

Five

Julie remained on the porch, holding her perpetual glass of lemonade. Her mind was busy with the unfairness of her situation as she stared out at the distant nothingness. She felt numb inside. What a cruel joke life has made of her; it has taken away half of her uterus and then cursed her mad with a burning desire to have another baby.

She wondered why it was her, the one with the broken uterus whose body continued to demand a baby. *Why isn't Modra the one who is pining at the walls? She has her uterus, the money... and a supportive husband. I have none of that! Oh, what torture.*

Her emotions had begun dominating her thoughts and manipulating her behavior. Yesterday, as she drove her son Daniel to his father's home, she hadn't paid any attention to neither the road nor her son. She could still hear him chatting away in his seat meanwhile the whole of her attention had been focused on a ridiculous fantasy of holding a newborn in her arms. She could still remember being able to smell the fictional baby's scent as she drove. A pang of guilt hit her; she was leaving her son with his father for a week so that she could fly to California and be with her sister and she hadn't bothered to pay attention to what he had been saying to her. In fact, she had been so preoccupied with her illusion of a new baby that she

couldn't remember the drive at all. She went from feeling guilty to worrying: had she paid attention to the road as she drove at all? Had she placed her son in any danger by being so absentminded?

The memory of yesterday's drive and her son's conversation completely escaped her no matter how much she tried to recall them. Ironically, her delusional fantasies were still clear and fresh in her mind. In one instance, she had seen herself arriving at Kevin and Modra's home, having Modra throw the door open and taking her in her arms and proclaiming, "oh sister, mom called me. I had no idea how much you wanted a baby. Just because I am not fertile doesn't mean you shouldn't have a baby. With your egg, a sperm donor and science I'm sure I can carry a baby for you." Julie realized she was smiling again just as she had been yesterday before her son had asked her what she was smiling at. A blush crept over her as she realized how ridiculous she was being—Modra would never offer. She took a swig of her lemonade and tried to clear her thoughts. Julie knew she was being delusional, but it keeps her hopeful.

As she debated whether or not to allow her delusional thoughts to take her away to a happy place of babies and newborns, she spotted Modra's little red car chugging its way up the steep driveway. She watched her sister through the windshield as she parked the car just below the deck and wondered how her sister was truly feeling inside. Does she really understand what she is missing out on? Like holding a

small precious baby in your arms and feeling a powerful love pour out of you when you see your eyes staring back at you. She's going to miss knowing the softness of her baby's skin; hearing its small breaths when it's sleeping and laughing lovingly at the cutest chubby feet ever. She'll never really understand, the way a mother does, the innocence of a baby's being or the beauty of the life that grew from within you.

"Hey, sister," she said pushing her thoughts away and trying to sound as bubbly as ever. She watched as Modra walked up the steps and instantly noticed that her mascara had run clear down her cheeks. "Got tears?" She asked hoping this was a sign of regret. If Modra would show a sign of regret, then Julie was sure she would be more willing to consider helping her.

"I know . . . I fell apart in the car... I don't know why—"

"—It's a hard choice you've made," Julie said as she dipped her cocktail napkin into her lemonade and wiped her sister's mascara off her cheeks. "It's a hard choice, and knowing Kevin, it's a final choice, too." There was a hint of disapproval in her tone.

Modra caught it and stiffened a little as she said, "It's a good choice for us." She knew she was reassuring herself as well as Julie, "and it is a final choice." She patted her sister's shoulder appreciative for her wiping off the mascara and added, "Besides, I'm tired of thinking about it. It gives me sanity." She stood with her arms to her side allowing her sister to finish the job when a slight stinging sensation occurred over her cheeks as

though someone were lightly pricking her with hundreds of needles. Suddenly, she broke into laughter as she noticed what Julie had been using to wipe the mascara off her face, “Oh, that’ll help.” She grabbed her sister’s hand that held the soaked and smudged napkin and laughed. “You just used lemonade and bourbon on my face and I just had microdermabrasion done yesterday. Yikes.”

