

CHAPTER 1

ALICIA CRUZ couldn't remember the last time she'd had her friends over for a sleepover. They'd pretty much given up on them in the eighth grade. Which isn't to say they hadn't hung out all night long until the break of dawn ever since—not only in their hometown of Miami, but as far away as Spain. Sometimes they hung out for fun, like in the ninth grade, when for Alicia's fifteenth birthday, she had passed on the traditional Sweet Fifteen extravaganza, known the world over as a *quinceañera*, and instead traveled to Spain with her pal Carmen Ramirez-Ruben. In Barcelona, restaurants didn't even start serving dinner until nine, so Alicia and her parents and Carmen had dined many times at midnight and explored the Rambla, the heart of the city, as they strolled back to the hotel.

Two years ago, the late-night sessions had become more focused on work, when Alicia's desire to do

a good deed and help a new girl in town plan her *quinceañera* turned into a full-blown business, Amigas Incorporated. And so, while Alicia had never had a *quince* of her own, she had now planned and attended dozens of them. She ran Amigas Inc. with Carmen and her other best friend and partner, Jamie Sosa. Now the three girls sat at the helm of the hottest teen-party-planning business in town—with a substantial company bank account and a very snazzy Young Entrepreneurs of Miami Award from the mayor’s office to prove it.

Over the last couple of years, they’d spent many nights creating the most magical details for their clients. Alicia could hardly remember how many times she’d stayed up all night while Carmen, who was an ace seamstress and an amazing designer, put the finishing touches on a *quince* ball gown. They had all watched the sun rise from Jamie’s studio, a garage turned working-artist’s space, while Jamie completed a mural or a video project that took an already awesome celebration right over the top.

There wasn’t anything you could tell Alicia and her girls about working hard. They’d all been there—blood, sweat, and tears—which was why Alicia wanted to have a sleepover. Lately, it seemed that every time

they got together, it was a business meeting—everybody with their iPads out, diligently taking notes and penciling in dates. She missed having a simple girls’ night in, with lots of good food, a cheesy DVD to laugh at, and nothing to do but relax and have a good time.

The doorbell rang, and Alicia knew it was Jamie, a dark-skinned Latina whose family originally came from the Dominican Republic. Having grown up in the Bronx, Jamie had been all hard edges and attitude. Then she fell in love with Dash Mortimer, the half Venezuelan, half American aristocrat and all-hottie golf player, and it rocked her world. Though it had taken a while for Jamie to reconcile the notion of herself as a girl from the streets with that of the girl who now hung out at country clubs and took private planes on the regular, the change had been good for her. Dash taught Jamie that she didn’t have to be hard to be real.

Jamie now strutted into the Cruz family home in a slouchy charcoal cashmere sweater, leopard-print leggings, and sky-high heels. Alicia couldn’t help laughing a little. “Come on, *chica*, I’m as fashion-forward as the next girl, but did you have to get so fancy for a sleepover?”

Jamie kicked her shoes off. “Ooooh, *mami*, I just had an early dinner with Dash. He was in town for an

ESPN event last night, but he has to get back to Duke. I wanted to look cute—make sure I kept my edge over all those boy-crazy college girls.”

In addition to crisscrossing the country on the junior PGA circuit, Dash Mortimer was a freshman at Duke University. Jamie had spent most of the summer trying to break up with him in anticipation of what she called “the inevitable,” but Dash had finally convinced her that distance wasn’t going to be their undoing. “It’s over when it’s over,” he had told her one night after she picked another fight with him. Pulling her toward him for a kiss that seemed to last forever, he had said, “I don’t know about you, but this doesn’t feel like it’s ever going to be over.” It was only the last week of September, still early in the semester, and so far the unlikely couple was holding strong.

The doorbell rang again, and now Carmen joined them. Although she was the group’s designated fashionista, she was dressed—as Alicia was—in sleepover-ready gear: an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt, black leggings, and neon pink fuzzy socks.

