

Fifteen

Julie drove up to the International flights terminal, pulled the car up to the curb and turned off the ignition. She glanced at Kevin and Modra in the rear view mirror as they hurriedly exited the car. A police officer walked past them at a brisk pace blowing his whistle, commanding the SUV parked in front of them to move along. The brake lights went off and the SUV pulled forward and away from the curb before the policeman could stick his head into the passenger window.

“Julie, I hope you’re able to finalize everything with Veloria here soon.” She had concern in her voice though it was apparent she was trying to hide it. “I mean, I can’t imagine you’ll need to be around much longer than a week, what do you think?”

Julie smiled for her sister’s benefit wishing she could be more confident about the surety of the adoption, but she couldn’t rid herself of the feeling that it was all going to come apart. Everyone kept reassuring her that it was in Veloria’s best interest to follow through with the adoption, and yet Veloria’s disposition said that she wasn’t so sure anymore.

“I hope a week is all. I’m out of vacation time.” After all of her traveling back and forth, agonizing over every detail, and coming so close to having a baby, she feared going home. She felt that she needed to be near Veloria to continually remind her

that she is doing the right thing. She could see that Veloria was being pulled apart by the life she would have led had she not become pregnant and the guilt of giving up her baby to adoption. They have become close and she can now see how fragile she is. Sadly, Julie knew she couldn't stay in Healdsburg longer than a week; she has a son and a job that she has to get back to.

She wanted to talk about Veloria and her fears again and pry some sort of reassurance from her older sister, but she had already tortured them for the past two hours and felt that to be enough. Embarrassed of the fact that she had selfishly crammed their two hour commute with two hours of her fretting, she gave her sister a weak smile and shrugged her apology.

“She just has to be found competent to consent to the adoption, and I'm sure she will be.” Modra placed her arms around her sister and gave her a tight squeeze. “It's all going to be fine, sister. This is just a lot for her to emotionally handle and it's understandable... she's still just a kid.” Modra could feel her sister nodding her head. “She's not going to change her mind. She's just depressed.”

“And scared.” Kevin added. “She's running through that guilt circuit thing you all do and she's dreaming up the worst.” Kevin patted Julie's shoulder as she clung to Modra. “Just keep talking to her and remind her that she's doing exactly what her aunt Modra does, torturing herself by thinking of the ‘what ifs’.”

Modra thought that Julie needed to find a way to stay in Healdsburg until the baby was safely in her arms, but she knew it

wasn't feasible and never voiced her opinion to her sister out loud.

“Ugh!” Modra let out, “it is going to be interesting.” She stared at her sister for a minute wondering how in the world Julie would handle the situation if Veloria did change her mind. Even worse, how would they all handle the situation if Veloria changed her mind after it was all final? She then looked at her watch and realized they needed to get going. “Remember, we won't be checking email regularly,” Modra said, taking her bag from Kevin as he removed it from the trunk. “So you may be getting some delayed responses.” Modra pulled her backpack upright. She was still a little nervous about traveling with a huge bag strapped to her back. “Oh, Dad and I agreed that I would call him on his cell phone every other Friday at noon, but keep it to yourself, I'm not interested in being kept up-to-date on the family drama... except for yours... I mean... I only want to be updated on your adoption process and nothing else. Everything else can wait 'til we get back.” Modra flung her pack over her shoulders and hugged her sister goodbye.

“I love you, sister,” Julie's eyes became swollen with tears as she spoke. “Have a wonderful trip.”

Julie turned to hug Kevin. He put his bag down then had to put his leg out to stop it from tilting over, but it fell over anyway.

“Hey,” Kevin said, hugging her back, “we'll miss you, too. Next time we see you, you'll be a new mom.”

“I can hardly wait.” She stepped back and helped him lift his rust-orange-colored backpack from the ground to his shoulder. He thanked her and she quickly gave them both a kiss on the cheek. She was already missing them. “Have fun,” she said as she walked around the car.

Kevin and Mod smiled and waved goodbye to her as she got into the driver’s seat. Julie waved her final goodbye before driving away. They stood with an arm around each other’s waist as they watched her melt into the flow of traffic and disappear.

“Whew!” He proclaimed, “That’s just difficult all around.”

Modra nodded.

He then turned to his wife, “Well, are you ready to sow your childless oats across Argentina, my un-difficult and un-complicated love?” Kevin asked with ever more certainty of their decision to abstain from adoption; that was a call they had made early on and after getting a better understanding of the process, he was relieved for having made it. He took her pack from her and swung it onto his other shoulder before extending his hand for her to take.

There they stood, before the magical airport doors, as they joined their hands and took their first giant step towards the long awaited excursion they were never sure they would get to enjoy. Humoring Modra, they stepped inside the terminal and together inhaled deeply the minute the automatic doors closed behind them. With the fluidity of a well-established routine, Kevin and Modra began their long awaited experience into SFO. They had

arrived a full three and a half hours early, giving them time to leisurely check themselves in. It only took about forty minutes to get from the check-in counter through security to the bar where they enjoyed over two solid hours of people-watching before they were on their fourteen-hour flight to Buenos Aires.

“Ben Beneidos a Buenos Ires. La hora es dose y dey la tarde ey la temperatoora es baynte tres grados selsios.”

Kevin and Modra sat up, rubbing their eyes to the announcement overhead in an attempt at Castilian by the clearly American pilot.

“He gets an A for effort and nothing more,” Kevin said, wiping the drool off the side of his mouth. Modra watched him as he pulled his shirt out to see where the trail ended.

“Oh . . .” Modra said, “don’t worry, it’s on my shirt.” She pointed to the white, partially dry saliva on her sleeveless, navy-blue polo shirt. They had stayed up for most of the flight watching movies, unable to sleep. It wasn’t until the last couple of hours that exhaustion had finally won out. Kevin had obviously been able to sleep though the rough turbulence where Modra had merely dozed in and out with every rattle and shake.

