

## Four

*Wow!* Modra thought as her thoughts came back to the present. *I can't believe ten years have passes since our pact.* It never ceased to amaze her how vivid the memory of that night remained in her thoughts. She could still see the tension in Kevin's jaw as he'd stood across from her in their dark kitchen, trying to talk some sense into her. And now here they are ten years later sitting on their porch in Healdsburg, getting ready to seal the deal. The day had arrived—finally they would have a resolution. Modra turned thirty-eight today and according to the rules of their pact, they were officially done and Modra's conscience was officially off the hook.

“Hmnh, what an interesting journey we've had. ” Modra said as she rocked herself back and forth. “You know, it's good we found each other.” She looked at him, “I just can't imagine how much more stressful this would have been on me if you had felt differently.”

Kevin placed a warm hand over hers.

She turned her hand up and entangled her fingers into his as she said, “I am so relieved to finally be done with this. Isn't it nice to finally get to know?”

“It is nice... and I am thrilled with nature's choice.” Kevin agreed enjoying the cool morning air. The light breeze and the

peaceful surroundings were lulling him, convincing him to close his eyes and relax when he suddenly sat up and looked at his watch. “Shouldn’t Julie be here already?” He liked Julie and was glad she was coming for Modra’s sake. Her positive attitude and bubbly personality would be good for the both of them to have around today.

“It’s funny, I just peaked at her itinerary yesterday hoping she would be here by now, but her flight isn’t scheduled to arrive into SFO until nine this morning, so she won’t be getting here until around noon. That is of course if the fog doesn’t delay her flight.” Modra smiled with the anticipation of seeing her sister again. They hadn’t seen each other for a few months. In fact, the last time had been when she and Kevin had flown to Wenatchee and had that disastrous family visit. They had mended their relationship since then and Modra was relieved for it. She did a quick mental run thru of things she still needed to get done before Julie arrived and remembered that she hadn’t put soap out in the guest bathroom. She made a mental note then looked at her husband who was relaxing with his head leaning back as he rocked slowly back and forth. She could see a peaceful hint of a smile across his lips as he stared out into the distance. It was a soothing morning, only the occasional car drove by on the street below to disturb the silence. She reached across and pinched his German nose and asked, “Are you nervous?” She was referring to the vasectomy not the fact that they would be living out the rest of their lives childless.

“Only about the procedure, I’m thrilled with everything else.” Kevin said crooking his head towards her. He closed eyes again and said, “It’s kind of weird to know it’s over today. I mean, it’s kinda become a natural part of my day to wonder whether you would find out you were pregnant or not.” He paused in thought and added, “I wonder if it will take me a few days or months to break the habit of worrying about it”.

Modra nodded to let him know she felt the same. In reality she still had some reservations about going through with it, but she now (conveniently) had her age to consider. She admittedly had a minor relapse a couple of nights ago and called her sister Mikaela for support. She didn’t know why she had chosen to call Mikaela who had been adamantly opposed to their ruling out alternative methods for conception, but when she picked up the phone, that’s who she had called. The minute Mikaela said hello, Modra had poured her internal conflicts out, asking her sister to give her advice and not judgment. Mikaela had sat silent on the other end of the line making Modra wonder whether she had made a mistake by calling her. She had wanted Mikaela to give her reasons to postpone the vasectomy, but when Mikaela finally spoke, she surprised Modra.

For the first time since Mikaela had learned of Kevin and Modra’s pact, she was supportive of their decision. Mikaela encouraged Modra to follow through with the vasectomy admitting that, “You don’t have to have children to be happy. Honestly...” she’d added, “they’re not all they’re cracked up to

be." The admission surprised Modra because Mikaela had always lived her life around her children and loved it. Perhaps it was for that reason that Modra felt better about today. She had been genuinely grateful to her sister for her genuine advice. Mikaela had continued, "As a parent you can't help but love your children regardless of who they are. Once you have them, it's almost impossible to imagine your life without them, but they do disappoint you and they do hurt your feelings without giving it a thought." Modra could tell she was crying on the other end. "But it's hard being a parent. The more I try to stay involved in Cody's life, the more he becomes frustrated with me. I don't know how to parent him all of a sudden."

