jose had his arm around Evie and she could feel his hand inch under her arm and closer to the outer wire of her bra. She shifted uncomfortably, just a little.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

The timer for the first photo started flashing.

“Okay,” Alejandra squealed as she tilted her head down and brushed her hair forward. “Smile, sexy like!”

The camera flash went off quickly, before Evie could even think of a pose.

“Here comes the next one!” Alejandra announced.

“Let’s do something goofy,” Evie quickly suggested.

“Yeah, let’s.” Alejandra laughed and pulled out the inside of her cheeks with her fingers.

Evie crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

“My,” Jose looked over at Evie. “What a long tongue you have, grandma.”

Evie laughed. The camera flash went off.

Alejandra pounded Jose’s shoulder and pouted. “Jose! You didn’t make a goofy face!”

“Okay, okay. ” Jose looked straight at the camera. “Now the last one I want you ladies to throw Papa a kiss, right here on each cheek.” He tilted his head up.

Alejandra put her arms around Jose and puckered up. She was getting ready for the timer, but when the camera flash went off, Jose turned his entire head towards Evie and pressed his face into hers. He slid his tongue deep into her mouth and at the same time, moved his hand higher, around her chest and rubbed his hand slowly across her breast.

Evie felt a dangerous thread shoot across her body.

“Jose!” She jerked away.

“Oh, Evie,” He leaned back into Alejandra and just laughed. “Don’t be such a prude.”

“I’m not a prude,” Evie wiped her mouth. “You’re an asshole!”

“Hey,” Alejandra pouted. “What’s going on?!” She obviously hadn’t seen exactly what Jose had just done.

Evie started to get up from the booth’s seat.

“Where you going?” Jose held on to her hand.

“Out of here,” Evie crossed her arms, covering her chest.

“What’s wrong, Evelina?” Alejandra asked. “Camera *shy*?”

“Yeah,” Evie glared at her. “*Exactly.*” She looked behind her, at the party. “I gotta go to the bathroom.”

Alejandra put her skinny arms around Jose again. “Okay, come back, yeah?”

Evie didn’t answer. She stepped out and Alejandra wasted no time with closing the booth’s curtain.

“Hey, Evie,” Jose poked his head out from the curtain.

Evie looked back. “Yeah?”

“You be a good,” He looked at her firmly. “Okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

And unfortunately, she did. She wasn’t to say anything to Raquel.

Evie left the grinding, slobbery couple to themselves and she made her way to the back exit of La Pantera. She needed fresh air and lots of it. She couldn’t believe what had just happened. She could taste the cigarette smoke from Jose’s mouth inside hers. And that Jose, with Alejandra de los Santos? How long had *that* been going on? Did Dee

Dee know about them? Did Raquel know, or even suspect? No, there was no way Raquel would put up with such crap. *No way.*

She felt so disgusted. How could she let Jose get up all over her? God, how could she do that to Raquel? To herself? She deserved a much better for her first big time kiss.

**She imagined...** She looked at her phone. Why hadn't Alex returned her text message?

Evie paced the back parking lot. It was already close to midnight and most of the **shops and taco bars** on the main drag were shutting down, giving the whole downtown a bit of a ghost town feel. Evie felt even lonelier and to be honest, a bit frightened. She wasn't used to hanging around the downtown area alone. She wanted to be home, in her bed, immediately. But how would she get back? It did cross Evie's mind to call her mother. Her mother always told Evie that if there was ever an emergency, any type of emergency, she could always call home and she would go and pick her up. No questions asked. Was this an emergency?

Evie figured it really wasn't, so she flipped open her phone and dialed 411. She was surprised to get an actual live person.

"Can you connect me with a taxi service?" she asked the operator.

Living in a three auto household and having friends with cars, Evie never had the opportunity to use a taxi in Rio Estates. The only time she used a cab was when the whole family visited Sabrina at Stanford and they all made shopping trips into San Francisco. Her mother, always overwhelmed by the one-way, vertical streets, would, to Evie's delight, spring for a taxi.

"I'm sorry," The operator didn't sound so sorry. "We can't recommend a business. You have to give us a name."

“Okay, um,” Evie thought out loud. “How about Yellow ... Yellow Checkered Cab? Service?” An obvious business sounding name. There had to be at least one listed in all of Ventura County.

“Do you have a street address?” The operator asked impatiently.

“Uh, do you have anything downtown?”

“I’m sorry, but I need an address.”

Evie clicked off. She looked at her cell. She was losing time. Should she just call her mother? She walked back in La Pantera and peered into the back lounge area. Guests were still **dancing to the horrible () and waiters** were still taking orders. The party was far from ending. She checked the time on her cell phone. It was nearly midnight. She had **thirty** minutes to get home.

She went back outside and she realized that if she wanted to get home, right away, there was only one person she could rely on and that was Alex. Yeah, he hadn’t texted her back, but he still was the reliable, trustworthy Alex.

She sped dialed his number.

“Hullo?” His voice sounded groggy when he answered. She had clearly woken him up.

“Alex, it’s me, Evelina.” Evie felt embarrassed. “I hate to bother you. But do you think you can you come get me? I’m stuck downtown, at La Pantera.”

“Evie,” his voice already sounded apologetic. Not a good sign. He was getting ready to turn her down. “I’ve already crashed. I’m doing dawn tomorrow.”

“Please?” Evie begged. “I don’t have a ride and I, I just ...”

“You just what?” he asked.

“Just please, Alex...”

“Evie,” Alex sounded more awake. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Evie’s voice started to crack.

“Okay, Evie,” Alex said quickly. “I’ll be there.”

Evie waited in the front of La Pantera for Alex and as she walked back and forth on the sidewalk, she felt even more embarrassed that she had called him. The abalone necklace issue was on the back of her mind. Why, why, why did he give it to Dee Dee?

MORE

When Alex finally pulled up, Evie got in the cab of his truck and couldn’t bear to look at him. It’s almost as though she was afraid he could read her thoughts. She felt horribly ashamed with what had just happened between her and Jose.

She flipped open her cell and looked at the time. 12:13 am.

“Alex,” she tried to focus on something else. “I only have about 15 minutes to get home.”

Alex looked over at her. “Are you kidding me? Don’t I even get a thank you?”

“Oh, right. Of course,” Couldn’t she do anything right? “Thanks, Alex. I mean it. I’ll make this up to you.” She leaned over and started to unbuckle the slinky slinks off her feet

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her.

“No, really,” Evie promised. “Let me take you out or something. Like the Coastal Creamery or something.”

Alex frowned. “What would I get at the Coastal Creamery? You know I’m lactose

intolerant.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right.” Evie looked out the window. *Tonta!*

**HOW HIS CAR WAS** Evie really didn’t know what else to say. Alex was playing Dios Malos, just about Evie’s favorite band. She could smell the hint of soap on Alex . Evie turned her head away from Alex and closed her eyes. Between the harmony of () and the aroma of (), she felt ().

Alex yawned as soon as they were at a red light at the intersection. “So, what’s this all about?”

“It’s just been a bad night.” Evie didn’t turn to look at him, but rather rested her head on the passenger window. She felt reluctant to mention how scandalous the whole night was, especially the part about Jose. God, Evie suddenly thought. **What if Jose tells Alex what he did to her in the photo booth? What if he tells Alex that she wanted it? That would suck, big time.**

“That’s *all?*” Alex’s truck continued to idle at the red light. “First you cancel on me, twice, you don’t answer my texts and then you drag me out of bed ‘cause you’re having a bad night?”

“No, it’s just…” Evie trailed off. “Wait, what texts?”

“I send you two text messages tonight. You never replied.”

“What? Alex, I didn’t get any messages.” She pulled out her phone from her bag and checked her text history. “No,” she told him. “Nothing.”

“Well, I sent them.”

“What did they say? She asked.

“Nothing.” The light turned green and Alex shifted into drive. “It doesn’t matter

now.”

“Alex,” Evie looked out his truck’s window. “I’m having a really tough time here. It’s like I just don’t know who my friends are any more.”

Alex was quiet for a long time before he spoke up. “Maybe they don’t know who you are.”

“What is that suppose to mean?”

“I dunno, Evie. You tell me.”

“I have *no* idea what you are talking about.”

“Okay, well, first you try to be a badass,” Alex started. “With your blue hair and everything, then you hook up with Dee Dee and Alejandra and that crew and then you try to be like them.”

“I’m not trying to be like them!”

“Oh, really?” He looked at her sandals and then at her hair. “You could have fooled me.”

X Fooled him? What, was she trying to be fooling everyone tonight?

“Alex,” she pulled on the side of her blonde hair. “*This* was *my* decision.”

“It would be cool if it really was, but I don’t think it was. Like I’ve said before, I don’t care what you do with your hair, but I don’t get it. You’re smart and one of the coolest girls I know and I don’t know why you are letting everyone lead you around.”

Evie sat back in her seat and crossed her arms. Why was Alex lecturing her? Who gave him the authority to issue reality checks? Look what he did with the abalone shell he had promised to give her. Yeah, nice friend. She looked out the window and could feel her eyes begin to well up. Do not cry. Do. Not. Cry

“I mean, when’s the last time you’ve even hung out at Sea Street?” Alex continued. “Let alone learn to surf? Have you even tried out the new board I helped you picked out? You were going on and on how you wanted to surf and I took all this time to help you pick out –“

“Oh, sorry if I wasted your time, *Alex*. ”

“No, it’s not that. I’m just saying I spent the time helping you because I was actually looking forward to doing something with someone ~~with~~ you.” He shook his head. “Maybe you need to take a long good hard look at herself in the mirror.”

“I need to take a good look at myself? What about you, *Alex*?”

“Me? *Evie*, just remember who is driving you home. Just remember who *you* woke up in the middle of the night and who *you* called to get up and come out and drive *you* home. I really like you *Evie*, but sometimes you can be so self absorbed.”

“Self absorbed? You know what, *Alex*?” She unsnapped her seat belt. “Don’t do me any favors.” She motioned to an El Pollo Loco up ahead on the boulevard. “Just drop me off ~~here~~.”

“Oh, *Evie*, come on. I’m not gonna leave you here. Don’t be silly.”

“No, I mean it.” *Evie* was near a breaking point. “I don’t need a fucking lift from you. You call yourself a friend? Giving things you promise to me to someone else!”

“What?” *Alex* looked confused. “What are you talking about.”

~~X~~She couldn’t even start about the abalone necklace.