They pulled up the shade and saw a vast city beneath them. Modra was pleasantly surprised; the homes they flew over were in excellent condition, contrary to flying over Mexico City. The landscape seemed green and lush; Kevin commented on the amount of rain they must receive before recalling that they were well into Argentina’s winter months.

By the time they made it through customs and got to baggage claim, their bags were already off the carousel and placed under a handwritten sign with their flight number. Thrilled to not have to wait for their bags, they swung them over their shoulders and headed for the exit. Once they found a taxi and were on the road, their exhaustion faded away. Kevin and Modra found themselves admiring the city, amazed by the incredible number of parks available at every turn. There was something different about the city view that had their attention. Modra couldn't put her finger on it, but something was definitely different.

“No windows!” Kevin said pointing at the buildings as they passed them. “You see, they don't have windows on the sides or backs of the buildings, only on the front!”

Kevin was right; the only openings on the high-rise condominiums or apartment buildings were the hollows which were obviously hammered out by the current residents for the soon-to-be-placed swamp coolers and the windows at the face of the building, which were covered with metal shutters in the middle of the day. Kevin and Modra sat in the back seat of the taxi, both sets of eyes on the closest building to the freeway, examining it as they went by: the left side of the building . . . all wall, no glass; the back side of the building . . . all wall with the occasional swamp cooler or hole for one; drive around to the right side . . . all wall, no windows. Incredibly, the buildings emerged twenty or thirty floors above the ground with absolutely

no glass on three of the four sides. Modra wondered if this was done in anticipation for future construction surrounding the high-rise.

The both looked at each other, wondering how safe the building would be in a fire before deciding that this was why they loved to travel. Everything was different away from home.

Forty minutes later, they arrived at their hotel. They gratefully handed off their backpacks to the bellboy and checked into their room. They climbed two flights of stairs to get to their room and as they stood before their room door, and before Modra inserted the key-card into the slot, they made an impromptu pact: Immediately jump into the shower, change into warmer clothes, and then sprint out the door in an effort to avoid a total submission to jet lag.

They knew it would be cold when they arrived in Argentina but couldn't fathom wearing winter clothes when they had just driven away from Healdsburg, which was boasting temperatures in the high nineties. They had nearly frozen their bottoms off just getting to the hotel, so when they emerged from their room, each was wrapped in a scarf, hat, and heavy leather coat—ready to explore.

The first stop they made was Café Confection, located a few blocks from the hotel and across on Santa Fe Street. They sat and had their first espresso accompanied by a complementary butter cookie with a raspberry filling. They sat for half an hour taking in their surroundings, watching the stylish locals walk past the

window. The women were slender; they wore knee-length, high-heeled boots over their skinny denim pants. Beautiful scarves and hats accessorized their outfits as they confidently strutted their way down the sidewalk. The men went about wearing perfectly worn denim pants or slacks, complemented by either nice Argentine leather loafers or colorful sneakers. For the most part, the look for men seemed to be a sort of rugged-preppy look.

The initial impression Buenos Aires made on Kevin and Modra was Western European; the similarities were most apparent in the architecture. The waitress explained that Spain was considered Argentina's mother country so they took many of their cultural and social cues from them. Happily, like Spain, they also took a daily siesta between the hours of two and five PM. The local dinner hour commenced at nine PM, anything prior to that indicated that one was a tourist and anything later made getting a table nearly impossible. To Modra's delight, they were told that locals practiced daily espresso and cake hour that normally took place at around three PM every glorious day, which also helped to explain the vast number of pastry shops sprinkled around the city.

Fully informed on Buenos Aires and its cultural customs, Kevin and Modra felt ready to spend their first cold day getting lost in the massive city. She was thrilled to walk on the narrow cobblestone roads and couldn't shake the feeling of Europe all around, from the architecture to the people. The B.A. locals, by appearance, seemed to be of predominantly European descent,

obviously the result of race mixing with the British, Spanish, and Germans settlers. There seemed to be vast number of German last names behind Spanish first names and different German, Spanish, and English words seemed to have been blended into their version of the Castilian language.

Kevin and Modra, intrigued by the city's diversity, decided to venture miles away from their hotel and visit a district called La Boca. They stopped a couple of times along the way for *empanadas de carne* and a glass of the local wine, Malbec. Only a few hours into their adventure their energy levels had begun to drop, and the wine was not helping their cause either. They strolled through the streets toward La Boca becoming aware of the changing demographics around them. As they walked away from the city center, they noticed more and more poverty, reminiscent of the outskirts of Mexico City.

“This part would appear to belong to the ethnic Argentines,” Modra said, looking around.

Kevin agreed. “They seem to have been forgotten by their government,” he said, looking at the sidewalks which were almost three feet above the dirt roads in some areas.

They discussed the elevated sidewalks and agreed they were elevated for flood protection and not for pedestrian protection since there were hardly any cars in that part of town; probably for economic reasons.

Once in La Boca, Kevin and Modra walked around taking in the colorful buildings and the beautiful narrow streets of the

town where tango was born. The area was an undisputed major tourist attraction. People milled around in their heavy coats, umbrellas in hand, as they posed for pictures in front of the famous street corner called Caminito. The colorful two-story building that stood on that corner was guaranteed a spot in every tourist's photo album, including their own.

They had walked four miles to get to La Boca and then strolled up and down every street they came across, absorbing the architecture and the culture. Eventually, the camera began to feel too heavy to lift and Modra knew she was wilting. They decided on a quick espresso and another complementary cookie before heading back towards their hotel in search of a place for dinner.