“Pajama party!” Carmen said, giving each of her friends the Latin *doble* kiss—a peck on each cheek. Carmen was Chicana on her mother’s side, Jewish Argentinean on her father’s side, and as she liked to say,

she wasn’t half and half, she was one hundred percent Latina.

As the girls tucked in to a meal of takeout Indian—samosas, rice, and spicy chicken vindaloo—the conversation drifted to the big question mark on the horizon: college.

“So, Lici, is that T-shirt a sign of your coming around?” Jamie asked playfully. “All that ivy looks good on you.”

Alicia was wearing a maroon and yellow Harvard T-shirt. Her parents had met at Harvard, and they’d made no secret of the fact that it would make them positively ecstatically happy if Alicia followed in their footsteps by attending that venerable institution.

Alicia blushed. “I just like wearing it, that’s all.”

Carmen tore off a piece of the Indian bread called naan and dipped it in the raita, a yogurt and cucumber dip that was the perfect cooling complement to the spicier dishes.

“And the fact that Gaz could be right down the road at Berklee doesn’t have anything to do with it?” Carmen asked.

Berklee College of Music had one of the top programs in the country for aspiring musicians, and

Alicia's boyfriend and sometime *quince* collaborator, Gaz Colón, was a *serious* musician. He didn't just play in a high school garage band, he'd already signed a deal with an independent label in Nashville. They hadn't placed any of his tunes yet, but Alicia had no doubt that one of Gaz's sweet and sexy love songs would have audiences cheering in the rafters and would be playing on a million iPods sooner or later.

She loved him. She adored his music. She just wasn't sure how much she should let her relationship influence what felt like the most important decision of her life.

"I don't know," Alicia replied, feeling uncharacteristically nervous and uncertain. "Don't you guys think it's lame to choose a school based on where your boyfriend is going to college?"

Jamie held up one finger and gave Alicia a little South Bronx head swivel. "Oh, come on, *chica*. When that school is Harvard, the most prestigious university in da world, the answer is no, it's not lame."

"But it's where my parents went. It's where my boyfriend wants me to go. There's no *me* in that equation." Alicia rested her head on Carmen's shoulder. "You understand, right, C.?"

Carmen patted her friend's arm reassuringly, just the way she had when Alicia had gotten food poisoning

the time they all went to Key West to plan a *quince* for a very eccentric girl who lived in a house full of three-legged cats.

"Alicia," Carmen replied, "you're large and in charge. It's not what you choose to do, it's who you are. And you'll be running the joint, with a pile of friends and fans, wherever you go."

Alicia looked reassured; she always was when Carmen gave her advice. It wasn't just that Carmen was her oldest friend—which she was—it was also that Carmen had the mellow vibe of a Zen yoga master.

"Thanks, C.," Alicia said. "What about you guys? Things all moving along according to plan?"

"I'm trying to keep it simple," Jamie answered. "I'm planning to apply to three colleges in my favorite city, which, of course, is NYC. To mix things up a bit, I'm also looking at two schools with great graphic-design departments: Savannah College of Art and Design, and there's a dual program at Brown and Rhode Island School of Design."

"I'm going to apply to twelve colleges," Carmen said, smiling, "which seems like eight too many, but when your mom teaches high school, going above and beyond is the name of the game. Then we'll see where I get in and what I can afford. My dad's latest *telenovela*,

¡*Qué Lástima!*, just went into syndication in twenty-two countries, so *Papá* says if I get into almost anywhere, he'll cover the tuition, so I should be okay."

"What about 'To the Max' Maxo?" Jamie said. "Boyfriend have any preferences?"

Maxo was Carmen's new "guyfriend," as she called him. They'd gotten to know each other at the end of junior year. Alicia and Jamie liked to call him "To the Max" Maxo, because he was cute—to the max; smart—to the max; and sweet—well, to the max.