“Well, honestly, you look horrible, your makeup is—“

“—I know. I took a look in the rearview mirror and scared myself.” She said, putting her hands on her cheeks. “Wow, that lemonade is really stinging me now,” Modra giggled. “Let me go wash my face and I’ll be right back.”

“Oops! Sorry.” Julie laughed. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be sitting right here when you get back. Right next to the lemonade.”

“Oh, ok.” Modra looked over at the half empty pitcher wondering how much of the damage was Julies, “You do that.” She was already on the other side of the door sprinting up the stairs.

The hour passed quickly. By the time Modra had her breakdown in the car, drove home, and cleaned herself up, the girls had only a few minutes of small talk before Modra’s cell phone rang letting them know that Kevin was ready to be picked up. This time Julie insisted on going with Modra arguing that she had flown down all the way from Washington and should be

included. What she didn't say out loud was that she was looking forward to razzing her brother-in-law on the drive home.

Seven minutes later they were pulling into to parking lot when they both saw Kevin slumped over in a wheelchair with Veloria standing behind him looking grim. They looked at each other wondering why he was in a wheelchair waiting outside the office entrance. Kevin looked weak and miserable causing Julie to immediately regret the thought of teasing him. He looked so terrible that they both wondered if he should be released from the clinic at all.

“Are you sure this is normally an outpatient procedure?”

Modra shrugged suddenly not so sure. “I better talk to Bill and make sure we should be taking him home today.”

Concern was evident on Julies face as she said, “I didn't realize how debilitating this type of surgery could be. My god, he's pale.” Her eyes were as wide as saucers in disbelief at how miserable and out of it Kevin appeared. “I've never known anyone who's had a vasectomy before or . . . seen their condition when they left the hospital. Ugh, this seems pretty severe,” There was definite shock in Julie's voice. From what Modra had told her, he should have been just fine, maybe walking a little funny, but that was supposed to be all.

Modra nodded her agreement; Kevin seemed to be in horrible shape. “Maybe the surgery didn't go so well.” She said as they walked briskly from their car, across the small parking

lot, toward Kevin and Veloria. There was urgency and concern in their faces.

At that moment, Bill happened to walk out the front door looking for someone or something when he saw Modra and Julie. They were almost running towards him with worry in their eyes and his smile disappeared as he followed their gaze to where Veloria and Kevin were. Veloria stood behind Kevin as he slumped over in a wheelchair.

“What are you two doing?” Bill said scolding Veloria and pulling Kevin out of the wheelchair, carefully but forcefully, by the arm. He looked at Modra’s worried face. “Oh,” he said giving Kevin and his daughter a disgusted look. Julie and Modra were panting by the time they reached them. Bill shook his head with disappointment and said almost apologetically to the sisters, “This is the wheelchair we use to wheel in our older patients who can’t walk too far.” His eyes went to Kevin. “Apparently, Kevin has borrowed it without regard for Mrs. Walker, who is sitting in that car”, he pointed to a small black compact car park near Modra’s car, “needing to be wheeled in.”

Kevin looked up and saw the black car parked about twenty feet away. He was completely ashamed when he saw a head of white hair belonging to the older person sitting in the driver’s seat. He slowly pushed the wheelchair toward Veloria so she could go assist Mrs. Walker.

Modra tried scowling at her as she walked past pushing the wheelchair but Veloria kept her head down avoiding her evil

eye. Once she was past her, Veloria glanced back and was relieved to see that Modra had focused her evil eye on Kevin.

Bill smiled and shook his head at the childlike behavior of his forty-four-year-old friend and his eighteen-year-old daughter. “Mod, it appears Kevin is attempting to milk this for all it’s worth. Let’s walk to the car and get him in, and then I’ll tell you what he should and shouldn’t do.”

Bill pretended to be frustrated with his friend for trying to milk his surgery for the next week. Of course, Kevin was just having fun, and now so would Bill, at Kevin’s expense.