They meandered their way back to their hotel where the bellboy happily recommended a local favorite, The Espania Restaurant. They thanked him then fought the urge to skip dinner and go to sleep, knowing that would only result with them becoming awake at a god forsaken hour and starving. Espania was located only two short blocks away, but for an exhausted Kevin and Modra who were battling jetlag, it felt more like ten.

They found the place and were grateful to be seated. A bread basket was placed on the table by their waiter before he smiled and rushed off again. As they waited patiently for him to return they could feel themselves melting into their chairs from exhaustion. Modra's eyes appeared to be closing and Kevin rested his head on the table. The waiter was in no particular rush

to feed them and move them along in order to make room for more patrons. They'd been sitting at their table for close to twenty minutes before a waiter finally made his way over to take their drink order. Wanting to stay true to tradition, they ordered a bottle of the house Malbec and afterward laughed at themselves. They were nearly too tired to drink it. Determined to have the full experience on their first day in Buenos Aires, Kevin and Modra enjoyed their very first *parrillada*, which was comprised of grilled lamb, sausage, blood sausage, chicken, pork, and steak, served with a huge bowl of French fries and a side of chimichurri sauce. The meal was basic yet incredible.

That night, for the first time in all of their travels, they decided that sex would be better had in the morning when they had the energy to enjoy it. They were both asleep before their heads hit the pillows.

Sometime in the middle of the night Modra felt Kevin rustle.

“Are you awake?” he whispered. He had absolutely no clue what time it was nor could he guess how long he had been asleep. They had both the shutters and the dark-out curtains closed, and their room was pitch-black.

Modra had been asleep but she woke up the minute she felt his hand wrap around her waist as he pulled her toward him.

“Wow,” Modra said, feeling his manhood on her thigh, “is that from the elevation?” She was referring to what they privately called his “travel penis”.

“Mmmhem,” he admitted, breathing his warm breath on her neck. His voice told her he was already there and he wasn’t looking to keep her up long. “I love travel sex,” Kevin whispered. “I swear I am ten times more aroused when we’re in another country.” He kissed her shoulder as he pulled her top off.

Modra’s grin was lost in the darkness of the room. She enjoyed his strong hands as they cupped her breasts before wandering south. They rolled around the small double bed with the threat of falling off and not caring. Modra swam with pleasure as Kevin dove in and out.

“I love you,” he said, as he exploded into her.

Modra hugged him as his 6’3” body lay on top of her.

“I love you, too,”

The week spent in Buenos Aires was a whirlwind. They wanted to get out of the big city, so they kept busy seeing all of the tourist attractions: They loved the Evita Museum; they attended a tango show; they strolled for miles on Avenida 9 de Julio, where a huge obelisk was prominently displayed smack in the middle of a 14-lane street; they shopped at a huge open market that went on for several blocks; they walked to the Argentine Presidential Palace and the House of Congress; they visited the embassies of Spain, France, Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Poland and they spent several tireless hours scouring the upscale area for the American Embassy, to no avail. They actually made it a point to visit Argentina’s Natural Science Museum, which happened to be about five miles from their hotel. Apparently,

the museum is the third largest in the world. On the very last day they stopped to admire the *Floralis Generica*, a huge metal tulip sculpture located in the Recoleta District. It was a breathtaking art piece that stood approximately fifty feet high by thirty feet wide. Kevin and Modra brought their dinner and picnicked around the tulip and watched as the solar tulip closed its petals as the sun went down.

Of course, the most interesting experience in Buenos Aires was the food. The *empanadas* were amazing. Kevin couldn't get enough of them. They ate *empanadas* with ground beef, chicken, or vegetables every day at one time or another. At dinner, some sort of meat was accompanied by either the traditional French fries or a tomato salad. Everything was simple and yet divine. And like Brazil, Argentina had a very different menu than what Kevin or Modra associated with Latin-American food.

"I never thought it would be this cold in South America," Modra said as they left their hotel to move on to their next destination. The morning was so cold she could see her breath as they walked. "I mean, I read about it, but after Brazil, it just didn't seem possible." Modra held her shoulder straps with her gloved hands to relieve some of the weight off her shoulders.

"I know what you mean. We'll buy some wool sweaters in our next city," Kevin said, realizing he too had packed poorly. "It's just hard to fathom how close this country is to Antarctica. I mean you see it on a map and it makes sense that it would be this cold, but I guess we're just conditioned to associate hot weather

with Latin America.” He looked back at his wife to make sure she was doing fine. “Come on ahead. You need to walk in front of me, babe,” he said, pausing long enough for her to get ahead of him.

Modra pushed ahead, weaving through the throng of pedestrians who were all going in the opposite direction.

“You know, I wish I had packed at least one pair of cute boots,” she said, looking around. She was embarrassed by the fact that she was wearing unattractive hiking boots she had purchased in Ireland a few years back. They just weren’t fashionable enough compared to what the locals were wearing. “You know, in Italy they say beauty before pain.” She found herself contemplating her entire outfit. She had definitely packed with the mentality of comfort before beauty. She wore her trusty Levi 501 button fly jeans; black hiking boots; thin black sweater, and Italian leather coat. “I’m feeling frumpy.” Modra was suddenly embarrassed to be representing the United States as a tourist.

“You’re being ridiculous. Where would you carry all those extra clothes?”

“I know . . . you’re right, but I still feel frumpy.”

“Yeah, but your my frumpy and I think you look just fine.”