“*Alex*! Let me out...*now!*” *Evie* yelled.

“*Evie*,” *Alex* was perplexed. “Come on...”

“*Alex!*” She yelled louder. “Let me out!”

“Okay, okay,” He finally slowed down and pulled into the parking lot. “Have it your way.”

He parked his truck and looked around the lot. The interior lights were on in Pollo Loco, but the eating area looked vacant. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“Like you really care.” She grabbed ~~the~~ sandals and slammed the car door.

Alex let his truck idle a bit as he waited for Evie to change her mind and get back into his car, but she didn't. She stormed, barefoot and all, to the other side of building to get out of his sight.

But when Evie got to the side entrance, she discovered that Pollo Loco was closed. Only its Twenty-four hour drive thru service was open, as a lone cook indicated to her from the kitchen and by that time, Alex had already driven away. *Crap*. She sat grimly on the concrete curb near the dark, ~~unattended~~ order window. **MORE HORRIBLE**

“Scuse me,” a voice crackled over the loud speaker. “But this is for car drive through only.”

Evie whipped around and glared at the attendant. “I *know!*”

She looked down at her feet and saw that she had at least three throbbing blisters, large, pink **and full of liquid**. How could this night have gone so wrong? Why does it seem, lately, that every night goes badly?

She flipped open her phone. The time was 12:23 am. She would never make home in time for her curfew. She punched in her home phone number.

“Mom,” she said as soon as the other end picked up. “Can you come get me?”

The next morning Evie still couldn't shake off her funk from the night before. She brushed her teeth and gargled with mouthwash as soon as she got home, all to get the residue of Jose out of her mouth. Her eyes were swollen from an entire night of crying and she wondered if her parents, whose room was just down the hall, had heard her. She was exhausted.

It was all a blur after she got out of Alex's truck. Her mother had picked her up at El Pollo Loco and, thankfully, stuck to her promise of "No Questions Asked." She didn't even point out that it was almost 1 am by the time she picked up Evie. Evie hoped the "No Questions Asked" rule applied the morning after. God, it would be just like her mother to start ragging on her first thing in the morning after such a horrendous night.

Evie's cell vibrated.

*Alex?*

But she saw it was Dee Dee. Evie looked at her cell. None of this -- her getting attacked by Jose, her yelling at Alex -- would have happened if Dee Dee hadn't bailed on her last night. And Evie wouldn't have even wanted to be bailed on by Dee Dee if Dee Dee hadn't accepted the shell necklace from Alex. It looked like all the blame fell back on Dee Dee. Raquel was right. Dee Dee was definitely not the sweet girl they used to know and trust.

She let her cell go unanswered, but seconds later it started vibrating again. She knew once Dee Dee's phone was on redial, she would not give up. Evie finally flipped her phone open.

“Hey, chica.” Dee Dee was munching on something firm and crispy. Pita Chips? Chicharrones? Dee Dee was crazy about pork rinds as a kid. “Que paso? You just took off last night without saying goodbye. I was so worried.”

So worried? How could she even eat when she was supposedly “so worried?” It annoyed Evie even more.

“I told Natalia I was leaving,” Evie lied. “I had to get home before my curfew and I didn’t wanna bug you. She didn’t tell you?”

“Nuh uh.”

“Well, to be honest,” Evie started. “I didn’t even know where you were. You sorta just took off as soon as we got to the party.”

“What?” Dee Dee asked between chomping. “No, I (chomp, crunch!) was there. I was just talking to some friends of Fabby’s, from San Diego. Evie, I’m sorry. You’re (chomp, crunch!) not mad are you?”

“No, no really.” And she wasn’t, really. She was more upset about what happened between her and Jose.

Hey, so what’s up with Alejandra (Doesn’t) she have a boyfriend?”

“Alejandra?” Dee Dee asked. “She has a lot of boyfriends. Why?”

“Nothing...”

“What? Is there something I’m missing?”

“No,” Evie said. “I was just wondering.”

“So anyways,” the chomping continued as Dee Dee switched gears. “I’m calling about tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes, *tonight*. The Dia de los Muertos dance.”

Evie groaned. “Dee Dee, I am **dead**.”

“Good, then you’ll fit right in at the dance,” Dee Dee insisted.

“No, I mean, I’m way tired. I think I’m **call in granny** and stay home.”

“*What?*” Dee Dee finally stopped her **annoying** eating. “Evie, you promised. I have the costumes and everything. Graciela even made adjustments and took the Frida skirt in just to fit you. Alejandro flaked on me and now you?”

“Alex isn’t going?” Of course, it didn’t surprise Evie, but she wondered how soon he had talked to Dee Dee.

“No,” Dee Dee said. “So you have to come!”

“Oh,” Evie put her fist to her forehead. “Lemme think about it.” But that was another lie. She just wanted to get off the phone. There was no way she was going to a dance. She had too many issues to deal with and besides, her feet and eyes were swollen to the **size of Goodyear blimps**. They wouldn’t be back to regular size by that evening.

But Dee Dee didn’t give up. “Why don’t I come over now and we can --”

“Dee Dee,” Evie interrupted. “My phone is about to die.” This was, fortunately, true. Evie could see the low battery warning flash.

“Then call me from the land line,” Dee Dee suggested.

“I can’t. My dad’s on,” Lie number two. “With business.”

“Argh! You make things so difficult.” Dee Dee went back to chomping. “Okay, call me back as *soon* as your phone is on. We are *not* done (chomp, crunch!) discussing this.”

When Evie hung up, she thought her head was going to explode. Dee Dee, Alex. ...and worse, Jose. She turned to her side and petted Meho, but even his affectionate purring didn't make her feel better. She couldn't believe she let herself get so out of control in front of Alex. What was worse? Yelling at Alex or making out with Jose? Well, they didn't technically make out, but she *did* have his tongue in her mouth. Evie curled up tighter on her side. How did that even happen? Why did she even go into the photo booth? Why was she *even* at the party? How would she even begin to tell Raquel that she was in a photo booth with both Alejandra and Jose?

Evie definitely owed it to Raquel to tell her about what happened between her and Jose. She leaned over and grabbed her cordless. She started to punch Raquel's number. It seemed strange. Had it been that long since she had called Raquel? Unlike her cell, her cordless didn't have Raquel's number on speed dial and Evie actually had to pause and remember the digits. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity of rings, Raquel answered

"What?" It was clear Raquel had Caller ID for both lines.

"Hey," Evie instantly regretted dialing her number. "It's me."

"Yeah, I know," Raquel said. "What do you want?"

Evie took a deep breath. "So, I went out last night,"

"Did you call to share that with me?"

"No, I'm trying to say that I went out last night and I..." Evie suddenly got to a point where she didn't want to continue but knew she had to. "...I saw Jose."

**Raquel was silent.**

"Raquel," Evie's left leg was twitching like crazy. "I don't wanna be the bearer of

bad news, but you gotta listen. Jose was with Alejandra.”

“Alejandra who?” Raquel’s harsh tone dropped slightly

“De los Santos. They were at La Pantera Negra, in the photo booth.”

Raquel let out a long drawn out sigh. “God, Evie, is this what it has come to? You making up stories just to get back at me?”

“Back at you? Why would I wanna get back at you? You’re the one who’s been mean to me.”

“*Me?* Evie, I have loyalty to my friends. Dee Dee was a bitch to me from day one. And what do you do? Nothing. Not the next day at your mother’s brunch and then you show up Monday at school with her? What the hell is that?”

“Raquel,” Evie started. “Yeah, I agree. Dee Dee was a bitch that first night, but really, she’s been our friend since we were kids and everything just started off wrong. I mean, listen to me.”

“You know what? I don’t have to listen to you and you know what? *I* was with Jose last night.”

“What, when?” Evie asked.

“It doesn’t even matter.”

“But that doesn’t make sense, Evie said. “I *saw* him, last night. I talked to him and he was all grabby, even to me. Raquel, he is *so* not cool.”

“He was grabbing at *you?*” Raquel laughed sarcastically. “Exactly what do you have that her could grab at? You know what, Evie. I got another call.”

“Wait, Raquel.” “Bye, Evie.”

And with that, Raquel hung up on her.

Evie was stunned. She was too shocked to even get upset. Raquel didn't believe her. She thought she was lying! How could she think that? Raquel was acting as if Evie was an entirely different person. She looked over at herself in the closet mirrors. Maybe she really needed to take a good look at herself?

The phone rang again, startling Evie. She quickly picked it up, but it wasn't Raquel phoning back, as she had hoped.

"Evelina?" The voice on the other end asked.

"Oh. Hi." Evie was taken off guard. It was her sister, Sabrina

"*Oh. Hi,*" Sabrina mimicked Evie's disappointed tone. "Sorry to let you down."

"No, I just thought you were someone else."

Sabrina sighed. "Yeah, this morning, I wish I was someone else." She sighed again. This time heavier. "Did mom tell you I called?"

"Uh, yeah," Evie suddenly felt badly. Her sister sounded uncharacteristically down. "I've just been busy. Did you know that Dee Dee is back? Did mom mention that?"

"Yeah, she did. That must be nice for you. So, is she around?"

"Who?"

"*Mom.*" Sabrina said.

"Oh, sorry. Um, I don't know. I just woke up. Let me check." Evie held the phone to her side and called out. Sure enough her mother was outside, on the deck. She waited until her mother picked up the cordless and just as Evie was hanging up, she could hear

her mother soothe<sup>X</sup> on the other end, “Ay, what’s the problem, mi’ja?” Her mother cooed softly. “What’s wrong, precious?”

After she hung up the upstairs line, Evie could still hear, through her opened bedroom window, the compassion in her mother’s voice from the deck outside. Her mother and Sabrina talked for a long time. Evie wondered ~~was~~ was wrong. Why hadn’t her sister just told her? Finally, after what sounded like her mother was finally off the phone, Evie went outside to join her on the deck.

“How’s Sabrina?” Evie slid onto a canvas chair. The fabric was warm and felt nice on the back of her legs.

“Oh, she’s not doing too good.” Her mother was gluing plastic yellow daises to a terra cotta planter that she had painted orange. It had been her latest interest, buying inexpensive pots from Green Thumb, painting them in bold, vivid colors and then lining the rim with plastic do-dads from Michael’s Arts and Crafts. If she only knew of the grand planters Graciela had in her home, her mother would die from shame.

“What happened?” Evie hoped her sister wasn’t sick or anything.

“She just had a break up. Remember Robert?”