Carmen smiled. "Maxo is actually going to take a year off to work with the Geekcorps in Haiti. He's going to be part of a volunteer IT team that helps local communities become more proficient in information and communications technologies."

"See?" Jamie laughed. "He's even a do-gooder—to the max."

"And you'll be okay with him being in another country for a whole year?" Alicia wondered.

Carmen shrugged, "Are you kidding? The rebuilding effort down there will take *years*, if not decades. I'm so proud of him for being willing to sacrifice a year to make a difference. I'll miss him, just like I'll miss you guys. But I want everyone I love to follow their dreams, no matter where they take them."

"You're awesome, Carm. I wish I could be as relaxed and mature as you are about this senior-year decision-making stuff," Alicia said as she put down her fork. "What I love about *quinceañeras* is that they are all about ritual and transition. You turn fifteen. You go to a church and the priest blesses you. You change from flat shoes to high heels. Presto change-o, you're no longer a kid, you're a woman. Then you have a big party and you dance the night away. Why can't finishing high school be like that?"

Jamie and Carmen both raised their eyebrows. Alicia very rarely had meltdowns. But when she did, they tended to be epic—and the girls had a feeling that deep in their friend's heart, a meltdown of legendary proportions was brewing.

"Sweetie," Carmen offered, "there's a process for finishing high school. It's called graduation."

Jamie reached for Alicia's *quince* crown and added, "You even get to wear a funny hat. There are speeches and a formal ceremony, just like in a *quince*. And there are huge parties after."

Alicia did not look satisfied. "But that comes when all the hard work is done, when you've taken your SATs, applied to colleges, and actually decided where you want to go. The difficult part is now, when there's

a million decisions to make and each one feels way significant.” Biting the straw in her drink, she said, “You know what I wish?”

Jamie shook her head. “I have no idea.”

Carmen shrugged. “Not a clue.”

“I wish there were an equivalent of us, an Amigas Inc., to guide you through the whole process—from college tours to SATs to applications and decision making.”

Jamie reached into her purse for a tube of lip gloss. “Uh, *duh*. There is. It’s called guidance counselors.”

Alicia shook her head. “See, that’s like saying regular party-planners are like us. If only there were girls who’d just been through it—who could help you decide.”

Carmen knew then that her friend was really scared, not just about whether or not she’d go to Harvard, but about all the other changes that lay ahead, too. “Lici,” she said tenderly, “*no te preocupes*. We’ll help each other through this. We’ll do what we always do when we plan a *quince*. We’ll make a checklist. We’ll divide the tasks according to our strengths, and we’ll rock it out. Just like we always do.”

“Pinkie promise?” Alicia said, extending a little finger to each of her best friends.

The girls locked fingers.

“There’s only one thing that could make me feel even better,” Alicia said shyly.

“And what’s that?” Carmen asked, glad that her friend seemed to have been talked down from the ledge.

“If Jamie would lend me her mad hot shoes. They are fabulous, and they are spanking new. Not like mine, which are cute, but hand-me-downs from my mom.” Alicia slipped the shoes on and ran out into the hall. She was quite a sight in her worn-out Harvard T, navy cutoffs, and runway-ready patent-leather heels.

“I got those shoes on eBay,” Jamie said, running after her.

“Of course you did,” Alicia grinned. Jamie’s prowess at finding incredible deals online was legendary.

“They come from a seller in Antwerp,” Jamie added as she caught up to Alicia. “That style never even came to the US.”

Alicia took the shoes off and tossed one to Carmen. “Feel that leather, Carmen. It’s like buttah,” she laughed.

Jamie stood between Alicia and Carmen, desperately trying to catch one of her shoes as they sailed over her head. “You do know that you’re playing hot potato with a very exquisite pair of heels, don’t you?” she asked.

“And to think,” Alicia said innocently, “back in the eighth grade, we played hot potato with real potatoes. What a bore!” Then she dissolved in giggles, relieved that, although as seniors in high school they were too old for many things, sleepovers weren’t among them.