They arrived at the bus station and were amazed at the number of people swarming around on the platforms. Busses appeared to be the preferred mode of transportation for both locals and tourists alike. In the middle of the terminal stood a

huge 5'x9' map of the many bus lines that zigzagged across the country. They joined the random group of relatively younger backpackers to study the map. The bus lines disbursed from the terminal like arteries to seemingly every part of the country. Several people pointed fingers to different lines in an attempt to choose a route or destination. Unperturbed by the occasional bumping by the passersby, Kevin and Modra stood squarely as they discussed the map. Modra was set on skipping Mendoza for now and going straight to San Carlos de Bariloche. She had read all the emails and had fallen in love with the pictures. They reviewed the map for several minutes before Kevin agreed. He bargained with Modra that as long as they could do El Calafate for as long a time as he chose, he would be okay with temporarily skipping Mendoza. Satisfied to each get their way, they bought bus tickets and set off for Bariloche.

The two-day bus ride was everything they had expected: They eventually became tired of sitting; the toilets didn't always work; the food quality varied greatly depending on the stop and how remote it was; and the sightseeing was marvelous—the primary reason why they chose the bus method over flying. The scenery went from inner city to suburbia to desolation. There were the occasional Don't-blink-or-you-might-miss-it towns with only dirt roads running through them and at nightfall, after all the other passengers were asleep, Kevin and Modra completely reclined in their bus passenger bed and pulled the curtains back to peer out into the vast and seemingly never

ending darkness. There were billions of stars in the sky and nothing more. There were such an incredible number of stars in the sky that it seemed as if all of the stars of the universe had congregated in the southern hemisphere for that night.

The next morning they knew Bariloche wasn't far when the flat terrain became mountainous and the rain became snow. The huge bus, expertly and slowly, wound its way through the mountains. They marveled at the enormous frozen lake that lay along the right side of the highway and at the densely packed snow-covered pine trees that surrounded it and spread out in every direction, as far as the eye could see.

It was about noon when they arrived into the small, square, bus terminal. They handed a five-peso tip to the porter before they took their bags and strapped them on. Kevin and Modra went into the terminal and scoured the entire place for a map of Bariloche, reading every bulletin board and flyer at every kiosk, unable to find one. A young local saw their panic and came to their rescue.

“Les puedo ayudar?” the young, twenty-something girl asked.

“Si, por favor,” Kevin said, surprising the girl, who had directed her comment to Modra. *“Buscamos un mapa de la ciudad.”* Kevin looked at the girl with curiosity when she almost laughed. He wondered if he'd said something funny without knowing it.

“Señor, no se ocupa un mapa. Solamente ay una calle que entra y sale de la ciudad.”

Thirty-five minutes later, Kevin and Modra had walked their way into town.

“I love it!” Modra said in awe. “This place looks like Interlaken, Switzerland.” She flashed her eyes from home to home.

“The icicles look like they’re man-made,” Kevin agreed. “They’re so perfect.”

After the third attempt to locate a hotel vacancy, Kevin began to worry that they wouldn’t find accommodations. He looked about the small town and got nervous; there were tourists everywhere. Modra had become nervous as well but decided not to exacerbate the situation by saying so out loud though with every rejection it was becoming more obvious.

They were freezing cold when they finally stumbled into a small boutique hotel that had a vacancy. The quaint hotel was located above the Rodeo Restaurant and the location couldn’t have been better—it was a block away from the lake. The receptionist was wonderful. She checked them in and recommended a hot bath and a complementary spiced wine that would be sent to the room immediately. Modra was most grateful for the hot mulled wine and the opportunity for a steaming hot shower. She hoped the combination would help her sleep and shake the stomach flu she was sure she’d picked up from a fellow passenger on the bus.

The initial appeal of Bariloche was more than they had expected. They were thrilled with their hotel location, not to mention the fact that the nightly rate was more than reasonable, making their decision to stay put for a couple of weeks an easy one. The receptionist gracefully accommodated their request for an extended stay and promised to try and keep them in the same room for the length of their stay.

The spiced wine was delivered a couple of minutes after they were in their room. It was presented in a small pewter tea kettle with two small Asian-style ceramic tea cups. Modra could smell the mulled wine from across the room. The cinnamon, cardamom, honey—the entire concoction was enticing to her senses and when she took the first sip, she felt the hot liquid burn its way down her esophagus as it warmed her down to her toes. She stood over the dresser and refilled her cup before reaching across and opening the bedroom window. As she poked her head out she felt the sting of the cold air, causing goose bumps to quickly form up her arms. She leaned out to see the immense beauty of Lake Nahuel Huapi. The big blue lake had turned white and was frozen in all its glory, and when she turned her head to the right, she saw the main street beneath them clustered with restaurants, chocolate shops, and hundreds of tourists milling about.

“My God . . .” Modra felt as though she were in a winter wonderland. “I think I could live here.” Her ears were freezing but she didn’t care.

Kevin stood behind her and held her shoulders as he poked his head out above hers. “Oh, we have to go have a hot chocolate in one of those shops,” Kevin said, ignoring all the dinner joints.

Modra looked over at the chocolate shop his eyes were fixated on and smiled. “I can do that. We’ll call it dinner.”

“Wahoo!” he said as he quickly turned to get dressed. “You’d better get in or you’re going to get sick,” he said, pulling her in and closing the window.

Modra brought her head in. “It may be a little late for that. I’ll take a vitamin C tablet to help fight it off,” she said, going to their bathroom kit. “Hey, there’s no bottled water.”

“Babe, there’s a little card on the counter that says the tap water is safe for drinking.” Kevin took a cup and had a drink to prove his point.

Modra watched him then warily followed his lead.

The two weeks in Bariloche flew and they felt as though they were not enough. The cute town turned out to be their dream destination. It felt welcoming from the moment they had arrived and the Rodeo Restaurant happened to have the most spectacular *parrillada* so far. A cool find for Modra was that Bariloche happened to still be home to many of the Patagonian Gauchos, but most of all, San Carlos de Bariloche offered a natural beauty that could make a heart stop. The hotel owner and receptionist glowed with pride when Kevin and Modra requested a couple more weeks of accommodations, explaining they were just not ready to leave yet.