“Nuh uh.” Her sister went on about so many guys that Evie had lost count.

“She had been dating him for the last year,” her mother said.

The last *year*? How could Evie’s sister have been hanging out with someone for a whole year and Evie not even know? God, was Alex right? Was she that self-absorbed?

“Anyway,” her mother continued. “He broke up with her and Sabrina’s pretty upset about it. She’s coming home next weekend.”

“She’s coming home?” This was really unlike her sister who claimed to be so involved with so many projects and school activities that she could never leave the Bay Area.

“Yeah,” Her mother looked at her. “But how are you doing this morning, Evelina. Feeling any better?”

“I’m okay,” Evie picked at her toe polish. She wasn’t ready to have her mother’s attention all on her. “But Sabrina’s all pretty and popular,” she said matter of factly. “She’ll be over him soon enough. And what’s the use? Boyfriends cheat on you anyway.”

“Evie,” her mother frowned. “How could can you be so callous? She just lost a really good friend.”

“I thought you said he was her boyfriend.”

“A boyfriend is a friend.”

“No, a friend is a friend,” she asserted. “I’m not gonna be making out with my friends.”

“Evie, there’s more to a romantic relationship than just ‘making out’.”

Oh, no. Her mother wasn’t gonna start talking about her own relationship with her father was she? *Eyeew.*

“Okay,” Evie said abruptly. “Is that today’s paper?” She looked at the newspaper her mother had spread out on the patio table. “I wanna look up movie times.”

Her mother looked at her for a moment. “No, it’s yesterday’s.”

Evie knew it was rude to cut her mother off like that.. Why couldn’t she just talk to her mother like Sabrina? Or how Dee Dee did? Was she bad with talking to people?

“So,” Evie tried slowly. “Were you and dad friends before you started dating?”

*Please, just the facts. No details.*

“Oh, yeah,” her mother replied. Evie watched her measure out the plastic daises, making sure each one had a similar distance between each other round the rim of the planter “We were very good friends.”

“Yeah,” Evie started. “It seems like all my so called good friends are mad at me or vice a versa.”

“Why?” Her mother asked. “What happened?”

Before she knew it Evie was telling her mother all that had been going on for the since Dee Dee had returned back to Rio Estates. Her own version, of course. **She left out all the references of liquor, pot, the Ojai Valley Inn, the four letter words and topless Sangros.**

“...And then, last night,” Evie continued, not taking a breath. “I was just with Alex last night. I mean, at first I was with Dee Dee. Remember we were going to the birthday party? But then Dee Dee really did something uncool and then I saw Jose, at the birthday party, with another girl and he’s supposed to be all loyal to Raquel and everything and then he tries to be cute with me and then I got all mad at Alex and ...I dunno. You know what I mean?”

“I think so,” Evie’s mother looked like her head was spinning. TMI? “So why did you get upset with Alex?”

“He made a promise to me and he broke it.”

“Did he have a good reason for breaking it?”

“I dunno,” Evie said.

“He didn’t explain?” Her mother seemed confused.

“I never asked him, but he never said anything. He sorta doesn’t know that I know that her broke his promise. I’m not talking to him.”

“Evie,” her mother started. “That’s the first thing about being a good friend. Communication. Only a coward hides behind a veil of silence. You have to give someone a chance to explain. Besides, sometimes we put our friends on pedestals and we expect so much from them. We have to remember that they’re just people. We have to allow them space to make mistakes.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Evie felt sorta foolish. Had she been too harsh on some of her friends?

“But I know you’ll figure this out. You’re smart that way. That’s something you’re good at, questioning people and their actions.”

“Good at?” Evie never thought she was so “good at” something. At least, something her parents recognized

“Yes,” her mother said. “You’re a bit more of a fighter, I wish I was.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, I’ve just had so many arguments with your your tias and my sisters,” her mother said as she dipped her paintbrush in crimson red paint. “They would have all lasted so much longer if one of us hadn’t had the courage to take the first step. Like just like last weekend I had an argument with your Aunt Connie.”

“And you apologized?” Evie asked. “You took the first step?”

“Uh, not yet.” Her mother looked sheepish and went to gluing the plastic daises on the planter. “But who do you think I’m making this for?”

\* \* \*

Evie was surprised by the talk she had with her mother. It was one of the best discussions they'd ever had in a long time. In a way, she felt she had taken a chance, if only with her mother, to communicate.

She got to thinking about Alex. It took the threat of Dee Dee just to make her realize how important he was to her.

Evie felt panicky. She did not want to lose Alex. She had to call him. What had she done lately, but only push him away, over and over again. And he was someone who was really important to her.

She grabbed her cell, but then stopped. Oh, God, what would she say? So many times they talked on the phone, in his truck, during lunch near Juniper's tree, but now she wanted to make sure she said the absolute right thing.

Finally she just did it. She sped dialed his number, but unfortunately her call immediately went to voice mail.

*"Hey, you've reached Alex. You know what to do at the sound of the beep."*

Evie's confidence flailed. She hoped he really was at Sea Street and not just ignoring her call. Should she just hang up or leave a message? She hung up.

*Coward.*

She called him again.

His line was busy. Most likely his voice mail processing her hang up? Argh! She waited a few seconds and redialed.

“Uh, hi Alex it’s me,” she started as soon as she heard the beep. “Uh, I guess I didn’t know what to do at the sound of the beep, he, he.” *Stupid!* “Anyway, that was me who just called a second ago. *Stupid, again!. Of course, he would know it was her. She had only programmed her number in his cell herself.* “Um I’m sorry about last night. Really, that I woke you up and everything. It was so nice of you to pick me up”.

Nice? Guys don’t like to be called nice. What should she have said? That was so muscular and strong of you to pick me up? “Well, anyway, I’m just calling because I’m sorry about last night. *Duh! She already said that!* “And I’m hoping you’ll call me back and I --.” Beep.

She was cut off! Too much and too long. Should she call again?

No, she didn’t wanna come off as a stalker. She’d just have to wait until he called her back.

Sigh. She went over to her bedroom bookshelf and got **her yearbook** from last year. She looked up Alex’s photo. He *was* cute, she concluded. Not that she ever thought he was ugly. Then she went to the back cover and found what he’d written.

*To the coolest girl I know,*

*Looking forward to getting to know you better this summer!*

He thought she was cool! How had she over looked that? And he had even said that again last night.

God, Evie thought, Alex *would* make for a really great boyfriend, but now he wasn’t even talking to her.

The cordless rang back. *Yes!* She picked it up, right away.

But it was Dee Dee.

“Hey,” Dee Dee asked. “Is your dad finished on the phone?”

“Yeah,” Evie felt defeated. “He’s all done.” It was no use hiding, or even getting a temporary break, from her. **Dee Dee was on a roll.**

“Good. Okay, now about tonight...”

And before Evie knew it, she agreed to go to the Day of the Dead Dance. Maybe her mother was right and she shouldn’t be putting people on pedestals. She had to give people room to make mistakes. But for all Evie knew, it wasn’t worth it, fighting with Dee Dee. Besides, she was running out of friends. If anything, it would be better just to get out of the house, rather than sulk around. She could ask Dee Dee about the shell necklace because that’s what you had to with friends -- talk things out. That’s what true friendship was all about – **communication and a hand painted terra cotta planter.**

14

Later that night **(when)** Evie walked in the Villanueva’s gym with Dee Dee, **(she)** was blown away by all the elaborate decorations for the dance. It was a sensory overload of multicolored **papeles picados**, sugar skulls and burning incense and bright orange cempazulti (Correct Evie pronunciation: marigolds) were scattered about the floor.

“Wow, **I am impressed.**” Dee Dee looked the gym over. “Look,” she nudged Evie. “They even have an altar. A bit rasquache, but still.”

The make shift altar was below ~~the~~ gym’s scoreboard and made up from a few cafeteria tables, two on the bottom and one on top and draped in dark velour fabric.

Dozens of votive candles were lit and placed about with black and white photos, colored photo cubes, bowls of dry food, plates with cooked food were also on the altar -- everything from Spagetti-Os to Greek domas. There was even an old fishing pole layed out across everything. They were the favorite foods and things a departed one used to enjoy.

Evie had brought a few things to place on the altar. A minature Dalmatian figurine, in honor of her great grandpa Rudy, who was once a fire captain in Rio Estates, and for her great grandma, Conchita, a piece of pan dulce from her father's bakery. *Not* the fat free kind, of course. Great grandma Conchita wouldn't be merely rolling over in her grave at such a thing, she'd be doing double twisted rotating backflips.

Evie wondered if Dee Dee had brought anything to offer for her mother. Since she's been back to Rio Estates, neither she or Dee Dee had brought up the subject of her mother's death. Maybe, Evie figured, it was just something Dee Dee didn't want to talk about. She knows she sure wouldn't and so she decided to push it with Dee Dee.

Evie looked around the gym and sighed to herself. She knew Alex was going to be a no-show, but she was still hoping to hear from him. Hadn't he gotten her message? She pulled her cell out of the little black velvet purse Dee Dee had loaned her (from NAME OF NOVELA) and checked her cell phone. Is this how Dee Dee felt? Waiting and waiting for Rocio to call? Is this what's like to have a boyfriend? She put the cell back in her purse and snapped it shut. *Do not check again!*

Dee Dee was right. The clothes Graciela had brought back from Mexico were incredible. Even with a lightly penciled moustache and unibrow, Evie felt festive and a bit glamorous. Her full skirt (from NOVELA!) had a hand embroidered flower motif

stitched with sequins. She wore a frilly off the shoulder blouse (NOVELA), lots of vintage glass beads around her neck (NOVELA), and a pair of small hoop gold earrings (NOVELA). Who even knows if Frida Kahlo actually dressed that way. Maybe she would, if she had her own telenovela on Telemundo.

Dee Dee's costume was slightly similar to Evie's, minus the unibrow and penciled in moustache. And while Evie's hair was pinned under a dark thick wig with two braids woven on top, Dee Dee's long blonde hair was loose and flowing. Sexy. Of course, her whole costume was tight in some parts and showy in others. Would Frida's sister actually have worn red fishnets, a push up bra and so much red lipstick? To Evie, Dee Dee looked more Can Can than Coyacan. NEED TO MENTION FRIDA'S FAMILY FROM COYACAN.

"I wonder where Alejandra is," Dee surveyed the gym. "And this great costume of hers."

Yeah," Evie said. *Where* was she? In some dark photo booth with Jose?

