

CHAPTER

I

Tiara Trouble

I jiggled my foot up and down and stared out the window of Boston's Logan Airport at the jets lined up like toy planes on a game board. To tell the truth I was a little bored, which really wasn't my usual style, particularly since I was about to leave on an adventure.

Then out of the corner of my eye I saw an adorable little boy twirling about like a bird and staring up at the ceiling. As the official BSG artist-in-training, I always reach for my special Isabel Martinez sketchpad whenever I see something different or special to draw. But a burst of girl laughter distracted me for a second.

I glanced over at my sister, Elena Maria, who was deep in important teenage conversation with her chatty best friends, Jill and Lauren. It was pretty obvious that I wasn't going to be invited to join their talk fest. How I wished that Avery, Charlotte, Maeve, and Katani were going to Texas with me. The BSG were my best friends in the world, and right away I wanted to call them and tell them to race to

the airport. But I couldn't. This was my sister's adventure. I was just along for the ride. Plus . . . in the morning rush I had forgotten my cell phone at home.

At least I had my art supplies. I felt happy about that. As I leaned down to grab my sketchpad out of the one-of-a-kind artist's bag Katani had sewn for me, it hit me. I mean something actually *hit* me. "Ow!" I squealed. I had just bumped my head on somebody's rising bright orange ankle brace—that somebody being Scott Madden, Avery's older brother, and, I was almost positive, Elena Maria's main crush. Not that she would ever admit that to me in her current state of frenzy. (More about that later.)

"Sorry, Iz, I completely didn't see you reaching down!" Scott said apologetically.

Scott *was* really nice for a high-school guy, even if he had just crashed into my head. I opened my mouth to tell him "No problemo," but before I had the chance, Elena Maria rushed over to his side. "You okay, Scott?" she asked in her sweetest voice. Yup, he was definitely the main crush of the moment.

"Uh, yeah," he said, laughing and sounding a little embarrassed. "I guess a guy with a sprained ankle should be a little more careful."

"I'm okay too—," I started, but was interrupted by Elena Maria's friend Lauren, who called out from across the waiting area, "Check. It. Out! Elena and Scott, you *have* to watch this video Jill has on her iPod! It's sooooo funny!"

Without another look back at me, my sister and a

limping Scott took off to join Jill and Lauren and Scott's friend Andy. I turned to grab some mom attention, but saw that she was sneaking a quick snooze before we boarded. Next to her, my Aunt Lourdes was engrossed in a thick, hardback book.

Again I wished I could chill with the BSG. What an adventure we could have on my aunt and uncle's ranch in Texas. Instead, because it was my sister's superfabulous birthday entitled "My Amazing, Incredible *Quinceañera*," starring Elena Maria Martinez, she got to bring *her* friends.

In our Mexican culture, honoring a girl when she turns fifteen is an important tradition that might even go back all the way to the time of the Aztecs. That celebration is called a *quinceañera*, and it's basically a beautiful ceremony followed by a huge, awesome, rockin' party. I love *quinceañeras* . . . usually. But my sister was taking hers to a whole new level of crazy. All she could talk about was dresses, tiaras, shoes . . . and her amazing party.

The whole *quince* planning thing exploded a couple of months ago when the three of us—Mom, Elena Maria, and me—were sitting in my Aunt Lourdes's living room, looking at some old family photos. I could look at those pictures over and over again and never get sick of them. I loved seeing us all together as a family. Back in the fall we had left our home in Detroit, where my dad still lived, and moved in with Aunt Lourdes in Brookline so Mom could get treated for her multiple sclerosis by doctors in Boston. My aunt was a nurse, and she was tapped into lots of incredible medical care.

Mom's MS was hard to understand and kind of frustrating for me. Sometimes she'd feel okay, and then the next week she might feel weak and dizzy, and there wasn't really a lot we could do about it. But that night had been a good night. Mom was sitting up on the couch and smiling as she held the photo album and flipped through pages of photos of her "darling" daughters.

"Look at this one, Isabel! You were only two years old. And there you are, Elena, just four. My two beautiful girls," Mom said. I scooted closer to the album and giggled at the two of us in our Halloween costumes while Elena Maria filed her nails.

I was surprised that Elena Maria was even hanging out with me and Mom that night. It was a Tuesday, and lately she'd been spending every Tuesday and Thursday evening at Scott Madden's house, "studying Physics," she said.

"Elena," I had teased a few nights earlier, "with the amount of study time you're putting in, your report card should be amazing. Just think," I added, "Mom and Dad will have your report card photocopied and send it to all our relatives in Mexico. The Mexican government will issue a special proclamation declaring it a holiday: 'Elena Martinez, Student of the Century Day!'"