Once Kevin was in the car, Bill began. “He can walk only a little for the next couple of days. He shouldn’t be walking up any stairs unless he has to and definitely not too often. I suggest he sleep on the couch.” Modra nodded. “He can make his own food, wash his own dishes, and change his own clothes.” He winked at Kevin who sat with a deflated expression, “But, he should do no heavy lifting for at least three days or his testicles could swell to the size of grapefruits.” Bill held back his smile when he saw both Modra and Julie giggle slightly. “Otherwise, he’ll be back to normal within a week.” He patted Kevin on the shoulder. “Nice try, ol’ buddy. I’ll see you tonight.”

Kevin grumbled something no one understood.

From the minute they got home, Julie tried to have Kevin lift a few heavy things around the house and each time Modra gave her a disapproving glare.

They settled down around the coffee table and played a game of scrabble. The game was dragging on as Kevin refused to give Julie any details about his surgery, making her ask more questions and interrupting the focus on the game. During the game, Julie went to the freezer, pulled out a gallon of ice cream and ate out of it with a spoon, refusing to share any with Kevin because it might be too heavy for him to lift and it “might compromise the aesthetic appearance of his testicular region”—this was the nature of their relationship and Modra enjoyed it.

Christine Merkle came over at around 2:00 PM to help prepare the duck confit and cassoulet for Modra’s birthday dinner. Duck anything was Modra’s favorite meal. The women spent the next few hours in the kitchen while Kevin napped on the couch.

“Veloria told me about the wheelchair,” Christine said, shaking her head. “I guess Bill let her know he wasn’t too thrilled with her.” Christine shook her head again. “She sends her apologies.”

“They had us going. Both Julie and I were wondering what had gone wrong with the surgery.” Modra laughed as she spoke. She couldn’t believe Kevin had had the energy to pull off a stunt like that after his vasectomy.

Christine was completely engrossed in searing the duck as she spoke. “Bill felt really bad. He said you looked pretty distressed when you saw Kevin sitting in the wheelchair. I swear, sometimes I truly believe that your husband is never going to

grow up.” She smiled and all three women looked over at Kevin before they realized their humor was wasted on a sleeping man. Christine put the tongs down and looked at her best friend. “How are you doing?”

“She’s doing a lot better than I would be,” Julie cut in. “We haven’t discussed it once. Here I am for support, and so far I’ve had to provide none!” She looked puzzled. “She’s just not a normal female I guess.” *Oops!* She thought. She didn’t know why she’d blurted that out. Pursing her lips, she quickly stopped talking, turned, and went back to cutting the tomatoes for the salad. Then, feeling both Modra and Christine’s eyes boring a hole in her back she tried to fix her comment, “Of course, I am glad to know she’s handling it all so well.”

Christine and Modra looked at each other with their brows furrowed as they considered Julie and her oddball comments.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re doing better,” Christine said, choosing to ignore whatever it was that was going on with Julie. “Whenever you are ready to talk about it, we are here for you.” She glanced over at Julie and added, “right Jules?”

“Right.” She nodded her commitment but kept her back to them so her sad eyes wouldn’t give her away. *Although my sister doesn’t need support, she needs help. Help for the selfish.*

“Thanks you two, but I’m fine. I really truly am doing fine.” Modra said, wanting to assure her friend and her sister. “I had a minor breakdown today, but it was a good breakdown, if that makes any sense. It happened just as I dropped Kevin off for his

surgery. I got in the car and my body went limp. I can't explain it." Modra seemed in awe herself at the way the meltdown had just snuck up on her and taken over her every muscle. "I know I wasn't experiencing guilt or remorse."

Christine noticed Julie's eyes drop and her shoulders sag as Modra spoke. Her cutting motion slowed almost to a stop.

Oh, don't say that. Julie thought, *of course it's remorse you just don't know it yet.*

"It was as though my emotions were suddenly overpowered by the finality of our ten years of indecision and then the weight was pulled off and I could breathe again." She looked at her friend, "It's weird. I had somehow believed deep down inside that we would find ourselves pregnant and we would have the baby because truthfully, that's the only way I would have a baby—by accident." Christine was surprised to hear that her friend ultimately believed she *would* be a mother and looked as though she wanted to apologize. "Please, don't apologize," Modra told Christine before she could. "There's no need for that. It's just that I had always assumed that I would get pregnant and every year that passed left me feeling frustrated and useless in some way and relieved in others. I think my body just reacted to the end of the emotional rollercoaster I've been on. I can honestly say that the relief has triumphed over guilt."