During the first two weeks in Bariloche they had whittled away their time taking leisurely strolls by the frozen lake, hikes, and doing some other good old-fashioned tourist excursions. They decided the next two weeks needed to include more sex, skiing, hiking, and long walks, before sitting down to their nine o'clock dinners. The goal was to cram in as much as possible before they moved on to El Calafate.

They were sitting at Rodeo having dinner when Kevin asked, "Did you remember to call your dad today?"

"Yeah, we had a nice long chat while you were in the shower." She said, trying to hide the fact that she still felt like hell. It had been two weeks of the stomach flu and food just didn't sound good anymore, and in fact, the smell alone had become enough to turn her stomach. She'd been fighting to hide it and to keep up with Kevin on his hikes, but it was really taking its toll on her. She was finding that she was becoming more exhausted by the day and all she wanted to do was sleep.

"How's he doing?"

"He's doing well." Modra gave him a weak smile. She always lit up when she spoke about her father. "He said that he hates knowing that we're so far away."

He gave his wife a concerned smile. "Honey, you've got to eat more than French fries," her health seemed to be progressively worsening. "Eat your tomato salad or something healthier or you'll never get your energy back."

He was becoming worried for her health. Modra seemed to be getting weaker by the day. That morning he practically had to drag her out of bed and he swore she looked pale. At first he worried she might have contracted malaria in Buenos Aires, but he was told it was too cold for the mosquitoes this time of year so he ruled that out. Now he was leaning more towards the stomach flu, and according to the receptionist at their hotel, the local population seemed to be fighting a particularly harsh flu season.

“I know, I know. I’m trying,” Modra said, making another attempt at her salad. “I shouldn’t have drunk the tap water.” She was sure it was either a bacterial infection from the water or the stomach flu. “I hate how I feel right now,” she said as she swallowed her last bite of salad back down. She just wanted to put her head down on the dinner table and go to sleep.

The next morning she was so tired and weak, Kevin insisted they go to the local hospital and have her checked out. His thought process was to have her diagnosed, get her a prescription of whatever she needed then fly her home in a week if he didn’t see any improvement. He paced the halls for nearly an hour before a very friendly and happy doctor came to tell him he could see his wife now.

“Is she okay?” Kevin asked the doctor who was clearly amused. “She’s been throwing up for days, she just can’t seem to hold anything down,” he explained, wanting to make the doctor better understand how serious her condition was.

“Ah, si...yes, she is okay,” he said with a minor British, but mostly Spanish accent. Kevin had to really concentrate to understand him. “She is fine, she have a minor condition... go see jer,” he said motioning with his hand over his heart. “Please,” he extended his hand in the general direction of her room. “I give jer some pills,” he said this with an underlying humor that made Kevin feel sick.

“Okay,” Kevin said with resignation. He figured he’d be better off talking to Modra, who had most likely already grilled the doctor with all of her questions and probably had all the answers he was looking for. “What door?” he asked, looking down the small hallway with about fifteen doors on each side.

“Ah,” the doctor said as though Kevin had just asked some confounding question. He looked at his chart and flipped a page. “Schroeder?” he asked in a German pronunciation.

Kevin nodded yes.

“Room one-o-six.” the doctor said, and watched an awkward and confused Kevin walk away. He stood in place with a peculiar stare affixed until Kevin disappeared through the doorway.

He entered the room, then paused for a second before peeking out to see that the strange doctor was still standing there, smiling in his direction. Kevin turned and shook off the feeling that the person outside in the hall was really the character Mr. Bean and not a real doctor at all. He looked at his wife who had her back to him. He made his way around the bed to see if she

was asleep before speaking. She wasn't asleep, she was crying. His heart sank immediately as he kneeled besides her.

“Honey, tell me. What is it?”

She couldn't look at him. She was only able to sob.

“Honey, please tell me,” he said, brushing her hair back. “Tell me how I can help.” He felt so helpless. The absolute worst came to mind; he worried that they were finally free to fulfill their dreams only to be losing her to a terminal illness.

“What is it? Babe, I need you to tell me what's wrong. Please...” he pleaded, “I'm thinking the worst.

Modra shook her head.

Then he got off his knees. “I'll be back, honey,” he said, packed with anguish. “I need to talk to your doctor and get some answers.” Kevin was already out the door when Modra yelled it out.

“I'm pregnant! I'm pregnant.” Her voice went weak and she covered her face with her hands. She didn't want this. She had been so much happier the day before when she thought she was sick with the flu. “I asked the doctor not to tell you. I thought I should be the one,” Modra said with her lower lip quivering.

A flash of shock, followed by anger, and ultimately denial, rolled across Kevin's face. Modra witnessed disbelief and complete denial pass through his eyes. Frame by frame, she witnessed his mind absorb and process the meaning of what she had just said and she was willing to bet that that was exactly what the doctor saw when he'd given her the same news.

Kevin sat on the bed next to Modra. “I don’t understand. This is impossible,” he said with authority. And then in the same breath, “That doctor seemed a little iffy. We should get a second opinion.” Kevin wondered what the odds were they had made an error.

“Apparently, it is not impossible, and yes, they are positive,” Modra’s words deflated Kevin like a pin-pricked balloon. “I just had the exact same conversation verbatim with Dr. Draux. I’m having a hard time believing that we were pregnant before we left Healdsburg. I just don’t understand how this could happen now.” Modra was definitely still in shock.

Kevin was numb. “I feel like we’ve just entered the Twilight Zone.” He stood, transfixed on Modra’s engagement ring. Suddenly, he sat up wondering if his harsh reaction was inappropriate. Was he being insensitive to her? Is it wrong to be honest about his disappointment? He couldn’t read her thoughts. Was she crying because she was worried about him? He wanted to be fair to her. He wanted for her to be happy, but he didn’t know what that meant so he back pedaled a bit and said, “I’m sorry babe. I didn’t mean to seem so disappointed about... um...” he didn’t know how to say it “about your... um... you know. We...” he took a quick inhale and put on a brave face, “we can keep it if that’s what you want.” He truly meant what he said. He would do anything for her.