My sister chased me around our bedroom with a spray can filled with purple hair mousse. I was about to get seriously slimed, when I stubbed my toe and started to bleed really, really badly. Elena Maria, who is a total softie inside, grabbed a towel and started treating me like a patient.

"Lean back, Isabel, I'm going to put disinfectant on

your poor toe and bandage you up.” Even though the disinfectant hurt like crazy I couldn’t help laughing because Elena Maria was acting like Aunt Lourdes. She even took my pulse!

After Nurse Elena fixed me up, we laughed ourselves crazy about Elena Maria Day in Mexico. One of the best things about having my sister is the laugh-a-thons we share over the silly things we do.

After almost a half hour of flipping through the photo album, Elena finally put down her nail file. *Thank goodness*, I thought. The sound of her file scritch-scratching back and forth on her nail had been making me squirm. “Um, so looking at these pictures is fun, but there’s something else I think we should talk about,” she announced.

Leaning over a huge tote bag, she pulled out an overstuffed white notebook with *MY QUINCEAÑERA* written in flowery pink letters on the front. Wow! Was I impressed. My sister was really organized for her party.

“You think I looked beautiful as a little girl, Mami? Just imagine me at my *quince!*” She opened the notebook dramatically to reveal pages and pages of pictures torn out of magazines and carefully pasted into the notebook. She had even written little notes on the side of each page about where to buy everything. *So that’s what she’s been working on*, I thought. For the past few nights she had closed the door to our bedroom after dinner so she could “concentrate.”

I smiled politely as she flipped through glossy pages of her ideas for the *quince*. They included: a huge cake, a

horse-drawn carriage for her and her court of honor, and an elaborate hairstyle with gobs of curls piled up on top of her head. “That will look sooooo good with the tiara. Have you started thinking about what kind of tiara you want to get me, Mami? Because if you haven’t, I have a whole list of choices right here.” She flipped to a page where she had pasted a ton of magazine cutouts of the sparkliest, most gigantic crowns I had ever seen. I mean, we’re talking some serious bling.

Before Mom or I could say anything Elena turned to a page covered with pictures of beautiful porcelain dolls. “Don’t you just love them, Isabel?” she gushed. “As my little sister, you know I will be giving you my last doll, and believe me, I want to give you the absolute best one I possibly can—but that’s up to Mom and Dad, of course,” she added, giving Mom a meaningful look.

I looked up at my sister with shining eyes when I heard “the last doll.” She knew the last doll was one of my favorite *quinceañera* traditions. In our family, the *quinceañera* sometimes gives her favorite doll or a pretty new doll to a younger sister—like me. It was a sign of approaching maturity.

I was so touched that my sister remembered me in her plans that I restrained myself from giggling at her other way-out plans. I really wanted a last doll. It would be a special symbol of my Mexican heritage and my bond with my sister (even though she can drive me crazy sometimes!), and I would keep it forever.

But then came the shoes. My sister was practically

drooling as she flipped through at least five pages of pictures of every kind of high heel imaginable: strappy, stiletto, kitten heel, hot pink . . . everything. It was another tradition for the *quinceañera's* father to give her a pair of high-heeled shoes at the ceremony to symbolize how she was growing up, but I'd never seen anyone receive shoes like the ones Elena Maria had picked out! I glanced over at Mom. She was staring intently at the pages, but the corners of her mouth seemed to be twitching.

As Elena continued to page through her notebook, she gabbed at a hundred miles a minute. It was getting harder for me to keep from laughing out loud. "Look at this one, Isabel. Do you see the beads on the toe? And Mom, how adorable is the pink satin strap with three-and-a-half-inch heels? I will look like a model in those." I wanted to tell my sister that she would look like a wobbly flamenco dancer and break a leg in those high shoes, but I didn't. I could tell how important all of this was to her.

Instead I concentrated on my doll. But then I caught Mom's expression and saw that she was about to lose it too. I sat on my hands and began to count birds. *One flamingo, two crows, three robins* . . . birds were my fave. I thought of all the adorable new bird cartoons I could do about flamingos in top hats and tails, crows in wild pink costumes, and fat little robins in tutus. Anything to keep me from bursting out laughing at her outrageous choices.

But then my sister turned the page and pointed to a picture cut from a high-fashion magazine, and dramatically announced what she planned to wear.

“Violet Woo, *peau de soie*, in powder-blush pink. It’s only one thousand dollars at Bloomingdale’s.”