Julie put her knife down, placed her hands on the counter and leaned into them while keeping her back to Christine and

Modra. She was completely unaware that Christine had been watching her and noticed the tension in her posture.

Silence fell over them and Julie and Christine pretended to focus on their dinner chore; neither knew how to respond, was congratulations appropriate? They were both thrilled for Modra, well, at least one of them was, and the fact that she was happy with the outcome of her situation, but neither Christine nor Julie could honestly relate to the way Modra felt. They were both supportive of her because that's what friends were for, but they personally loved motherhood and cherished it. On occasion, when Christine thought about Veloria graduating in just a few months and going off to college, she became depressed wondering what she would do with her new found time. Sure, she had her own identity and friends, like Modra, whose life didn't revolve around children, but she still had daily routines and events that revolved around her daughter. Veloria was a constant daily event that occurred in her calendar in one form or another and soon it would be deleted as a daily event. Soon she would have to find things to fill that gaps with.

“Are you really relieved?” Julie snapped the silence and brought the girls back from their private thoughts. “I mean, aren't you always going to look back and wonder if you should have tried hormones or something?” She paused wondering if she should continue, Modra suddenly appeared exhausted, then she told herself: *oh hell, just say it.* “You know it's not too late. You can still—“

“—It is too late.” Both Christine and Modra said simultaneously. Christine placed a hand on Modra’s shoulder to calm her down and added, “It’s too late for that. Kevin can no longer contribute and that was the point.” Christine knew where Julie was going with that comment and for the life of her couldn’t imagine why. It was over.

“Are you kidding me, Julie?” Modra sneered. If she could breathe fire, Julie would have been toast at that moment. “That was exactly the point. Why are you rehashing this? I thought you were fine with it?”

“I am it’s just that—“ Julie couldn’t finish her sentence before Modra cut her off.

“—why did you come if this is how you feel?”

Julie took a deep breath. “You’re right,” she conceded. She thought of Kevin and Modra’s ridiculous nature pact and cringed. “I know, you guys said no birth control, no science, only nature.” Her voice quivered, “and by god youuu followwwwed throooough.” Condescension wrapped itself around her drawn out sentence making Modra need to close her eyes and take a much needed deep breath.

Modra found herself wondering what was going on with her sister and for the first time she really noticed her push against the vasectomy. Julie has always been very religious and most of her values came from her Catholic beliefs, so it wasn’t hard for Modra to ascertain why Julie strongly believed in having children and large families. But she got the feeling that there

was something more going on that had nothing to do with Modra or Kevin having a vasectomy. Except for the night when she and Kevin had flown to Washington and told the family about their decision to remain childless, Julie had come around and jumped on board with them. She hadn't liked it, but she'd said she understood how they felt and had accepted the fact that her older sister would not give her nieces or nephews. But now something had changed, something in Julie's life was different today from only a couple of months ago and Modra decided she'd have a private conversation with her sister later that evening.

"I heard Veloria was accepted to UCSF. Is she excited?" Julie asked, sensing her sister's glare and suddenly wanting to get on a different topic.

Christine paused. "Oh, God, we're having such a hard time with that right now." She grabbed three wineglasses and poured from a bottle of Lambert Bridge Cuvee. "Do you think four bottles of wine are enough for tonight?" she asked as she poured.

"It's enough," Modra said, wanting to get back to Veloria. "Chris, are you telling me you are still struggling with her going away? I mean, I'm going to miss her too, but she has to leave the nest at some point." Modra couldn't believe her friend was still struggling with this. Christine has dreaded, mourned and feared this day for two years now. It was always the same thing, Modra would talk about her "nature pact" with Kevin and fret over her guilt and anxiety and Christine would fret over her daughter growing up and being a junior in high school. The the worst was

when she became a senior and Christine spent an entire evening picturing the dreadful day that they would have to pack up her clothes and drive her to her dorm. They've had many a bottle of wine and hundreds of hours of conversation on the same two subjects.