Modra was shocked and startled at Kevin’s sudden change of attitude. She knew he would do it for her, if that was what she

wanted, but she didn't. It was too late. She had already made up her mind. Motherhood was not something she could do anymore. She shook her head vehemently. No, no, no, she would have screamed if she could. The tears spilled out down her cheeks and her throat had a knot the size of a baseball.

Kevin knew that Modra was horrified. This was her worst nightmare. She never wanted to be in this position and yet here she was. The whole point of the vasectomy had at that moment become pointless. He knew what had to be done and he hoped that his wife had the courage to do it.

"I'm sorry," he said, taking her chin and turning her face toward him. He could see all the sadness in the world trapped in her eyes. She wants an abortion, he thought, and it is torturing her that she feels that way. He went to hug her and whispered in her ear, "Honey, we'll get through this." He kissed her forehead as he sat up. "Why don't we go back to the hotel so you can rest? We can talk about this later." He gave her hand a squeeze. As he was helping Modra out of her hospital gown and into her clothes, Dr. Draux walked in.

"Hmm." He cleared his throat, "Joo shoold let us remoove the IV next time." His accent still baffled Kevin and it bothered him that the doctor seemed to be happy for them and their pregnancy. "Now, here are some prenatal peels," he said looking at the label. "I believe dese are de same kind joo will find in jour country though jour doctor may prefer a different brand." He handed Kevin two bottles. "Incidentally, how long will joo be

with us in Argentina?” the doctor asked with so much happiness that Modra looked to Kevin for help.

Kevin pretended to read the label on the prenatal bottles to avoid losing his temper with the poor innocent doctor who had to be in his mid-thirties and had probably never delivered such wonderful news to a more unhappy couple. He wanted to tell the doctor to stop it, that the excitement and happiness was wasted on them, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

“We were planning to bump around Argentina for the next several months, but now . . . under the circumstances, I think we'll be going home sooner than we thought.” Kevin looked at Modra who had finished putting on her shoes. She happened to be looking up at him but he was unable to decipher what she was feeling inside. He imagined a tiny boat being tossed about by the deep dark ocean of her conscience. “We'll have to get back to the hotel and discuss our options before I could tell you for sure,” Kevin said to the doctor who probably assumed “discussing our options” meant remaining in Argentina and seeing a local physician or going back home to the United States to see their doctor there.

“Excellent!,” the doctor cheerfully exclaimed. “dos peels should get you tru at least two monts.” He wrote some information down. “dis is a list of things Modra shouldn't eat, at least while joo are here in Argentina. Jour American doctor may jave a slightly different list.” He handed the note to Kevin and pointed with his pen. “I jave written my cell phone number at the

bottom in case you need anything while you are here. You should know that the first three months of your pregnancy are the most important for your baby, so try to eat healthy, take your vitamins, and don't have more than a half glass of wine per day." He looked at Modra and smiled. "Do you have any questions for me?" His warm green eyes were focused on her.

Modra shook her head. She had a thousand questions for him, but at that moment all she wanted was to leave the hospital and bury herself in her husband's arms. She wanted some distance away from this happy doctor who had ruined her life with his diagnosis. "Not now, thank you. Right now I just really want to get back to our hotel and sleep." She was extremely tired and it showed. She wore no makeup, had on her same old button flies, one of Kevin's beige wool sweaters that hung almost to her knees, snow boots and her hair was tied back in a bun without being brushed for some time now.

"Oh god, I can't believe this is happening to us," Modra said, feeling the snow crunch under her boots as they made their way to the taxi. She yanked the neck up on her sweater to cover her ears and put her sunglasses on to hide her puffy red eyes as they got into the back seat. "I couldn't have been a happier person the day you had the vasectomy. I was so proud of us for being responsible." With no more tears to cry, she added, "I just don't understand! I don't understand any of it!" Modra's hands went to her eyes, pushing her sunglasses into her hair. Kevin saw the taxi driver look back at Modra in the rearview mirror as she

rubbed her dry eyes. He took her in his arms, covered her face with his hug, and held her tightly. He shushed her and kissed her head as they drove away from the hospital to the hotel.

The shower had been running for nearly thirty minutes before Kevin knocked on the door. When he got no answer, he opened it a slightly. “Babe?” he said, trying to peek into the shower to make sure she was fine. He knocked again, this time a little harder and pushed the door open a few more inches, but still he got no answer. “Babe?” he said again and then walked in. “Hey, are you okay?” He pulled the shower curtain back and saw Modra standing under the water spout with hot water pouring over her head and cascading down her body. She still wore her bra and underwear and her back was red from the hot water. “Hey,” he said turning off the water and wrapping her in a towel. “Hey, it’s okay,” He kept his arms around her and held her there.

“I can’t,” Modra said, “I can’t. I know I can’t!” Her face was in his chest, her wet hair was dripping all over his shirt, soaking him completely. “I can’t believe that after all these years and all the agonizing that we went through about you having a vasectomy, the craziness with my family, and all of the anxiety, we finally still pregnant. We’re too old! We’re too old and too jaded to want kids.” She sobbed into Kevin’s chest, “I’m so angry at the world right now. We have already wasted a huge part of our lives... I don’t want to have a baby. God, I just can’t do this.” She stood curled, with her arms wrapped in the towel, cocooned in Kevin’s arms.