"Well," Dee Dee said. "Let's go get some pan de muerto."

Evie agreed. Anything was better than standing around, wondering where Alejandra was or waiting for Alex's call. She followed Dee Dee toward the refreshment table.

"You know," Evie started looked over the breads. They were all shaped (DESCRIBE DEAD BREAD). "All the pan came from my dad's bakery."

"Oh, yeah?" Dee Dee helped herself to a () She took a bite and looked over.

"Hey, check out your dad!"

“What?” Evie followed her eyes. Oh *my* God. Was that really her father? Dressed as a pirate and arranging dead bread with Ernie and Bobby from the bakery? She discreetly moved toward him.

“Dad!” Evie whispered sternly to her father. “What are *you* doing here? Dressed like that?”

“What am I doing here? What are you talking about? I always bring the pan muerto to the dance. What are you doing here? You never come to the dances.”

“Dad, *please*. When are you leaving?”

“Arg!” Her father adjusted his eye patch and drawled in a pirate voice. “Don’t you be a worry, Miss Evie. Me mates and I are just abandoning ship!”

“Dad!” Evie was horrified.

“Evie,” he was used to her melodrama. “*Calmate*. Joe called in sick and we had to get all this bread here. Plus, I thought it might be fun to get into the spirit.”

“Dad, *please*,” Evie looked around the gym in a panic. “Does anyone know you’re my dad?”

“Hi, Mr. Gomez!” Dee Dee came up from behind. Two other classmates of Evie’s, Steve Cuevas and Sammy Zoabi, looked over at Evie’s father, then at Evie.

“Well, they do now.” His eyebrows raised as though to say “Ooops!” He looked at Dee Dee. “Hey there, Dee Dee. Oh, you sure look cute. Who are you supposed to be?”

“Dad,” Evie pleaded. “It’s *not* important. *Please*.”

“Okay, okay. Jeez,” he said. “I remember the times you *wanted* me to stay at school with you. Remember that, Dee Dee? When you two started kindergarten at Rio

Real and Evie was crying and crying because she was so scared? Remember she didn't want me to leave?"

"Oh, yeah," Dee Dee puckered her lips and made an exaggerated sad face. She looked over at Evie. "*Poor Evie!*"

"Dad, stop it!" Evie checked to see if any of her classmates were hearing such gory details. "Please, just leave!"

"Okay, okay." Her father gathered his aluminum trays and finally said goodbye to the girls. Evie finally exhaled.

"You're too harsh on your dad," Dee Dee took another bite of her **NAME OF BREAD**. "I think it's cute the way he wants to help at the dance. I wish my father was more involved with stuff I was into."

"No, you don't." Evie insisted. "Trust me. Besides, it's not so much about being involved with me. Dia de los Muertos is one of his busiest times of year. He supplies all the dead bread for just about all the celebrations in the area."

"Well," Dee Dee smacked her tongue on her front teeth. "Let's see if they have some champurrado or something. No offense, but this bread's *dead*."

"I'll make *sure* I tell my dad that," Evie said sarcastically.

Dee Dee took Evie's arm and they both crossed the gym to look for champurrado "or something." That's exactly what they found, *something*.

"**Nasty**," Dee Dee made a face when she took a sip from her Styrofoam cup.

"What is this?"

"The senior class version of champurrado," Evie quipped dryly. It was more of a watery gruel of corn and chocolate.

Just then, Fabby and her date, Arnie, came up to the table. She was dressed as Marilyn Monroe and he was James Dean.

“Oh, you two look *so* cute!” Fabby cried.

“What are you, two?” Arnie looked over ~~Dee Dee~~ and Evie. “A couple of Mexican lesbians?”

“*What?*” Evie said.

“No, tonto!” Dee Dee replied, indignant. “Evie’s Frida and I’m her sister, Cristina.” Dee Dee tilted her head sideways and threw out her hip in a sexy pose. “Can’t you tell?”

“Not really,” Arnie said. “But hey, didn’t Frida hook up with her sister?”

“*No*,” Fabby slapped his arm. “Quit being stupid.”

“But I saw the movie,” Arnie protested.

“Arnie, *no*.” Fabby eyes looked upward. “Cristina slept with Frida’s *husband*, Diego Rivera. You know who *he* is, right?”

“We had a Diego, but he flaked on us.” Dee Dee was more concerned about her attempt of an accurate ~~accurate~~ portrayal rather than reviving scandalous history. “So,” she looked around the gym casually. “Have you guys seen Alejandra? She’s supposed to be Maria Felix or something like that.”

As Dee Dee talked with Fabby and Arnie, Evie looked over and was surprised to see Mondo. He walked by, not even recognizing her. The last time she had spoken to him was that day he and Jose practically cornered her by the Boys PE. X

“Hey Mondo,” Evie called out before she knew it. ~~it~~

He turned around. "Oh, hey, Evie." He looked at her and frowned. "What happened to your hair?"

"Oh," She had forgotten she was wearing a wig. "It's a wig." He was wearing a standard Trunk Ltd. T and baggy cords. "Who are you supposed to be?"

"Who am I suppose to be?" Mondo rolled his eyes. "I'm *supposed to be* making a delivery, but Jose dragged me by here and now he just took off. I gotta get to the westside."

Jose?" Evie looked around. She suddenly felt frightened. What was *he* doing at the dance? He and Raquel *never* came to school functions. Was Raquel with him?

"Yeah," Mondo looked around, annoyed. "He's around somewhere."

"So," Evie asked cautiously. "Have you talked to Alex?"

"Nah," Mondo crumpled his punch cup and tossed it on the floor. The school dance was so definitely not his scene.

"Well," Evie said. "I hope you find him."

"Who?"

"Jose."

"Oh, right." Mondo looked past Evie and his eyes lit up. "Ah, there he is. Later, Evie." She brushed by her.

Evie turned around and looked in the direction that Mondo was heading. Then she saw Jose. He was in the hallway, near the back of the gym's bleachers. Of course, he wasn't in costume, but Alejandra de los Santos, aka Mexican film star, Maria Felix, definitely was. She had on a 1940s style gown that practically molested her body. It was dark green strapless silk number that defined every curve Alejandra's sixteen year old

body could possibly have. Her 1940s vintage platforms made her even taller, and her hair was colored dark with perfectly salon styled waves. Jose had his hands clenched around her hips and his head was engrossed into the side of her head.

Evie watched Mondo talk to Jose for a moment, then leave, without Jose who went back to sucking the life out of Alejandra's face.

"How long has that been going on?" Evie nudged Dee Dee and looked toward Jose and Alejandra. Fabby and Arnie had danced away into the crowd.

Dee Dee looked over. "What, them talking?"

It was true. Jose had just pulled away and it now looked like they were just merely having a conversation.

"No, them being together."

"What are you talking about?" Dee Dee bobbed her head to the DJ Buick's mix and picked at her dead bread. "Alejandra has a boyfriend, actually two of them in Mexico. You know that. They're just talking."

"Dela," Evie said. "Are you blind? No, look, watch them."

"Evie, I'm not gonna watch them all night, hoping to catch them doing something. But look at her dress," Dee Dee sniffed. "It's not all that SPANISH. I don't see what the big deal was. Gracie has a lot more better things. Oops," She wiped the crumbs off her blouse (from NOVELA)

"Ay! Que chiste!" Natalia who came up behind Dee Dee and squeezed the sides of her waist. "You make a great Cristina! Don't be stealing any husbands tonight!"

“Only if they look like frogs,” Dee Dee mused in reference to Diego Rivera’s **so called** amphibian-like features.

“Are you going to Charlene’s dorm?” Natalia asked. “After the dance?”

“Oh, si. Claro, right Evie?” Dee Dee asked.

But Evie didn’t answer. She couldn’t take her eyes off of Jose. She was so angry that Jose was getting away with his lying ass. And how could Dee Dee not see, if anything, how incredibly close he was talking to Alejandra? REWRITE ENDING

\* \* \*

Despite her heart being focused on Alex, her anger on Jose and her humility on her embarrassing father (should she go on?) Evie actually had a decent time at the dance.

People thought her costume was really cute and cool. But, ay, poor Dee Dee. All night she had to explain who she was supposed to be and that involved dragging Evie over to reinforce the **originality** of her costume idea.

Finally, before Evie knew it, **DJ Buick** announced the last songs for the evening. And that was fine Evie. She sat on the chair and rubbed her feet.

Allen Lau, who she had been dancing with the most, came up to her. “You not gonna skip the last song, are you?”

“My feet are killing me, Evie told him.

“Wow,” he lifted his glasses and squinted. “I’ve never seen you in shoes before. Weird.”

Dee Dee came up to both of them. “So Evie, you wanna get going to **Charlene’s** dorm? You should come too, Allen. She having an after party.”

“How?” Evie asked. Villanueva had a strict policy against get togethers in student housing, no guests after 9 pm, and absolutely no guests of the opposite sex.

“It’s on the DL,” Dee Dee said knowingly. She tucked some hair behind her left ear. “Oh, no,” She touched her left ear lobe. “I lost an earring. Gracie will kill me. I gotta go back in and look for it.”

“Are you serious?” Evie asked.

“Yeah, they are the ones from *El Cuerpo de Fuego*.”

“What kind of store is that?” Allen asked, confused.

“Let me go with you,” Evie offered. “Ill help you look.”

“No, it’s okay,” Dee Dee said. “I think it might be in the bathroom. On the counter.” She gave Evie her car keys. “Here, wait in the car, if you want. Then we can walk over to Charlene’s dorm.”

Evie took the keys and headed out to Dee Dee’s car, where everyone else had the made the parking lot into one big tailgate party. But these tailgates, being Villanueva High School and all, belonged to rides worth sixty grand, at least.

“Evie?”

She looked up. It was Raquel.

“Raquel?” Evie couldn’t believe it. What was Raquel doing at the dance? She was walking up from the side of her mother’s *Beamer convertible*. Her eyes where puffy and bloodshot and she looked horribly somber in her *faded jeans and gray sweatshirt* in a parking lot full of laughter and colorful costumes.

Evie couldn’t believe it. She had no time to think. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“No,” Raquel admitted. “I’m not okay.”

She reached into the inside of her fleece jacket and she pulled out a strip of paper. It was actually photo stock. The strip of pictures from the photo booth at Fabby’s birthday party.

**Evie’s heart dropped.**

“You were right,” Raquel looked at the photos.

“Raquel...”

“He is such an asshole, Evie.”