My jaw fell. Mom’s eyes popped wide open. “Violet Woo!” I exclaimed. Everyone in the world knew that Violet Woo was one of the most famous fashion designers ever. Elena was so caught up in her dream of pink *peau de soie* that she didn’t even register our reactions.

“*Peau de soie* means ‘skin of silk’ in French,” she explained, smiling radiantly. It was like Elena Maria was in some Cinderella world and didn’t even realize that her mom and sister thought she had lost her *quinceañera* mind. “It’s smooth. They make the fabric some way so it has a finished feel to it on both sides.”

I looked at Mom. She bit her lip. I hiccupped . . . and it was all over. Mom and I began to laugh. Quietly at first, but soon I was laughing so hard, I squeezed one of the pillows on the couch so tightly that a feather popped out. That sent my mom over the edge with laughter.

Poor Elena Maria. She looked confused. “What? What’s wrong? Do you think I should go with ‘Oriental Ivory’ instead? What’s so funny?”

Mom and I tried to tone it down, we really did. Neither of us wanted to hurt Elena Maria’s feelings, but every time one of us tried to speak, the other one would laugh even harder. We were lost in total giggle-riot mode. Everyone knows that when you are in total giggle-riot mode, you have to let it run its course, or you could have a stroke or something.

“Will somebody tell me what’s going on?” Elena Maria demanded, sounding hurt.

“*Mi hijita*,” Mom finally managed to spit out. “I think you might want to reconsider, at the very least, your choice of gown. A thousand dollars? And a carriage with a team of horses? How could we possibly find a carriage to fit fifteen people?”

“What are you . . . a movie star?” I squealed. I got hit by poison darts coming from Elena Maria’s eyes and a warning eyebrow from my mom. I realized I’d better cool it way down. Nobody likes to get made fun of when she’s talking about something that is really important to her.

“Mami, this is very serious, and I’ve done tons of research. I can probably get the gown at Filene’s Basement. All the girls tell me it’s the place to go for high fashion at bargain prices.”

Mom sighed. “Elena Maria, a thousand-dollar dress . . . it’s not possible, sweetheart.”

“Mami,” she cried. “I have to have the Violet Woo. It’s perfect! And if they have it at Filene’s it’ll be much cheaper—maybe half.”

“Even that is a bit much.”

“A bit much? Considering everything else I need for the *quince*, this is the most reasonable thing I’m asking for.”

“Yes, let’s consider those other things. The carriage? The doves you want to release? And the live band?” Mom provided answers by shaking her head: No, no, and no. “We need to be more frugal, dear.”

“Mami, nooooo! I have to have a carriage! I have to

make my *gran entrada!*” Elena was beginning to sound panicky. I looked over at Mom but she seemed unfazed by my sister’s rant. The calmer my mother remained, the wilder Elena Maria became.

Suddenly, Elena dropped her head in her hands. “Why can’t I get what I want, just this once?” I really felt sorry for my disappointed sister, even if she was acting like an event planner to the stars.

After a minute of sighing, her head popped up like a pogo stick as she announced, “Which brings me to another important subject. We have to make decisions. Tonight, Mom. Tonight! Deidre sent me an e-mail telling me my friends back in Detroit are waiting for their invitations. At the very least I have to let everybody know when and where, especially the girls and boys on my honor court.”

The *quinceañera’s corte de honor*, or honor court, was usually made up of seven *damas*, girls, and seven *chambelanes*, boys who acted as the girls’ escorts. Plus, some girls also picked one special guy to be their *chambelan de honor*, their date for the big party. I was pretty sure I knew who Elena Maria had in mind.

Mom continued to stare at Elena, with a look of firmness or pity, I couldn’t be sure.

“We really need to book the Chateau Celine soon.” Elena was still in major *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* mode. Mom didn’t blink. “We *are* having it at the Chateau, aren’t we? Aren’t we? Answer me, Mami!” I knew we couldn’t afford a place like Chateau Celine, so I braced myself for my sister’s freak-out when she heard Mom’s answer.

“Elena Maria, please calm yourself, sweetheart . . . and listen to me carefully. We are not having it at the Chateau Celine. Your *quinceañera* is not going to be held in Detroit.”

My sister’s eyes popped out. “Then let’s book it at the Holiday Inn on Beacon Street. I’ll call them tonight.” Wow, Elena even had plan B ready. I was impressed. She was already an awesome cook, now I could see her future catering business being a huge success. I was pretty excited because if the party was held in Brookline all my friends could come.

But Mom was already shaking her head. “Your *quinceañera* will not be in Brookline, either, dear.”