“Babe, we don’t have to keep this baby if you don’t want it.” Kevin dropped his head into Modra’s neck. He had an overpowering feeling that his life had been hijacked. “Of all the things running through my head this morning as we were rushing you to the hospital, pregnancy was not one of them.” He shook his head as he considered how this could possibly have happened. For a second the thought that Modra had cheated on him flashed through his head, but he ruled it out immediately knowing he was being foolish.

Modra slowly pulled away from him and brought her head to his. She kissed his lips and they both stood there for a moment dazed and confused by the whole thing. As he solemnly ran his hands down his wife’s arms, he felt the goose bumps—she was cold. He reached for her robe, wrapped it around her then sat her down on the toilet seat. She was motionless and took his guidance.

“The arrogance of life, it does what it wants with us.” She sniffled. “The whole reason for the vasectomy was to avoid me having to make a decision like this. I’ve always been afraid of being here because I know what I want to do, but I’m not sure I can go through with it.” There was panic in her eyes as she said, “Oh God, now what? I don’t know what to do, Kev.”

And there it is, Kevin thought, we’re having a baby. Before he could say anything, Modra continued.

“I can’t go through with being a mother. I don’t have that... that motherly instinct. I don’t even have the desire to go there,”

Modra confessed all the emotions she thought would always only be known to her. She figured she may as well put all her cards on the table so Kevin could help stave off bad decisions made from guilt. “I would be one of those detached mothers with a ton of rules and super-high standards that a kid could never meet. I lose my patience too quickly with kids . . . they exasperate me.”

Kevin leaned his weight against the bathroom sink. “Well, we’re both on the same page, that’s for sure,” he said wondering how to best get over the hurdle of Modra’s guilty conscience. They shouldn’t have this baby. He felt the same way and he couldn’t have been more honest than she was being at that moment. “I know it won’t change anything, but I want to call Bill and see what he can tell me.” Kevin looked at his watch and did the math; it was almost one o’clock in the afternoon which meant that it was almost nine in the morning in Healdsburg. “It’s a bit early for a phone call on a Saturday,” he said, debating making the phone call anyway.

Modra was as anxious to hear what Bill had to say as Kevin. “What time is it at home?” She asked, wanting to add her opinion.

“It would be about nine a.m. there.” He was looking at her, waiting for her input.

“You know, that also means Christine would be away at her women’s group meeting and out of the house,” she said, knowing from his expression that she had hit the sweet spot.

Kevin just wanted the facts. He wanted to have a conversation with his doctor/friend without his wife interrupting.

“Why don’t you get dressed and we’ll go for a walk or something.” He brushed some wet hairs out of her face and walked out of the bathroom. “I’ll give Bill a call; see if I can’t catch him by himself.” He punched Bill’s number on the cell phone and Bill answered after the second ring.

“Hello . . . Bill?” Kevin sounded like a nervous teenager calling a girl for the first time.

“Hey Kevin how’s Argentina?” Bill sounded thrilled to be hearing from his friend.

There was a pause on Kevin’s side as he debated how to respond.

“Kevin, are you still on the line?” Bill asked, looking at his cell phone to see if he was still connected.

“Oh . . . yeah, I’m still here . . .” Kevin paused again. “Listen, I’m sorry I called you so early on a Saturday. I really needed to talk to you. Are you alone?”

“Sure, no worries, what’s up?” Bill walked out to the patio where Julie, Veloria, and Christine wouldn’t hear his conversation. He regretted having said Kevin’s name out loud. The girls had perked up to listen to his conversation and were already walking towards him to say their hello. He shook his finger at them and closed the glass sliding door behind him to let them know he wanted to be left alone.

Kevin sat hunched forward in a tan chair as he looked out their room window at the pedestrians in the street.

“Kevin, is everything all right?”

“Well, I think that all depends on who you ask.” Kevin hunched over a little more and covered his mouth with his hand to prevent himself from coughing in Bill’s ear. He cleared his throat, paused, then came out and said it, “Oh hell, Bill, Modra’s pregnant.” He just threw it out there.

Bill paused a moment to process what Kevin had just said.

“Bill?”

“Oh, right... I’m sorry, but you took me by surprise,” Bill said, having to sit. “Are you sure? I mean, how?”

“That is why I called you. Modra had been tired and nauseated for a couple of weeks, so naturally we thought she had a severe case of the stomach flu. I was getting worried because she wasn’t getting any better so I took her to the hospital. By the time we left, I was in shock and Modra was in tears,” Kevin was whispering, hoping that Modra wouldn’t hear the frustration in his voice. “Should this even be possible?”

“Well, nothing is a hundred percent, but I have to say that in your case all the stars had to be aligned for it to even be possible,” Bill said, still shocked by the news of Modra’s pregnancy. He was sitting in a lounge chair unaware of Christine, Julie, and Veloria, who were on the other side of the open window just above him, listening intently as they huddled on the floor. “Like I told you before you had the vasectomy, in

very few cases the vasectomy can reverse itself; but the chances of that are minute. If I remember correctly, you still had a few swimmers the last time we did a sperm check, but even then,” Bill considered their fertility history, “you two are one of the least fertile couples I know. I mean Modra only ovulates two to three times a year and then for only a small window of time. I would have bet my house against you ever becoming pregnant without the hand of science stirring the pot.”

The girls looked at each other in disbelief as they mouthed the word *pregnant* without making a sound. A look of depression overcame Veloria and she felt sorry for Modra. She’d heard enough. She quickly stood and went to her room to sob in privacy.

“How is Modra feeling?”

Kevin explained that she had to be put on an IV for dehydration. He also mentioned Modra’s fatigue and nausea.

“She’s seven weeks? So she was pregnant when you left for Argentina?” Bill thought about Modra and knew that this was going to be especially hard for her. “Well, what are you going to do?”