Evie looked at the photo strip. Sure enough, in living black and white, there was Jose sandwiched between her and Alejandra de los Santos. **Even in the photo you could see the awkwardness in Evie face.** The third and final photo, her eyes looked shocked and disgusted as Jose face was scrunched into the side of hers. It was clear that he had pounced on her and jammed his tongue hard into Evie’s mouth.

“I found it in his wallet,” Raquel said.

“His wallet?”

“Yeah, what an idiot,” Raquel took a drag from her **cigarette.** “He knows we have total access to each other’s flow and he leaves *this* in his wallet? I’m sure he get’s a kick showing it off to his friends.”

Had he shown Alex? Oh, God. Evie hoped not. Maybe that’s why he hadn’t called her.

“When Jose told me he couldn’t hang out tonight,” Raquel continued. “I knew something was going on. Mondo had a pick up from his cousin out on the westside. His cousin is visiting from Humbolt State. You know what I mean?”

“Uh huh.” Everybody knew that Humbolt was known for its hearty harvest of weed.

“And we were all gonna hang out tonight. Me, Mondo and Jose and then Jose just suddenly turned *that* down”

“Yeah,” Evie sighed. “I definitely can see what you mean.”

“He’s just been doing that a lot lately. Flaking on me last minute and then when you called me—” She didn’t finish. She looked over Evie’s shoulder.

Evie turned around and saw Jose and Alejandra, coming out of the gym. Jose had his arm around Alejandra’s bare shoulders and Alejandra’s body was turned into Jose’s as she walked slowly across the parking lot and towards the dorms. Her fingers played with his dyed black hair.

“Hey,” Raquel called out. “Hey, Jose”

Jose looked up. He immediately yanked his arm off from around Alejandra.

“So, what’s going on?” She asked calmly.

*What’s going on?*

“Whoa, whoa baby.” Jose went toward Raquel. “It’s not what you think.”

“What would I be thinking?” She asked.

“Uh, I dunno. I just swung by, with Mondo. Have you seen him?”

“Nuh uh.”

This was so unlike Raquel, to be so relaxed in the middle of this situation.

Raquel looked at Alejandra and then at Jose. “Aren’t you supposed to be in costume?”

Jose was definitely confused by her reserved behavior. The calm before storm?

“Yeah,” he laughed uncomfortably. “I forgot.”

“No, you got it right,” she looked at him up and down. “What are you supposed to be some trust fund kid? In your 80 dollar vintage rock T?”

“Huh?”

Or are you dressed as the pussy footing liar, can’t even be direct with his girlfriend so he can sneak out to a school dance so he could get a couple of cheap feels from a Sang-ho?”

“Excuse me?” Alejandra finally said something.

No, no. Wait,” Raquel paced in front of Jose and and squeezed the side of her forehead. “Or maybe you’re dressed as a moocher who has to rely on his best friend to drive him around, like his mommy or something, because he didn’t pass his driving test for the third time?”

“You told me had a car, but that you couldn’t drive it because of your grades,” Alejandra said to Jose.

“Oh, and speaking of grades,” Raquel continued. “Let me give you a grade in the sex department, Jose.

“Raquel...” he was getting uncomfortable.

*Oh, this was gonna be good.*

“No, no,” Raquel put her palm out to quiet him. “Let me finish and then you can go back to your date. Let’s see, an E for Effort, an S for sloppy and T as in *Too* soon. *Always* too soon. You better be careful, Alejandra, the way he gets overly excited, he might just dirty that little pretty dress of yours without any warning.”

“What?” Alejandra looked horrified.

Raquel tapped the side of Jose's chin.

"See you around, Jose. And you know what, don't worry about the money you owe me. You can use it," She tugged on his belt buckle. "For that little **medical** problem of yours."

Raquel threw her cigarette down and put it out with her flojo.

*Bravo! Well done!*

As Raquel walked away into the darkness, she left Evie, Alejandra and Jose pretty much speechless until Jose looked over at Evie.

"You little bitch," He started in on her. "You had to go and open your hole, didn't you?"

"Me?" Evie protested. "I didn't say anything. I didn't have to."

"Yeah, right." Jose narrowed his eyes and came right into Evie. She leaned back, as far as she could, into the door of parked car. Wasn't there anyone around to help her? Alejandra was doing jack, but just standing there, fumbling over Raquel's words.

Jose moved closer into Evie. She could feel the anger exuding from his eyes and nostrils. **Soon his belt buckle** was actually pressing against her.

"What. The. Fuck. Evie?"

"What?" She faced him back, directly. She tried to sound tough. But inside she was dying.

"You know, somebody's gotta teach you a lesson?"

Evie closed her eyes and braced herself. *Be strong.*

Just then, her ringtone of **()** rang out, cutting through the tension. **Biddy Biddy**

**Bom Bom.**

Jose backed up, a bit thrown off.

The music rang again. **Biddy Biddy Bom Bom!**

“Your dad?” He asked.

“Yeah,” Evie lied. “He and my uncle Louie are picking me up.”

**Jose loosened his grip on Evie’s blouse ().**

At that same time, Dee Dee came out of the gym. She saw Jose and immediately knew something was not right. He was still practically on top of Evie.

“Jose!” She called out firmly as she sprinted over to the both him and Evie.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” He finally backed off. “Nothing, she ain’t worth it.”

“Worth *what*?” Dee Dee demanded to know. “What’s the hell’s going on?”

“Jose looked over at Alejandra. “Come on,”

She held her phone to her ear and held her finger up to motion it would be moment. “Uh, sorry Josito,” she said. “But I’m on a long distance call. I’ll find you later.”

What the –?” He waved his hand aside. “I do not need this **hen party.**” He rubbed his hair with both his hands and turned to leave.

**“Good riddance...”**

“What happened?” Dee Dee asked.

“Jose pissed cause Raquel found out about him and Alejandra,” Evie told her.

“She was just here.”

**“Raquel?”** Dee Dee asked. “Was here?”

“Yeah,” Evie got her breath. “Just a minute ago. She just took off.”

“What?” Dee Dee looked over at Alejandra who just got off her call. “Alejandra, Is that true? How could you be after someone else boyfriend? Don’t you have enough attention?”

“Dela, I do not *chase* men,” Alejandra sniffed and she patted her hair in place. “I don’t *need* to.

“How could you not do anything to help Evie?”

“Oh, Dela, you’re overreacting. He wasn’t going to do anything to Evie. He was just mad.”

“You could have fooled me.” Evie finally exhaled. Her body was still shaking.

Alejandra rolled her eyes. “Come on, this boring dance is over,” She took a hold of Dee Dee’s arm. “Let’s go to to Charlene’s dorm.”

“Not me.” Dee Dee pulled away.

“What?” Alejandra laughed uncomfortably. “ You gonna go looking for *La Llorona*?”

“I’d rather be with a weeping woman than a cheating one.”

Alejandra put her hands and her hips. “Well, do what you want, Dela.”

“Thank you,” Dee Dee said. “I will.”

“You are so fake, anyway. You think because you lived in DF for a few years that you’re my *paisa*? Mira, *mi’ja*, you got a *long* way to go.” She turned to leave.

“Alejandra!” Dee Dee called after her. “Wait.

She actually stopped and turned around.

“You’re dress is so ugly!” Meaner, SPANISH.

“I guess you were right about her and Jose.” Dee Dee told Evie after she left. “I just thought they were just talking. That’s what it looked like to me.”

“In a dark corner, behind the bleachers?” Evie asked.

“I dunno. I mean, how would anyone know, right?”

“I did, but I had seen them last night.”

“Last night?” Dee Dee asked. “Donde?”

“At Fabby’s party,” Evie said. “In the old photo booth,”

“At La Pantera? Are you serious? Why didn’t you say something last night?”

“I was just too upset. And actually,” Evie thought it was probably just the best time to bring it up. “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” Dee Dee asked.

“Your shell necklace, the one you wore last night, Evie started. “Who gave it to you?”

“My necklace?” Dee asked. “Nobody. I got it in Veracruz.”

“In Veracruz? Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” Dee Dee said. “Why would I lie?”

“It’s just that it looks exactly like the abalone shell Alex had found for me at Bard Beach. We are at a party there a while ago.”

“At Bard Beach?” Dee Dee raised her eyebrows. “You were at Bard Beach?”

“Yeah, at the abalone farm.”

“Well, no, Alex didn’t give me any necklace. I got mine in Veracruz. They sell them all over the street. But, I’ll have you know,” Dee Dee feigned snobbery. “It’s *not*

abalone. It's mother of pearl and I chose the necklace over the mother of pearl paperweight with the wiggly eyes glued on."

Evie laughed.

"But what's the big deal with the necklace?"

"Oh...nothing."

"Nothing?" Dee Dee was not convinced, but didn't press. "So," she looked around the parking lot. "Where do you think Raquel went?"

Evie saw Kitty Diaz's car still parked in the lot. "I think I know where she is. I should go get her." Evie looked at Dee Dee.

What?"

I think you should come with me."

Me? I'm not gonna go looking for Raquel. What if I find her?"

Dee Dee, she was so upset. You didn't see how she was, but you know how she can be.

Yeah, unfortunately I do.

No, I mean. I worried about her. You should be worried about her. You know how she can be when she's been hurt. I mean, this isn't the same thing, but remember when we went horseback riding and she kicked off and she pretended it didn't bother her?

Yeah...

And then remember how she just lost in the car ride home? It was like she was trying to be tough and then...

Dee Dee was quiet for a moment. "Okay..." she sighed. "I'll go with you."

“Good,” Evie said. “I think you need to.”

They crossed the parking lot and headed toward the quad area. DESCRIBE.

Ironically, it was the same parking lot where Raquel had made Dee Dee huff away just over a month earlier and now here it was. Dee Dee was skipping a party to go find Raquel.

“By the way, that was pretty ballsy of you,” Evie told Dee Dee. “Confronting Jose and all.”

“That was nothing,” Dee Dee said. “Confronting Raquel, now that’s another story.”

She suddenly remembered her cell phone. Some had called and she she it wasn’t her father. She pulled it out of her purse and saw she had one new voice mail. She clicked on call history, and yes! It was Alex. Finally! But she didn’t call him back. Because she and Dee Dee, well, they had more important things to tend to.

\* \* \*

Sure enough, Raquel was at Juniper’s Tree.

She was sitting at the foot of the old oak, her legs bent at the knees and her face buried between them. Evie could see her body trembling and she was sobbing in anguish. Evie had never seen her like this. Even Dee Dee seemed horribly uncomfortable by it.

