

Chapter 10



Out of Control

After another swim, Nan and Bronte agreed to meet again the following day. Bronte carried her Boogie board home under her arm with her towel around her neck, as she had seen the locals do.

In the kitchen, she ate a cookie while dialing Jessie's number. On the third ring a woman answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi. This is Bronte Bella. May I please speak to Jessie?"

A muffled moment passed. "Oh! Is this about the book club?"

"Yes."

"Hold on. I'll get her."

Bronte could hear voices in the background.

She couldn't tell, but they sounded angry. Soon she realized Jessie and her mother were arguing about the club.

"It's lame, that's why. I'm not going, and you can't make me."

"You listen to me, young lady—"

Should I hang up? It felt as if she were eavesdropping.

"—people will think you're smart, Jessie, if you know how to discuss literature. It's quite the thing to do, even your brother—"

"I'm not an idiot, you know."

"Well, my dear, that's a debate worth having."

Bronte hung up.

At the next meeting Lupe arrived wearing sunglasses in leopard-print frames with a matching scarf swirled over her shoulders. She handed Bronte a small cardboard box from the bakery. Inside were oatmeal cookies and date bars. "My dad's the owner," she said, "so he loves giving stuff to my friends."

"Wow, thanks, Lupe. I'll get a plate." Bronte hurried into the kitchen, optimistic that this time would be more cheerful than the last. She set the

cookies on the coffee table just as Nan showed up, soon followed by Willow.

When Jessie came in she went to the bamboo chair without greeting anyone. After the unpleasant episode last time, Bronte was surprised she was back, and glad. But feeling awkward about the aborted phone call, she glanced down at her notes.

“Sooo,” she began, “I was wondering what you guys thought about Chapter Five, where Karana’s people wanted to canoe to Catalina Island. It’s about fifty miles away, and the channel is real choppy. See, this map here—”

“I went to camp on Catalina,” Willow volunteered. “Girl Scouts. We slept on the beach, but the wild boars came down from the hills and stole our toothbrushes that we left out.”

“Okay . . . well . . .” Bronte didn’t want to cut her off, but she knew Willow could talk forever, and they should at least *try* to discuss the book. At their last meeting, after Jessie left, the girls had ended up reading Lupe’s *People* magazine together, then gossiping about boys in town.

“Anyway,” continued Willow, “me and my friends shaved our legs there for the first time

ever. The camp store had bars of cocoa butter for sale so we used—”

“Me too!” Now it was Lupe. “I mean, I first started shaving at camp. My mom went ballistic because she didn’t get to show me how. Like I really want to do things the way *she* does. Anyway”—Lupe adjusted her scarf—“we made up. Now she buys me Sweet Teen Shaving Gel with pink razors, and makes a fuss about me growing up.” Lupe rolled her eyes dramatically.

“My mom doesn’t shave her legs,” Nan volunteered. “She doesn’t even wear a bra.”

“Oh you wouldn’t believe *my* mother,” said Willow. “She has every color, and they’re all padded to make her boobs bigger. She gave me a training bra when I turned nine, even though—”

“Okay,” Bronte interrupted, uneasy with such intimate details. She wanted to steer the conversation back to their book but didn’t know how. As a result the next hour and a half roared by with Nan, Willow, and Lupe chattering about cell phones, celebrities, pets, and finally parents. They didn’t seem to notice that Bronte and Jessie were silent.

Bronte felt helpless. She was thrilled that

everyone was getting along, but the meeting was out of control, and it was nearly five o'clock. Making one last effort she held up her copy of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. "Since we're on the subject of parents, this was my mom's when she was ten years—"

"My mom hates me." It was the first time Jessie had spoken that afternoon. She was staring down at her sandals, fiddling with a silver chain around her ankle.

Willow drew in a breath, ready to comment; but Bronte headed her off.

"Jessie," Bronte said, "I'm sure your mother doesn't hate you. Even when we're awful our mothers love us, right?" Bronte looked at the others for confirmation, but no one responded.

"Yeah. Right." Jessie stood up. "This club is stupid." She slung her handbag over her shoulder and left the sunroom.

When the front door slammed shut, Bronte dropped her head back and stared at the ceiling fan.

Now what?