“It’s a real killer, Bill. Modra and I are both on the same page when it comes to not wanting children. The problem is that even though she thinks an abortion would be the right choice, she doesn’t think she can go through with it . . . in fact, she said she knows her conscience won’t let her.”

Bill shook his head. He knew both Kevin and Modra were intelligent individuals who would ultimately make the right decision for them, whatever the cost. After everything he had just gone through with Veloria and her pregnancy, he decided he would abstain from giving his friend advice. Parenthood is a very intimate decision and, as his recent experience with his daughter had just taught him, you can't make a woman want to be a mother if she's not ready to be one.

"Kevin, I am so sorry but right now I don't think I'm in a safe emotional position to help you with your decision." His eyes watered up.

"I know, Bill. I only called you because I wanted to hear from you that this was possible. Modra and I are going to have to trudge through this and figure out what to do."

Bill rubbed his forehead with his spare hand. A headache was coming on.

"How is our Veloria doing?" Kevin asked while he sipped on a Coke from the mini-bar. Bill filled him in on everything that was happening back home, almost making him sorry he called.

By the time Modra emerged from the bathroom, she found Kevin sitting in his chair, legs extended outward and his arms hanging off the side of the chair with his head tilted all the way back.

"Hey, babe," Modra said, running her hands through his hair.

He sat up and smiled at her with sad eyes that said the world was falling apart.

“Have a seat, Mod,” Kevin said, motioning to the chair he had pulled up next to his. “Better yet, put your coat on; let’s go across to the lake where we can have some fresh air.” He took her colorful wool knit hat and placed it over her head while she wrapped the matching scarf around her neck. “Now *I’m* nauseated.”

Modra gave him a quizzical look then plunged her gloveless hands into her pockets. “It looks like it’s beautiful outside. Let’s do get out of here for a while, maybe I can clear my head.”

As they walked across the icy street to the lake, Kevin admitted that the only thing he disliked about Bariloche or Argentina was that he couldn’t get a cup of coffee to go unless they went to McDonald’s. His commentary made Modra laugh. She countered that that was what made home so wonderfully different and reminded him that these are the reasons they loved to travel. For a few minutes they forgot they were pregnant and enjoyed a much lighter conversation.

They took a seat on the snow-covered cobblestone wall and stared at the natural beauty of the lake.

“You should know that Veloria lost the baby,” Kevin said to Modra. Her back straightened from the news.

“Oh, my God!” she said as she debated whether the news was good or bad. “Is Veloria okay?” Veloria would have been four months pregnant when they’d left Healdsburg.

Kevin had considered not telling Modra how it happened but decided it wasn't fair to withhold the information.

"She's okay, at least now she is," Kevin insisted. "In fact, I spoke to her a moment ago on the phone. Bill had her say hello. I'm not exactly sure what happened but she hit a tree or a pole or something on her way home from Diego's and the trauma of the accident sent her into a premature labor."

Modra's eyes were shut tight. She had a bad feeling about what happened. "Did she drive into the tree . . . or pole, on purpose?" she asked with her eyes still shut. She was afraid she knew the answer.

At the dinner party Modra had noticed that the usually cheerful Veloria had barely spoken. She had seemed detached and depressed. Christine had acknowledged some concern about Veloria but not to the extent that Modra had. She had been worried enough to know that she needed to find a good family counselor, but didn't worry that Veloria might cause herself harm. By the time Kevin and Modra were leaving for Argentina, Veloria had already been forcing a smile for months. She had certainly been depressed and Modra had worried, correctly, that she might even be suicidal. Christine had outright rejected Modra's attempt to discuss the possibility of Veloria wanting to hurt herself; she had been so sure that it would all pass once she met with a counselor.

When Kevin didn't answer, Modra opened her eyes and kept them facing down at the white snow on the ground.

“Did she try to kill herself?” she asked again, wanting Kevin to confirm it.

“I don’t know. I asked Bill, but he couldn’t really talk. I guess Christine wasn’t happy with him for telling me,” Kevin was shaking his head. “Bill alluded to the possibility that Veloria might have had every intention of hurting herself and maybe even killing herself, but that there was no way of knowing. He also warned me that Christine was in complete denial. He asked that we talk to Julie. I guess she flew in the minute she heard about the accident.”

Modra nodded. “Of course, how could I forget, that was her baby,” Modra said, still concentrating on the pureness of the white snow surrounding her feet.

“He’s concerned about Veloria but it seems she’s only talking to Julie right now.” Kevin looked out and smiled as a little girl ice-skating on the lake grabbed onto a passing boy, causing them both to fall. The little boy then got up and angrily pushed the poor girl away before he skated off again. “I don’t know much more, but if you need more answers, I think you should call Julie. She’s going to be there for one more day then she’s set to fly back home. Bill’s worried that Veloria will just retreat from them once Julie’s gone.” Kevin knew full well that the only way to get complete detailed answers from Bill would probably be to call him during the three minutes when he would be driving to or from work. “It’s too hard for Bill to talk about what happened with Christine at home, and you know Bill won’t

discuss any personal business at work where co-workers or patients may hear.”

“I bet Christine is having a hard time wrapping her mind around the possibility that Veloria intentionally did that to herself. I mean . . . that’s pretty scary that our little V has that capability. God, I can’t believe it, either.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon contemplating their peculiar situation. The cool breeze kept Kevin’s nose red and a bit runny while it chapped Modra’s lips. They watched the children attempting to skate on the frozen lake and couples walking by, perfectly bundled, holding hands, and smiling as they too watched the aspiring little ice-skaters. They had been so engrossed in their discussion that they lost all track of time. When they realized the sky was starting to darken, they walked back along the frozen lake toward their hotel. The young skaters were all gone now, only the frozen lake lay before them. They took a seat once again, and waited to watch the sun go down. At a few minutes past six PM, the sun took its bow.