“Hey Raquel,” Evie said softly as she started towards her. “Are you okay?”

*Stupid question.*

hooked everything up, the plans, the arrangements with Basilio, all for her. It was almost like a birthday party and nobody, her mother, Raquel, none of the Flojos, that's for sure, had ever planned anything as extravagant solely for her. And was this something she had she craved?

Claro que si.

\* \* \*

It was 3 am by the time the lights in the suite turned off and all the girls headed to their own rooms to crash. Evie grabbed her Weekender and trudged up to the kiva ladder to her meditative loft. She was suddenly *so* tired. She saw Dee Dee passed out on the luxury egg foam sleeping pad. She was still in her clothes and *still* holding on to the phone. She *was* getting carried away.

Evie went through her bag looking for her camisole to change into when she noticed the red light on her cell phone was blinking. God, she hoped it wasn't her mother. What a buzzkill if she had to call her back. Evie flipped opened her phone and saw it was Alex. He had sent her a text message just a few minutes earlier. What was Alex doing up at 3 am? He faithfully goes to sleep early the night before doing DP. She flipped open her phone to read his text.

U up?

She wrote back: Ys.

A few minutes later, he texted back.

I cant sleep

Srry abot 2nte. U mad?

She responded: No, nt really.

He texted back quickly: Can i make it up 2 u?

Evie was confused. ?

Alex wrote again: i wnt 2 make it up 2 u

She texted back: No worries. No problema.

She tossed her phone on the sleeping pad and started to change. She was surprised to see the cell's red light blinking again.

Yr not mad at me?

Why was Alex so concerned? She was feeling sleepy and just wanted to go to bed, but before she could text him back, he sent her another message

Cnt sleep Whr r u?

Where *was* she? What, was he gonna come over? What was up with Alex? She didn't know if she should tell him that she was with the Sangros. Ever since he had asked her what was up with her "changes," she wasn't so sure she wanted to tell him all the different things she had been doing. All the seemingly "un Evie" things. She typed back.

Jst chillin. Whr r u?

He texted back: In bed.

*In bed?* This surprised Evie. What was Alex doing, texting her while he is in bed?

Like under the covers, *in bed*? And if so, what was he wearing? Was he naked? Evie didn't know what to write back. Alex was her friend, a friend she had gotten to know better over the last year, but it seemed, at least to her, he was flirting with her. Jose and Mondo were always silly with her, but Alex was different. She felt strange, somewhat strangely excited. Besides, it's so hard to tell with text messaging. But she knew for one thing, he was in bed and he was thinking of her. Not in a crass, icky Mondo kind of way, but...well, it seemed, just *nice*.

He texted again. U still there?

She was obviously taking too long. She wanted to write something back. All she could think of was a simple: Ys

A few seconds later:

Thght u fell aslp.

She wrote back: No.

*No*? God, can't she be a little bit more creative?

Alex: I dn't like fightin w/ u

Evie: Me 2.

Alex: Wsh u wre goin 2morw

Evie: Me 2, sriry.

Evie chest suddenly felt warm. It tingled. He wished he could *be with her*. He wants to be with her...tomorrow. Wait, was she reading too much into his texts? Had he ever been this way with her before? She tried to think. Alex has always been super nice and sweet to her, but he was that way with everyone. He was that way, big time, with



400, 500 thread count, sheets? She went through their message history, reading and re-reading what he had typed to her.

Wsh u wr gng 2morw

I wnt 2 mk it up 2 u,

In bed.

*Bed.* She wasn't imagining it. She reread his last text.

*Sleep sweet.*

No text short hand with that. He was clear and direct. He wanted her to sleep sweet. She snapped her phone shut and turn to her side. She held her phone close her chest and closed her eyes. She would sleep sweet. Alex *was* into her and maybe, yes, she could be into him too.

\* \* \*

It was already late in the afternoon, right after Dee Dee had just dropped Evie off after their night at the Ojai Inn, when Alex phoned her. Her cell blared out Maldita she walked across the drive way to her house. Yes, she changed her ringtone since knowing the Sangros.

“Hey,” she said, holding her phone between her left cheek and left shoulder. She was juggling her suede shoulder bag, her Weekender and all the things she brought back with her from the Ojai Valley Inn Gift shop: body salts with lavender and vanilla, (58 dollars) oiled scented candles with blown glass holder (95 dollars ). The wonderful feeling that Alex may possibly be into her? (priceless!)

“Hello?” Alex asked again. Just his voice suddenly excited her. How did this

happen? He used to “just Alex,” now he was *Alex*.

“Hey...” Evie breathed eagerly into the phone. She was still on a high from his texting from the night before. She reread the text history between them about a million more times. †

“I can’t -- you,” Alex spoke choppy. “You keep fading -- and out.”

“What?”

“I —you. Fading in – out.”

*Great.* After checking and rechecking her phone all morning and afternoon he finally called and they can’t hear each other.

“Let me call you from the house line,” she told him as she started to unlock her front door. “I’ll call you right back.”

“What?” he asked.

“I’ll call you right back.”

“What – say?”

*Grrrr!*

“I call back, NOW!” Evie was frustrated, to say the least. †

She went inside her house and ran upstairs to her room. She shut the door behind her

“Evie, are you home?” It was her mother, asking from her bedroom.

“Yeah,” She called out as she threw her Weekender and all the **bags** on the carpet.

Her phone was missing from it’s cradle. “I’ll be out in a sec.”

“Did you have fun?” Her mother was now coming down the hall.

“Uh huh,” Evie answered. She looked around for her cordless.

“Evie,” her mother stood on the other side of the closed door. “Why are you being so evasive? Did you color your hair again?”

“No,” Evie called out. “You can come in. I’m just looking for my phone.”

Her mother opened the door and came in. She immediately noticed the bag from the Ojai Inn. “What is all this?”

*Shit.*

“Oh,” Evie tried to sound nonchalant. “Dee Dee gave it to me.”

“Dee Dee?” Her mother opened the bag and went through the items.

“Yeah,” Evie went on. “She went with Graciela and...it was just a lot that she didn’t want.” **Where was her phone?**

“Wow,” her mother held up the jar and read the label. “That was very generous of her. You know this mud is from the Dead Sea, from Israel. It’s very expensive.”

“Uh huh. I guess.”

“You know,” her mother said. “I think it’s really great you are making new friends.”

“Yeah, me too.” **Evie continued to search for the cordless.**

“Not that I have any problem with Raquel.” Her mother opened a tube of organic carrot cream and tried it on her hands. “And you know I just adore Alex.

*Yeah, me too mom. Now help me find the phone so I can adore him some more!*

“Do you know where my cordless is?” Evie asked.

“How would I know where your phone is?” She put the tube back in the bag and looked around. “How would you know where anything is in this room? Evie, I didn’t

have California Closets come here to customize her closets just so you could leave all your clothes on the floor.”

“Mom, *Please*. Evie begged. “I have to make a major important call.”

“A major important call? Evie, you’ve been with all your girlfriends all night. Who could you possibly need to call so urgently?”

“Mom,” Evie was on the verge of an emotional breakdown. She could not find the landline and Alex was waiting. “Where is my cordless?!”

Evie went into the bathroom and looked around. She yanked up her vintage Senor Lopez from the floor and scared poor Meho, who was napping under it. He shrieked away in terror.

“Ooh,” Evie looked after him. “Sorry, P.!”

“Oh,” Her mother started to say as though she just remembered something. “It’s Lindsay’s birthday tomorrow. Did you know that?”

“Nuh uh.” Evie came out of the bathroom. *Where* was her phone?

“Your dad and I want to take her dinner tonight,” her mother went on. “You need to come.”

“Okay,” Evie rummaged through the piles of clothes strewn about her bedroom floor. “I’ll be there.” She lifted her Hawaiian fabric pillows and Baja Road Trip blanket. Still no phone.

Her mother finally chipped in and lifted up some spiral notebooks. And yes, the cordless phone was under one of them.

“Of course,” her mother held the receiver out to Evie. “It would be here, under your notebooks. You never touch *them*.”

“Okay, mom,” Evie grabbed the phone eagerly. “I have to make a call.”

“Okay, okay, Evie,” her mother held her hands up, feigning surrender.

“Remember, no plans tonight. Lindsay’s husband and sister are coming also.”

“Okay, okay.” Evie held the phone to her side and walked her mother out. As soon as she was out of her bedroom, she shut the door behind her.

Evie grabbed her pillows off the floor and slipped her flojos off. *Finally!* She propped the pillows against her headboard and lay back onto them. She wanted everything to be perfect when she returned Alex’s call. It was going to be their first conversation since their sexy texty from the night before, since Alex confessed his true feelings for her. Or, more appropriately, cnfssd hs tru feelins 4 hr?

She sped dial his number. But now his line was () busy. *Busy?* On a cell? Maybe Alex was calling her?

When she clicked off, she saw he had just left her a message. She immediately called him back, but got his voice mail. And cell where supposed to *assist* with communication? Normally, not reaching Alex wouldn’t be such a big deal. Evie would just catch up with him at school on Monday, but now she just *had* to hear his voice. She had to know what all that texting meant.

She listened to his message.

*Hey, Eves, I thought – call -- right back. Anyway, -- leave with -- dad. So...I guess -- l try -- later.*

Later? Evie cringed. She replayed the message. I try – later? It was so hard to make out was he was saying. What was up with his phone? Did he mean later as in later *that* night? But she had to go to dinner with her family...she would miss his call! Maybe

he meant later, as in *later* over the weekend? Or maybe he meant much later? As in Monday, at school?

She tossed her cell phone on her bed and turned to her side. She felt dizzy with agony. She desperately wanted to talk with Alex, but she didn't want to call him *again*. She refused to appear so needy. That's one thing she learned from the Sangros, do not get carried away over some boy.

Alex, unfortunately, didn't call back the whole rest of the afternoon. And then, double unfortunately, Evie had to leave with her family to celebrate Lindsay's birthday. As she and her parents drove to the **Elephant** Bar to meet Lindsay and her husband Jack and her sister Eileen, Evie checked her phone in the car. What, Evie wondered did people do before cell phones? Wait at home?

At the **Elephant** Bar, it was difficult for Evie to be in a celebratory spirit, even with Lindsay, who in a great mood for someone turning sixty three years old

. "Una vieja!" Lindsay pretended to cry on her husband, Jack's, shoulder

"Mi'ja," Jack looked at Evie. "Lindsay tells me your amigita, Dee Dee, is back. How nice for you. I bet you missed her."