"I know, I should be excited... but I don't know how." Her sole focus in life had been to raise a good, strong, independent daughter and get her off to the school of her choice. She succeeded and now her prize is a resounding feeling of loss. UCSF should have felt like a blessing for Christine because it was where Veloria wanted to go and it kept her close to home, but as far as she was concerned, it wasn't close enough.

"You should have had two," Julie said, almost choking on the tomato slice she'd popped into her mouth before she spoke. She wanted to kick herself for continuously blurting out stupid comments. She didn't know why, but it seemed that with every one of her comments she was making a contrary statement to Kevin and Modra's life choice.

Both Modra and Christine looked at Julie.

"For the record," Christine tried to clarify, "I was thrilled that she was going to UCSF. I mean, it's a hell of a lot closer than Europe."

Modra and Julie looked at each other with some confusion, where did Europe come in? Then Modra put a hand up quickly and asked, "What do you mean *was* going?"

Christine drank the entire glass of wine without breathing, refilled it, and did it again before she said, “Well, she is going. It’s not an option,” Christine said defiantly. Then she hesitated as she looked over her audience. “Oh, I’ll just tell you the whole thing before Bill gets here so we can get it out of our system. And girls, he does not want to talk about it, so please, do not bring up the subject later tonight.” She pointed a finger at both of them. “I don’t care how many glasses of wine you’ve had.”

Modra and Julie both nodded. The three looked at Kevin for an agreement, but he was snoring away on the couch.

“Bill and I are pretty sure it all started with a birthday gift we gave Veloria last year. All she wanted for her birthday were some gourmet cooking lessons—too much Food Network,” Christine surmised with a shrug of her shoulders. “Anyway, it happened that one of Bill’s patients owns the Tini House.”

Modra nodded knowingly, and said, “Dana,” remembering the many fun evenings she and Kevin had spent at the Tini House since it had opened its doors two years earlier.

Christine paused. “That’s right.” She seemed irritated at the fact that Modra seemed to know and like Dana. “She has a son who . . . who seems like a nice enough kid.”

“He is a nice kid. A nice kid who not only happens to be a chef, but he is also a part owner of the Tini House with his mother. Isn’t that cool?”

“I am not done with my story yet,” Christine warned. “Stop being so . . . just let me finish.” She said tersely.

“Oops! Sorry,” Modra apologized.

Afraid to interrupt again, Julie and Modra listened quietly as Christine continued with her story. They were dying to understand why she was getting so worked up over Dana, she happened to be, in Modra’s opinion, one of the nicest women in town. She and Kevin would take guests to the cool looking restaurant for great ambiance, martinis and food. In fact, Julie had also had the pleasure of getting to know Dana well the last few times she’d visited Healdsburg.

“Anyway, she offered her son, Diego, to give Veloria private lessons.”

“Oh, no,” Modra said, already knowing where the story was going. She was almost old enough to be his mother, but she couldn't help but notice how handsome he was. “He’s a gorgeous twenty-two-year-old young man.”

Julie interrupted. “Modra told me about him. I think you said—“ Julie looked at Modra as she recalled their conversation “—that he’s a blended product of Swiss and Mexican parents and that he’s fun to look at . . . for a twenty-something-year-old.” Julie was giggling. “Now I’m going to have to meet this gorgeous young man.”

Modra could feel Christine’s glare on her so she turned and gave Julie a funny look for her to shut up realizing they were being insensitive to poor Christine. She was obviously distraught over her daughter’s probable boyfriend.

“Sorry.” Modra said looking down at the floor like a five-year-old who got caught doing something she wasn’t supposed to be doing.

“Gee, aren't you two little fact-finders. That’s terrific.” Christine scowled at Julie. “Aren’t you too old to be drooling over a twenty-two-year-old?”