Modra had correctly guessed that her sixteen-year-old nephew must have really crossed the line recently for Mikaela to verbalize her feelings so bluntly. She tried to ease her sister's pain with empty words, "Don't forget he's a teenager and he's testing the boundaries. He'll grow out of it."

"Oh, give me a break! I'm really tired of hearing that. It's an excuse we parents use when we're losing control. There, I admitted it. I'm struggling as a parent." Modra could hear the weariness in her sister's voice. "Here, I'll tell you what happened and maybe then you'll even have the vasectomy early." Modra heard her sister exhale into the mouth piece before she started with, "It was my turn to pick up Cody and his buddies from school after the dance yesterday. I could smell the beer on his breath the minute he was in the car. I asked him about it and it

got ugly. All he could focus on was how I was smothering him and embarrassing him around his friends! Can you believe that! His dad had to come and get him. I swear I was going to kill him. I can't, for the life of me, figure out where all this sudden anger is coming from. He's been such a wonderful kid . . . I have to admit, he took me by surprise." There was a moment of silence where Modra could only hope her sister wasn't waiting for her to speak because she had no idea what advice to give. *I probably would have embarrassed him more by spanking him in front of his friends for his bad attitude.* Eventually Mikaela started again, "I've seen other mothers go through this... I just never thought it would happen to me. It's like the more I discipline him the harder he pushes back." She sniffled and said, "I feel like we're always fighting. I discipline him and then he runs to his dad's house where he has no rules." She paused, "it hurts me. You, you don't have to worry about this." Mikaela blew her nose, "Hell, you never have to worry, especially about what type of life changing decisions your kid will make—that kind of stuff keeps parents up at night."

"Wow," Modra said as she thought of what best to say. As a non-parent she could never figure out exactly how to respond to parents who vented about their kids. It saddened her to think that she couldn't offer her sister any advice on how to deal with her son and she reasoned that Mikaela was just looking for an ear, not advice so she offered her sister the typical non-parent response. "I am so sorry."

“Yeah, I’m sorry, too,” Mikaela said with defeat in her voice. “I know Cody will come around, I’ll just have to figure out how to give him space and parent him at the same time.”

Modra had wondered how or if that was possible and then decided to change the subject instead. She inquired about her five-year-old niece who, she thought to herself, had about eight years left before she put her mom through the same hell.

“How is little Jackie doing?”

“She’s missing her brother now that he’s moved in with his dad, but she’ll be fine. Listen, sister, I love Cody and Jackie with all my heart. Given the chance to do it all over again, I would still have them.” Modra smiled as she listened to her sister’s parental disclaimer, wondering what she was preparing to say. It sounded as though she was preparing to say something that could be taken as unloving-parent-like, when she said, “But I have to think . . . you can’t miss something if you haven’t experienced it.”

It only took a second of silence before Modra knew Mikaela already felt guilty for having said it. She jumped in to help her. “Thanks sister, I really appreciate your honesty. Your right, I can’t miss what I haven’t had.” She sat pensive for a second before adding, “I know you’ll get through this with Cody. He’s a good kid, just don’t stop parenting him. You’ll become his favorite person when he’s away in school and he doesn’t have you around every day.”

Once they had hung up, Modra actually felt worse about parenthood. Her poor sister, a devoted mother, wife, and devout Catholic, was now on her side prompting her to remain childless. She thought about their conversation. *It's only beer* she thought and wondered if Mikaela was right to worry that it may become something worse, or if she was over reacting. Though, as a parent, Modra could understand that a parent would never want to look back and feel that they should have done more, even if their kid hated them for it. *I would have been an overbearing controlling mother. I don't think I would know how to step back.*

It seemed inconceivable that Mikaela had become subjected to the same episodes of what Modra usually attributed to spoiled and ill-parented children. As her nieces and nephews were becoming older, Modra was beginning to realize that sometimes kids are who they are, regardless of their up-brining. That night, Modra said a thank you to the heavens for her uncomplicated life with Kevin.

“Babe,” Modra said to Kevin who was oblivious to Modra’s trip down memory lane.

“Hmmm?” Kevin turned his peaceful gaze toward her.