"Oh, yeah," was all Evie could say.

"I remember when all you were little girls, you, Dee Dee and Raquel. You were the best of friends. You had the biggest crush on Alfredo. Remember that?"

Yeah,"

But now you must have so many boyfriends."

"Well, not really." Evie looked around. Seeing the other couples with their hands intertwined and exchanging romantic glances with each other, made Evie ache. She

looked at her phone. Alex *still* hadn't called. She wondered if they would have a cute combined name together, like all the Hollywood celebrities. Alevie? Evex? Sounded like a decongestant.

"Evie," Her mother firmly tapped Evie's shin under the table. "Put your phone away. You are being rude."

Rude? And kicking someone in public wasn't?

Nonetheless, Evie reluctantly put her phone down, but didn't put it away. She simply put it on vibrate and discreetly placed it between her legs. Sangro Rule Number Two: Get It Where You Can.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, Sunday, Evie and the Sangros went over to Dee Dee's to lay out by the pool. Saturday's weather had been disappointingly overcast and to make up for precious lost tanning time they all met up at Dee Dee's. The end of every chaise lounge (six in total) was pointed directly toward the sun, as if such strategic positioning would help obtain a tan faster.

"What did you do last night?" Dee Dee asked Evie. The straps of her white Fendi bikini top was untied and hung at her sides.

"It was Lindsay's birthday," Evie told her. She kept her eyes closed under her sunglasses. "We all went to the Elephant Bar." She couldn't stop thinking about Alex. He still hadn't called her back and it really bothered her. Maybe 'later' meant 'later,' as in *after* the weekend? She was going crazy interpreting his cryptic messages. Why couldn't he just be more direct? 'I will call you at 9:15 pm, tonight.' And then he would

have done so and that would have been that. Done and over. X

“Who’s Lindsay?” Charlene asked. She was on the opposite side of Evie. She didn’t have her bikini straps untied. She was completely topless. Two hearty dabs of white sunblock topped each point of her breast, making them look like two mini Matahorns or, in the Sangros case, two mini Mount Popocoatles. X

“She’s our housekeeper,” Evie picked up her cell and checked to see if it was on. X

“You went out with your *maid*?” Alejandra leaned up and looked over Charlene and Natalia’s oiled bodies to face Evie. “On a Saturday night?”

“Yeah, why not?”

Alejandra lifted her BRAND NAME glassed and looked at Evie.

“I wouldn’t be caught dead with my *criada* in public,” she said. “Maybe if she had to pick me up, like from shopping or something.”

X “Or if you needed her to pick you up from the free health clinic (SPANISH), to sign papers,” Fabby smirked. “Again.”

“Lindsay’s actually not a maid,” Evie asserted. “She doesn’t even live with us. Besides, you don’t even have a maid, Alejandra. You live in the dorms.”

“Yeah, I do,” Alejandra checked her tan line from her bikini bottom before turning over to her side. “Back home, in Mexico. But they always fuck/screw up my mother’s clothes and then she is always firing them and we have to get new ones. When I go home for vacation, I never ~~which~~ two new Indios desgracios I’m gonna have to meet.”

“Ally,” Dee Dee looked over at Alejandra. “You don’t have to be so harsh.”

“Well, it’s true,” Alejandra let out an exaggerated exhale. “Am I lying, Fabby?”

“No,” Fabby agreed. “Your mom is a total bitch SPANISH when it comes to her

clothes.”

“That’s because she has nice ones,” Alejandra leaned over and grabbed her soda. “Not like the standard stuff you find here in malls. In Mexico City,” She looked over at Evie. “We have boutiques, with customized, tailored clothing. Oh,” Her eyes suddenly lit up. “You should see what my mother’s sending me for Dia de los Muertos.”

“You mean, for the dance?” Evie had almost forgotten about it.

“Yeah,” Alejandra took a sip from her ( ) “And this year, it better be good. I don’t want my costume flown in from Mexico for nothing.”

“Your costume’s from Mexico?” Dee Dee asked. Evie could sense a competitive tone in her voice. “Who are you going as?”

“Maria Felix,” Alejandra sang with an air of superiority.

“Ooh, que sexy!” Natalia raved. “You are gonna look hot.” (SPANISH) Only you could pull Maria Felix off.”

“Yeah, only you.” Dee Dee echoed the sentiment, if not reluctantly. J

Despite the larger than life announcement on Villanueva’s main marquee, Eve had forgotten about the dance. It was now just a week away, the first Saturday of November.

“But wait,” Evie suddenly remembered. “Isn’t the dance the same night as Fabby’s birthday party?”

“Nuh uh,” said Charlene. “Her party’s the night before, on Friday.”

“Yeah, and don’t be all *coda* and not bring a present,” Fabby held her right elbow up and hit it with her left hand a couple of times. The girls laughed, except Natalia.

“Hey,” Natalia frowned. “My family’s from Monterrey and we are *not* cheap!”

Evie leaned up from her chaise and checked her cell.

“What’s with you?” Dee Dee shaded her eyes as she looked over at Evie. “You’ve been checking your phone all day.”

“Maybe she’s waiting for Lindsay to call her,” Charlene ribbed.

Yeah,” Natalia said dryly. “They’re gonna hit the night clubs later tonight.”

“Hey,” Alejandra said. “At least she’ll be able to buy you liquor. Make her good for *something*.”

“Yeah, I’ll have her get us more Patron!” Evie laughed. She couldn’t help but feel a twinge of shame as they laughed with her. She thought a lot of Lindsay. She was like family. But as soon as she saw that she had no new messages on her cell, her spirits just fell even more.

After the afternoon sun slowly withered below the Pacific Ocean, or more appropriately, the stucco walls of Rio Estates, shade enveloped the de LaFuente’s backyard. The impromptu tanning party at Dee Dee’s came to an end and the Sangros, after comparing tan lines, gathered up their things and headed back to their dorms.

“Ay,” Dee Dee clicked her tongue at Alejandra. “You got too dark, Ally. Maria Felix was mas guera!”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Alejandra said calmly as she pulled the car keys to her Beemer from out of her bag. “My costume is so amazing, no one is even going to bother with my tan.”

“O-kay.” Dee Dee wanted to make sure Alejandra knew she wasn’t so convinced.

After the Sangros left, Evie mentioned to Dee Dee that she didn't plan on going to the dance.

"*What?*" Dee Dee looked at her. "Why"

"It's just not my thing," Evie said.

"Oh, just leave those," Dee Dee told her. "Marcela will come out and clean up.

"But why don't you wanna go to the dance?"

"We never go to school dances." She started picking up the glasses, soda cans and chip bowls from around the pool.

Who's 'we'?" Dee Dee questioned.

"Okay, *I* never go the school stuff," Evie said. "It's sorta dorky."

"Oh, and sitting around doing nothing is so cool?" She gathered her magazines off the chaise

"Hey," Evie said. "*I'm* not the one who planned a whole afternoon of sunbathing around my pool."

"Evie," Dee Dee ignored her last comment. "You *have* to go to the dance. I already have our outfits!"

"*Our* outfits?" Evie raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah," Dee Dee continued. "Ally's not the only one with such *fabulous* connections. Gracie has all this great stuff from Mexico, all these fancy embroidered clothes, crinolines, hats, some jewelry. She used to be an actress, in the Mexican soaps."

"Really?" Evie wondered if Lindsay would know of her. "Which one?"

"Oh, just about all the telenovelas," Dee Dee bragged. "But you know how the

stories just run for a limited time and she just had minor roles. She was always the *amante* (SPANISH, MISTRESS) and I guess she was good, because she was given a *lot* of the left over costumes and that doesn't always happen for actresses with bit parts."

Graciela, a seductress? *Imagine?* What until Evie told her mother.

"Anyway," Dee Dee continued as she opened the sliding glass door to her house.

"You, Alejandro and I *have* to go to the dance together. I have it all planned."

"Alex?" Evie asked. "When did you talk to Alex?" Her stomach suddenly felt jumpy. When did he talk to Dee Dee? And why hadn't he called her?

"I haven't talked to him...yet," Dee Dee admitted. "But he'll do it."

Evie couldn't help but feel *nerved* by Dee Dee's statement. *Yeah, like you got him dancing in the palm of your hand.*

"I got it all figured out," Dee Dee went on. "You'll be Frida Kahlo, Alex can be Diego Rivera and I'll be Cristina, Frida's sister. Que cute, no?"

"What?" Evie *balked*. "Uh, *no*. Dela, I'm not gonna be Frida Kahlo."

*She caught her reflection in the sliding glass doors and tousled her blonde bangs.*

"Evie, *yes*," Dee Dee walked into the kitchen. "You *have* to, to make it work."

"Dela," Evie followed her. "Frida is so played out. Everyone goes as Frida."

"How do you know?" Dee Dee asked. "You said you never go to school stuff."

"I mean, she played out everywhere. Even my *mother* is over Frida."

"Yeah," Dee Dee put her *Teen Peoples* on the counter. "But I bet nobody here knows how to do her right. You should see the stuff that Gracie has. You won't believe it. We'll be different than anyone at the dance. Even Alejandra."

"No, *you*'ll be different. Nobody ever dresses at Cristina. What does she even

look like?”

“Oh,” Dee Dee pulled her hair out of her pony tail and said very knowingly. “She was very beautiful.”

**Great.** So Dee Dee was gonna be the sexy one and Evie was gonna be stuck with an ugly unibrow and manly moustache. In front of Alex? *No* way.

“Uh, no thanks,” Evie said. “I mean, thanks for offering the costume and everything.”

“Evie,” Dee Dee opened the fridge and looked through it. She kept her back towards Evie. “You *have* to go as Frida. Nobody will know I’m Cristina unless there’s a Frida and a Diego.”

“Dela, nobody is gonna know anyway,” Evie said. “It’s not that kind of dance, or school for that matter.”

Dee Dee suddenly got quiet. She got a soda from the refrigerator and popped it open. As she drank from it, she looked away from Evie and said nothing.

“Dela, why don’t you dress as Frida and I’ll go as Cristina?”

There, a compromise.

“I already had the outfit for Cristina tailored to fit me,” Dee Dee said softly. “The dance is already a week away and I thought for sure you would want to go with me. Remember how much fun we had, dressing up for the Marina Park Beauty Pageant? Remember as we did as kids?”