Julie gave Modra the look of being an unjustly accused victim. Why hadn’t she gotten in trouble for saying he was gorgeous first?

“As-I-was-saying,” she said as she glared at the two sisters who pretended to lock their lips and throw away the key, “Bill and I assumed the classes were going well. Veloria came home every night, glowing. She would be completely excited about a new technique or recipe. Anyway, to make a very long story short, she wasn’t glowing about the new skills she’d acquired, she was glowing about the new boyfriend she’d acquired.” Christine’s words were full of distaste.

Modra looked at her friend with confusion. “Ok, Christine, I really want to be sympathetic here and maybe I missed something so please forgive my ignorance. So what if they’re dating? He’s only twenty-two and Veloria is what, eighteen?” She looked at her friend with complete sincerity. “I’m having a hard time believing you’re having issues with her dating, and what does this have to do with her going off to school, anyway?”

“Of course I’m not having issues with her dating. I’m having issues with her wanting to travel all over Europe for the

next year. She wants to take a year off before continuing her education.”

“Oh.” Modra said wondering why that would be so bad. She wanted to say that she thought it was a wonderful idea. Veloria would be going off to med school and would most likely be studying hard for the next ten to twelve years. After that, she would have to worry about finding a job and launching her career and then building a private practice. In Modra’s opinion there would never be a more opportune time for her to travel without having to worry about getting back. However, she said no more once she saw the sour look on Christine’s face.

“What’s she going to do in Europe for a year?” Julie asked, interested.

Modra bit her lip. "Julie, there is a lot she can do in a year in Europe." Modra could think of a million things to see and experience through the course of a year anywhere. In fact, a year would never be enough for all of Europe.

"That was exactly my question." Christine said, taking the opportunity to respond to Julie’s question, though it was really more about her painting a lopsided picture of her perspective than her providing a logical response. “Oh, I’ll tell you what she would do for an entire year in Europe. Apparently, *DeeAgo*” Christine made it a point to butcher the poor kids name with a hardcore American pronunciation “has traveled all over the world, staying with host families. He told Veloria that he worked his way through Europe before going to culinary school in

France.” Christine’s tone was definitely condescending. “France!” she exclaimed, “Who cares.” She said rolling her eyes, “he still only cooks for a living”.

Modra wondered if there was any way to paint this in a better light for Christine. It really wasn’t so bad. It’s not like Veloria was pregnant or getting married at such an early age. She was just looking for adventure before she had to buckle down for a long time. Both Modra and Julie were willing to bet this had more to do with Veloria being so far away for a year than anything else.

“Don’t you think this experience has had a hand in making him as worldly as he is for his age?” Modra asked, wondering how Christine couldn’t see the benefits in what Diego had experienced and accomplished in foreign lands. The kid was mature, responsible, and a heck of an entrepreneur. “I think some people really benefit from experiencing foreign places perhaps some of that foreign experience might be good for Veloria.” When she saw Christine’s disapproval over her statement she added, “Or, she may hate it and come right home.”

“I think it’s great that Diego was able to travel so much and it may even have been a benefit to his career, but let’s face it, he’s a cook.” Christine said *cook* as if the culinary arts required no amount of talent.

“I’m having trouble seeing how his being a *chef* ties into Veloria and Europe,” Modra said, pouring wine into their once again empty wineglasses.

“Oh, let me explain.” And in the most condescending pretentious tone she said, “He’ll first be *going back* to Asia to experience the culinary pallet of India and China and then spending the winter with some friends in Italy, London, and Prague, where he will be working with them in their restaurants.” When she finished, the sisters could only smile at the snootiness of her tone.

“Wow.” Julie bubbled, “That was good. You almost sounded British.”

Modra smirked by stopped, Christine was pissed.

Christine chastened them with her stare; apparently they weren’t getting how serious this was. “Anyway, Veloria thinks she’s going with him.” It was obvious Christine was quite done with Diego and his influence. “It all seems like a waste of time to me. She needs to start her education and get her first year out of the way. She will have plenty of time to take vacations later in life, when she’s professionally established.”