“Now that we figured out kids are to blame for global warming and the world’s problems, would you be interested in taking a nap before my sister gets here?” She was suddenly very tired.

“Oh, that sounds like a great idea.” Kevin smiled, stood, and held out his hand for her to take.

“We’ll leave the mess out here. I’ll get it later,” Modra said, ready to snuggle.

As they walked up the stairs, Kevin couldn’t help but notice how adorable his wife looked in her red flannel pajamas. Once they were at the top of the stairs, he reached forward and pulled her bottoms off slowly. She stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to face him as he took a step down to be at eye level with her. She reached under his tee shirt and felt his cool smooth skin, her body responded. She needed this more than she needed a nap.

They kissed passionately and Modra, half groaning, asked if they had time for this. Kevin responded by running his warm hands on her cold, naked bottom and making her smile. He picked her up and wrapped her legs around him. After placing her in the center of the bed, Kevin partially undressed as Modra watched.

“Locked and loaded,” Modra said with anticipation as his pajama bottoms fell to the floor.

Kevin grinned; he was flattered by his wife’s complimentary stare. He walked over, placed his hands on her ankles, and then slowly slithered over her body pressing his against hers. She ran her hands underneath his shirt, forcing it off before bringing her hands back to his chest. She wanted to get closer and feel him all around her. She wrapped herself around his naked body, wanting him closer with every movement he made. Instantly, he slid his hands beneath her and then Modra

was on top. He wanted to keep playing, but she couldn't wait. Finally, a completely intoxicating physical exchange took place and Modra was spent.

The sunlight poured through the windows but it didn't matter, both Kevin and Modra were so worn they fell into a deep sleep. The phone rang; one of them groaned but neither got up to answer. The phone then rang a second and third time before Kevin put a pillow over his head to muffle the sound. The answering machine finally picked up on the fifth ring and they heard Julie's booming voice.

"Hey, guys, good news. I was able to take an earlier flight in Seattle and I'm driving through Santa Rosa right now. I was going to surprise you but decided to let you know so you're not running around naked when I get there."

Kevin and Modra looked at each other; they were both stark naked and in bed leaning on their elbows in disbelief at Julie's message. "I hope you're home," Julie sang into the recorder, "but if you're not, don't worry, I have the spare."

Kevin and Modra fell back into their pillows as they realized they had about twenty minutes before Julie came knocking. Modra decided to ignore her sister's phone call and backed up into her husband to snuggle.

"We have to get up," Kevin said, running his finger down her naked back.

Modra didn't respond. She was enjoying her time wrapped in her husband's beautiful body. She wiggled a little and felt

Kevin's body respond. She smiled and went for a quickie. Eventually, the doorbell rang and she grudgingly wiggled out of bed and threw her pajamas back on. She gave her husband a kiss before he got up to jump into the shower and then ran down the stairs.

Julie stood grinning broadly on the other side of the twelve-foot glass door. Modra swung it open and gave her sister a big hug. "Oh, no, you were having sex, weren't you?" Julie asked a surprised Modra.

"What? How'd you know?" Modra asked, mortified.

"What?" Julie asked confused by Modra's response, before she realized they *had* just had sex. "I was joking, you know. Kevin is having the big V today and you won't be able to reach into the toy box for at least a week. I just thought that, oh never mind."

Modra smiled and shook her head. "You're an idiot," she said as she took Julie's bag and made her way up the stairs. "How was your flight?" she asked.

"Smooth. Thanks for leaving a car at the car park for me. That worked out really well."

Modra had to pause and think about it for a second. They had never parked a car at the airport before for anyone. "Oh, no worries. Kevin and I had to stop by his parent's home in the South Bay so it worked out," Modra said as she opened the curtains in Julie's room to let sunlight in. "How much was it, anyway, for the overnight parking?"

Julie was looking around the guestroom. She was always impressed at how childless couples kept their homes so perfect.

“It was way less than renting a car. Thank you.” Julie turned and gave her sister a bear hug. “I love you and I’m glad I’m here.” Her smile wavered.

Modra noticed but chalked it up to being tired.

Modra had no idea that Julie's visit had more to do with personal motive than to provide her with moral support. Unlike Mikaela, Julie was not on board with them giving up on parenthood and having a vasectomy.