“Yeah,” Evie sighed. She hated to let Dee Dee down. . “Okay, I’ll try to think about it. We’ll figure something out.”

“Well, I hope you do. I still have to tell Alejandro.” She started to smile. **“So, you**

X want a soda?"

"Yeah, okay." Evie looked in the fridge and helped herself to a Kiwi Apple

Snapple.

X "What's the Snapple Fact?" Dee Dee asked as Evie twisted off the cap.

Evie looked at the cap and read it out loud. "The shortest distance between..."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, do *not* push friends into something they do not want to do," Evie smirked.

But really, Evie wondered, why was Dee Dee so eager to always have Alex in the picture? He had been practically her personal escort at school, her potential private swim instructor and now her date for the Dia de los Muertos Dance? Why *even* have Evie along? She drank her Snapple. Then she remembered, didn't Diego have an affair with Fridas's sister, Cristina? Yes. She was sure of it. And *that's* a Snapple Fact.

14

ShaggyMA (8:07 PM): Plans tonight?

RioChica (8:09 PM): Party, again.

ShaggyMA (8:10 PM): You are the butterfly!

It was Friday night, the evening of Fabby's birthday party. The whole week at school had been a blur for Evie. When she finally got to speak with Alex, it was already on Monday before lunch.

After Alex left, Evie couldn't believe that she was spending an entire Friday night, alone, with the Sangros. Friday night was usually a night set aside for her and her fellow Flojos, time to just kick back in front of the plasma screen or, by someone's pool.

Friday night was usually the Flojo night to chill. Just to kick back in front of Raquel's plasma screen or even by Evie's pool.

But after a while Evie started to actually have fun. **Soon enough everyone's guards were dropped and judgements were tossed aside.** Girls, no matter what kind of bathing suits they wore, were girls. Soon enough they were all yelling and laughing, filling up Zip Loc baggies with water from the kitchen sink or the garden hose and slamming them at one another. () started dunking heads in the pool and () showed off her pathetic athleticism with a belly flops from the diving board.

They compared tattoos, navel rings and, as two of the Sangros peeled off their bikini tops, fearlessness. Yes, just typical girls, as a topless Alejandra and Natalia grabbed hands, screamed and jumped into the pool together. **SHOW THIS**

10

The next afternoon all the girls are in Dee Dee's room.

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

The second thing Evie realized was how light her head felt. She ran her hand from the back of her neck and, yup, her long, dark brown hair was gone. All of it. She pushed up from her pillows and got a look at herself in her closet mirrors -- her hair was now short, chopped in a haphazard fashion with streaks of uneven blue. Cancún Blue No. 32 to be exact. that had come out the color of granny grey blue, the tint you see, well, on grannies, coming out of

*What* had she done? She yanked down at the sides but they barely reached her shoulders. Who the hell cuts their own hair? Is this what happened to prisoners in solitary confinement? After being isolated from their peers for too long, did they eventually go mad and commit self-inflicted acts with Ginghar craft scissors, too? Evie looked hideous and she had no one to blame but . . . yes, Raquel. It was her fault that Evie was even grounded in the first place. Raquel had insisted they go to Tracy Tankerson's party two weeks ago. It was the first party on the first Friday of the new school year and Raquel

promised she'd have Evie home by her curfew. But, as Evie should have known, by the time Evie knew it was time to leave, Raquel was just getting her drink on. There was no way she was gonna get Evie home by her curfew and she didn't.

Evie glowered at the sight of her reflection. Why, why hadn't Raquel just called her back last night? She *owed* it to her. By the time (it was **nearly 9 pm**, it was obvious ~~that~~ Evie was going to spend another long night at home alone. And after clicking from one reality makeover show to the next, she realized it was she, not another midwestern housewife, who needed a change. She wanted something that demanded attention, respect. She wanted ... hair the color of the Cancun ocean! And that's how *the reinvention of Evie Gomez, Mex-treme Makeover, Friday Night Home Edition* came to be.

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

"What do you think, Meho?" she toed her male Tabby, nestled at the foot of her bed. "**Punk rock or goth metal dork?**" But Meho could care less about her state of blue disrepair as he promptly lifted up his hind leg and started to lick behind it.

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

She then heard Lindsay, the Gomez's housekeeper, turn up the volume of *El Mercadito* on the kitchen radio downstairs. Other than that, the house was quiet. She was

sure her father, Ruben Gomez, had left hours ago for one of his several *panaderías* and her mother, Vicki, was probably in the pool doing her obligatory fifty laps.

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

Just then the buddy alert on her computer beeped, signaling to Evie that one of her online buddies was available to (IM.) Raquel? *Finally.*

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

ShaggyMA (10:40 AM): Hey, U up?

RioChica (10:40 AM): Yup. U just wake up, too?

ShaggyMA (10:41AM) : No. Just got in from surfing. Did Dawn Patrol this morning. Crazy. Surfer magazine was there and took photos of us.

Evie felt jealous. Did everyone have a more exciting life than her? During her period of home internment, she had met Shaggy via a chat room for MASA. *No*, not *masa*, as in dough, *silly*, but MASA, as in the Mexican American Surfing Association.

Evie didn't even know such a thing existed, but ever since she caught *Blue Crush* on cable with Raquel over the summer, she had become a mad active surfer, on the internet, anyway. Raquel wasn't so hot on independent study after seeing the film, so it was Evie, alone, who researched all things surf. How could she live in California and *not* surf? All those years, as a kid, she spent time at the beach and not once did she even try? **WHY?**

As a fourth generation Cali girl she at least looked the part, from her sixty dollar Hollister

to her hibiscus print board shorts. Evie had even went as far as to buy a surfboard, a nine foot, five fin white custom long board, especially **shaped for her by the one and only Max of Santa Barbara**. But truth was, Evie had yet to even get the thing wet and, to be **dreadfully direct**, she could even barely manage a boogie board in waist high white water. Que scandalous, no?

RioChica (10:45 AM): What do you think of the color blue?

ShaggyMA (10:46 AM): One of my sticks is blue.

Stick?

RioChica (10:46 AM): Cool enough.

ShaggyMA (10:48 AM): Hey, gotta go. **Post surf chow down waiting.**

RioChica (10:48 AM): Sure, Lataz!

Sigh. Evie was alone, and bored, again. **Shaggy probably was heading back to the beach. As Evie had learned over there two month old online "relationship" Shaggy was more interested in chow and surf currents than Iming unknown girls.**

Suddenly (need song name) blared from her cell phone. Evie got up from her desk and grabbed her cell off her nightstand. She saw Raquel's face on the screen, her long wavy hair pulled over in front of her shoulders and her chin drawn down. Ugh. Evie reluctantly flipped her phone open.

"Hello?"

"Heey," drawled Raquel's gravelly voice. Apparently Raquel had gone out the night before. Without Evie. WTF?

"Oh, hey." Evie tried to sound just as casual.

"So . . ." Raquel started. Evie could sense a smile starting to form on the other end. "You got your phone back."

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

"Oh, yeah." Raquel paused. "That's right."

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

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

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

"Nah," Raquel said. "Nobody did nothing."

Evie relaxed. At least she hadn't missed anything, but that really didn't surprise her. The five Flojos— herself, Alex, Mondo, Raquel and her boy Jose — shared one thing in common and that one thing was the absolute, self gratifying pursuit to...do

nothing. Was it the cliché teenage rebellion (of) their workaholic fathers? Too many spins (and lyric interpretation) of Cypress Hill on Mondo's Technics turntable? Wherever they (were), be it poolside or oceanside, (or) whatever you called it, trifling or chilling, the Flojos (were) best doing nothing together. Never mind Generation Y. The Flojos were in a generation of their own -Generation Y (Brother)?

Coincidentally, Flojo (correct Spanish pronunciation: *Flow-ho*) means lazy in English, but it's also what you call flip-flops (correct South Cali pronunciation: *flow-joe*) and as everybody (knows) flip flops are a pretty lazy excuse for a shoe and usually assigned only for summer, even in Southern California. But the Flojos were hard core when it came to their flip flops and wore them 365/12. From high-end Havaianas (\$118) to low end plastic bin specials from Sa-Von (*true flojos*, Alex claimed), nothing came between (a) Flojo and their flojos.

But it wasn't attitude or (sandal sense) that had brought the Flojos together. Evie and Raquel had been friends since growing up in Rio Estates and last year when they were freshman, Raquel hooked up with Jose. He was (then) a tall lanky sophomore with (the) Mars Volta 'fro and (a) black titanium chin Labret (that) gave him (the) devious look that Raquel fell for hard. Once they started dating, his sidekicks Mondo (he, the only Flojo with a job making "deliveries") and Alex (he who actually did some surfing) (were) automatically included in the package. Of course, it was (pure) (prestig) for Evie and Raquel to hang with upperclassmen. Besides, few students at Villanueva Preparatory High School were like them—rich kids whose family's crest, that is, if they had (a) crest, contained the letters *x, y, or z* (read: *Latino*).

Evie's family had a crest, sorta. If you counted, the small, peach tinted seashell logo for her father's successful business, Conchita's Bread, as one. Years ago her father started Conchita's and thanks to his hard work (along with Evie's great-grandma Conchita's *pan dulce* recipes) the Gomezes are where they were now: in a big ol' Spanish-style house with a swimming pool in the back and her father's silver Escalade in the front. Not quite ransom-worthy rich, but the Gomezes, like a lot of the families in Rio Estates, were pretty well off.

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

"What?" Raquel said.

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

"Really?" Evie wasn't sure she believed this—it was so Raquel of Raquel to try and outdo Evie. "When?"

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

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

"Cause it was really no big deal."

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

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

"Definitely," Evie said. Actually, she was hoping they would drive down to L.A., do something covert, crazy. Rio Estates was just sixty miles north of Los, but it was still suburbia and, of course, painfully uneventful. Even though she truly felt like a true Flojo at heart, Evie always felt the slight tug of wanting something more, to do something more, especially outside of the 805.

But Raquel did say that the night's party was "out near Bard" so that could mean anything.

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

"Yeah, and we don't wanna freak out ol' Vicki," Raquel said in a tone that conveyed she was so over mothers and curfews. "She must have crapped bricks when she saw your hair, huh?"

"Not really," Evie lied. "Like you said, it's really no big deal."

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

Just then someone knocked on Evie's bedroom door. She sank into her bed and quickly pulled the sheet over her head. She would soon find out just how her mother felt about having a Smurf for a daughter.