Modra was obviously annoyed with her friend’s arrogant attitude as she commented, “I think you’re being unfair to Diego.” She squared off with her friend and added, “Going to Europe is Veloria’s call, granted Diego may make it seem like a romantic notion but in the end, it’s her call. He’s not tying her to an airplane and forcing her to go. I think your beef needs to be with Vel. Maybe you should tell her how you feel.” Christine said nothing but Modra could tell she was seething. “I just want to add that I’ve been to the Tini House many times. In fact, it’s

my favorite joint in town.” She paused to sip her wine. “Let’s be honest, the food is always spectacular and you have to love the way he blends spices from all over the world to make dinner an orgasmic experience. The boy has skill.”

“Oooh, I want to try the Tunisian lamb you’ve talked about,” Julie said, trying to bring the tension down a notch. “But, sister, I think your orgasmic experience stems from watching him run around in his form-fitting 501 button flies.”

Modra was giving her sister a warning glance to let her know she wasn’t being a very good friend right now. In fact, she wasn’t being a very good friend either.

Christine was understandably annoyed with them both. She couldn’t believe they weren’t taking her side on this. “You two are a wonderful support base,” she said sarcastically. She turned her back to her friends and began concentrating on dinner. She simply would rather not look at them right now. “He needs to use his *skill* on someone else’s daughter and leave mine alone.”

They both knew they were being unworthy friends and felt awful for it. Modra spoke first, “You’re right. I’m sorry. We are being really bad friends right now. I mean, here you are, taking time out of your day to support me during my difficult time, the least I can do is agree with you blindly—he’s a little shit!” Modra said, as she placed the duck in the oven. “But, if I’m going to blindly to agree with you that Diego is a little shit, then I have to be honest and say that I’m not quite sure that taking a year to travel is such a bad idea for her, without Diego I mean.”

Julie cut in. “No Mod. I don’t agree with you. I’m giving Christine a hard time about this whole Diego travel thing, but as a mother, I can see where her concern lies.”

Modra pursed her lips. She was surprised by her sister; she had always been on the liberal side when it came to her son missing school for travel. Kevin and Modra had sold their business for a solid profit and instantly found themselves with plenty of time and money for their favorite pastime: travel. They approached Julie, Mikaela, and Ricky about traveling with their kids, but only Julie would allow her son to miss school for vacation. Her only request had been that they make the trips educational.

Last year alone, they’d taken him on a road trip around the U.S., visiting presidential libraries, state capitals, and the White House over summer break for an entire month. In February, he missed two weeks of school so he could discover Morelia, Mexico, where he got to see the monarch butterfly migration in full swing.

“Whether you’re a mother or not, let’s agree that travel provides experiences that can be life enhancing *and* life-altering,” Modra said to Julie and Christine, who gestured as though she had just made their point.

Julie turned her attention to Christine. “You’ve worked for eighteen solid years keeping Veloria’s eye on the ball. Correct me if I’m wrong, but are you afraid she may get derailed? Maybe

decide she doesn't want to become a gynecologist after all or . . .
.?"

"And decide to be a chef or something more ridiculous instead," Christine said bluntly, "Veloria is a very emotional girl and I don't want her to fall so in love with this kid that she loses focus on what she has to do. This is what she's always wanted to be and the idea that a boy she barely knows could get her to shelve her lifelong dreams honestly scares me. I saw many of my friends drop out of college and give up their dreams for a boy. I don't want Veloria to be one of them." Christine made no effort to hide her frustration; these were her close friends and if there was anyone she could talk to it was them. It was a relief for her to know that at least Julie understood how she felt. She wouldn't say it out loud because she knew how much it would irk Modra, but Christine felt strongly that Modra couldn't possibly understand her situation because she had never had children.

"Okay, that's a valid concern," Modra said, wanting to be supportive and wishing she could agree with Christine, if only just a little. The whole crash-and-burn mentality was driving Modra batty. Christine was behaving as though Veloria was going to ruin her life by having a boyfriend and traveling abroad. Hoping to make her point about travel and ease Christine's fears, she added, "You know, most Europeans encourage their children to take a year off from school to travel to a different continent before continuing their education; they call it the O.E., for overseas experience. Traveling is a form of their education."