You could have dropped a ten-pound water balloon on Elena Maria’s head and she wouldn’t have noticed. Or on me, too, for that matter. What was Mom talking about?

Then she surprised both Elena and me with her next announcement. “Your father’s sister, your Aunt Inez, and her husband, Uncle Hector, have offered the use of their ranch in Texas for your party. It’s all been arranged.”

Elena jumped up from the couch. “What? In TEXAS? That’s impossible! No way!”

“Please sit down, Elena Maria. Just listen a moment to what your father and I have planned for you. I think you will—”

“I don’t want to have my most important birthday at a *ranch* in Texas! That’s crazy!” she cried as she wiped a river of tears from her cheeks. “And who’s going to be there? My

cousins? What about my friends? Who will be my *chambelan de honor*?" she asked. "This has to be a joke! Tell me you're joking. Uncle Hector and Aunt Inez let their chickens run all over the place and everything!"

My reaction was the complete opposite. Texas! Whoa! Chickens. I could barely remember my uncle and aunt's ranch, only that it was in the middle of nowhere, that the house was big and dark, and that there were cows . . . and a rooster. But, wow, what an adventure! "Yee-haw," I yapped. Oops! I clapped my hands over my mouth.

Elena shot me a look. She was not happy with my enthusiasm.

"I think you'll find the ranch has changed a lot since you were last there," Mom explained calmly. "Hector has made a lot of improvements, and I have heard Aunt Inez has decorated the place to the nines. I promise you won't be disappointed with your party."

Elena Maria popped up from the couch and tossed her *quince* book on the floor. In an angry voice she protested, "I am *not* going to Texas for my *quinceañera*. I just won't have one and that's that. If it can't be the way *I* want it, then there won't be one." And then she actually stomped her foot like a two-year-old. I couldn't believe my sister's behavior. Elena Maria had crossed the line, and she knew it, too.

"Elena Maria!" Mom cried forcefully. Whoa. I knew that tone. I looked from Mom's face to Elena Maria's and back again.

After a few seconds of silence, my sister sat back down,

folded her arms across her chest and took a big gulp of air. Mom explained their decision about the party in a patient voice. “Your father and I can’t afford to give you the party you want,” she said. “But Uncle Hector and Aunt Inez have generously offered to be your *padrino* and *madrina* for the *quinceañera*—to sponsor everything for you. As relatives who care about you very much, they are offering the use of their ranch, catering, the entertainment, and round-trip airfare to San Antonio. You can ask four friends from Brookline to come along.

“Hector and Inez made this offer a couple of weeks ago, and after looking at our budget, your father and I decided that it’s really the best option. Your father wanted to surprise you with this together, but it seems that now is the time. We had hoped you would love the idea, but if not, then I am truly sorry.”

My mother’s words echoed in the air, not so much for what she said, but how she said it. My mom might have MS, but she still has a lot of *fuera*—force. She sounded strong and very sure of herself.

Elena Maria sighed and looked at the ground. “I guess it’ll be okay,” she mumbled. But her voice sounded sad. Her party was not what she had dreamed of. I reached over and squeezed her hand. She might be *Quince-zilla* right now, but her eyes were brimming with tears.

“That is a very wise and mature decision, *mi hijita*,” Mom said. “Now I am a bit tired.” Using her cane, she got up and headed for her bedroom, leaving Elena Maria and me alone on the couch.

I had no idea what to say. “Ummm . . . it’ll be so great to see our *primos*,” I told her, trying to sound extra-cheerful.

“Oh, Isabel.” She sighed. “They don’t know anything about anything. Only horses and cows. They’re a bunch of *cowboys*.” She started sniffing again. “This is awful. I wish I wasn’t turning fifteen. Not now.”

She sounded so upset. I asked her, “Do you want me to make some special Mexican hot chocolate with cinnamon and whipped cream, and just a little teaspoon of coffee?” It was the only thing I could think of to cheer her up.

“No thanks. I’m not hungry right now. But at least,” she said, giving me a little half smile, “I can still ask Scott Madden to be my *chambelan de honor*, so I won’t have to dance with my cousins.”

Uh-oh. My face gave me away.

“What? Is that a bad idea? Oh, no. He has a girlfriend. Does he, Izzy? Does he have a girlfriend, Izzy?”

“Um, I hate to break it to you, but the dancing part . . . well, Avery told me this morning that Scott had an accident. He fell from the kitchen counter reaching for some spice or something. He might have sprained his ankle . . . really badly.”

Elena Maria was silent for a moment, then raised her face and hands to the sky. “*¡Ay, ay, ay!*” she wailed.