Modra looked at Christine, who had a look of disbelief on her face. Realizing that this was not what her friend wanted to hear, Modra said, “Listen, I’m not going to pretend to know how to deal with this situation, but you have to give Veloria some credit; she’s a smart girl. And I’ll grant you that you have sheltered her, but that only makes her naïve, not stupid,” she said honestly before deciding to shut up.

Christine was intrigued by her friend’s audacity. She knew Modra well enough to know she had an opinion so she wanted to know how she would handle the situation. “All right, then, please tell me how you, a non-parent, would handle this,” Christine said and took a deep breath to prepare herself. It was true, she and Bill had kept their daughter pretty sheltered from the abstracts of life. She was aware of how over-involved parents could get when it came to situations involving their own children—they many times forget to use basic common sense.

Julie chimed in sarcastically, “Oh, I want to hear this.” She crossed her arms and prepared herself to laugh.

Modra looked at both of them incredulously. “Fine, you smart-asses. If you’re both going to gang up on me, then I’ll share my opinion and I don’t care if it pisses you both off.”

“Good,” Christine and Julie both happily replied in unison. They were attendees at a comedy show and were ready to be entertained.

“All right,” Modra said, thinking out loud, as she prepared her statement. “I think that you only have two choices.” Modra

took a moment to think what she was like at eighteen. She was a bullheaded, rebellious girl and unlike Veloria, who was very agreeable and always flexible, Modra would have rebelled and gone anyway. Given that Veloria has never openly contradicted or defied either of her parents, she would most likely accept Christine's demand that she not travel and begin her education at USF immediately. And there was a strong possibility that she would at the very least resent her mother for it. At some point, Veloria was bound to rebel.

"We're waiting," Christine said, refilling her wineglass.

"Okay, okay. Your first option is to absolutely forbid Veloria from going anywhere until she finishes her education. This way, she can hate you and possibly blame you forever if she's unhappy with her career. But you won't have to worry, because Veloria is too nice to ever tell you she hates you. No, she's the type that keeps it bottled up. She would never dare admit she's angry with you because she loves you, but every time Europe comes up in a conversation she will always be able to say that her mother forbade her from having that experience to draw from."

"Ohhhh, shit, you chose guilt. There is now no doubt in my mind that you, who claims to be a moderate Catholic, would parent a child with guilt to get the results you want," Christine said, shaking her head at her friend for laying it on. "That's pretty pathetic."

Modra laughed, she knew her friend was right. “Guilt is like shrapnel: It embeds itself permanently into your life.” Modra noticed Julie giving her a deep, agreeing nod. “Anyway, your other option is to make a deal.”

Julie and Christine looked at each other, puzzled. “What kind of a deal?” Christine asked, intrigued, preferring an alternative to her daughter hating her.

Modra looked at them confused and shrugged. “I don’t know, you’re the parents. Talk to her and see if you can’t bargain her to a summer overseas experience or negotiate the next three summers that you and Bill pay for. You could even offer her the possibility of a different continent each summer if she maintains a certain GPA. Hell, tell her you wouldn’t even care if she took Diego with her.”

Christine’s eyes almost popped out of their sockets.

“As long as she uses protection and continues to work toward her goal, then who cares?” Modra asked, shrugging, “My logic is, if she’s not having sex already, she will be and the point of this discussion is to get her through school.”

Julie was actually very impressed with her sister and her expression said so. “I didn’t know you had it in you,” she said, giggling.

“Because you’re her mom, you’re looking at this as though she’s having a problem and you have to control it by denying her a life experience. I look at Veloria as an adult, eager to begin using her grown-up powers and choose her own experiences. She

did just turn eighteen, you know.” Modra smiled and added, “I know, I’m such a know it all.” In reality, Modra had absolutely no clue how she would truly react to the same situation if it were her daughter but she hoped she would respond the same way.