“I’m going to shower and I think you should, too,” Julie said with a smirk.

Modra gasped and pinched her sister for being unkind. “I love you, too, sister, and I’m really glad you came.”

“I’ll be out in a few minutes,” Julie said as Modra left the room. She carefully closed the door behind her sister then placed her forehead against the back and stood there, listening to Modra’s footsteps until they disappeared behind the sound of another door being closed. She turned and walked heavily to the bed letting her weight fall on the mattress. In her backpack Julie found her laptop and pulled it out of the sleeve and turned it on. Drumming her fingers on the comforter, she waited for the computer screen to load. Immediately she checked her In-Box—nothing. She opened yesterday’s email and bowed her head—at least I have this for now. After two years of trying, she was desperately waiting to hear if the eggs that had been harvested

from her ovaries were healthy and usable. She had received a message from her doctor's office that said she should call back A.S.A.P., but she got it too late so she sent them an email this morning. She may not be able to have another child in her own uterus, but if she had healthy eggs a surrogate uterus could fill the void. Then all she had to do was find a willing, inexpensive uterus to borrow.

Julie had gone round and round on surrogacy since she lost half of her uterus to cervical cancer. The fact that her womb had been ravaged by disease hadn't diminished her need to have a baby. *It's absolutely wicked the way the body works.* The desire to have a baby plagues and haunts her every minute of every day; nearly driving her insane. She constantly finds herself thinking about Daniel, her beautiful son. *He deserved to have a sibling he can count on for the rest of his life. He deserves to have someone who can't divorce him or leave him for someone else.*

As she stared at her empty In-Box one more time, she wondered how or if she could afford the procedure. With the laptop in her lap and both hands in a ball, she tried to visualize the concept of a childless woman, one that is a member of her own family. How could it be that she and Modra were so very different on the subject of motherhood? Julie couldn't help wonder why it couldn't have been her with the whole uterus and access to alternative options. How is it that Modra can be so

blasé about remaining childless while her own body ached for a baby?

She closed the laptop and went to take a shower. She stood under the showerhead crying as the scalding hot water ran down her back turning her skin a shade of pink. She was here to be supportive of Modra, but she knew it was going to take a heavy toll on her. What she wanted to do was to beg Modra to reconsider. She believed that Modra was making a mistake she would live to regret. Her healthy uterus gave her options and alternatives Julie could only wish she had. If she had a healthy uterus of her own, she would attempt in-vitro in a second if it gave her even a minute possibility of having a baby grow inside her body. Julie placed her hands over her tummy as she thought of the wonderful feelings she had felt when she was pregnant with Daniel. It had been ten years since and she would give anything to feel that way again.

Kevin and Modra were in the kitchen putting a quick lunch together for the three of them. Modra stuffed a tossed cob salad into a whole-wheat pita bread pocket, while Kevin made some good, old-fashioned Schroeder lemonade—freshly-squeezed lemonade and bourbon.

Cheerful music floated in the air masking Julie's footsteps as she made her way to the kitchen. She leaned against the doorway and watched the oblivious couple buzz around, grabbing silverware, cloth napkins, and such. As Kevin turned to

go to the freezer for ice, Julie noticed the open bourbon bottle sitting on the counter.

“Isn’t it a bit early for booze?” Julie asked, wondering if Kevin should be drinking before his procedure.

“Today is an exception,” Kevin said, looking over his shoulder as he shoveled ice into the pitcher.

“Today is a special occasion,” Modra said, smiling at her sister warmly, “You are here visiting.”

Satisfied with the amount of ice floating in the lemonade, Kevin went to the counter and poured a glass. He quick took a sip and puckered his mouth in response to the sour lemon taste, and then he turned and handed it to Julie before pouring two others.

“Yes, I am . . . here,” Julie said as she, suddenly, gratefully accepted her drink. She let her weight fall back against the wall, resting against her shoulders as she held her glass with both hands. Her narrow shoulders were flattered by the sleeveless white top she wore with ruffles in front. “However, I think you are drinking for courage.”

There was a double meaning in Julie’s words and Modra caught them. “Julie—”

“Are you sure,” Julie said, cutting Modra off, “it’s not to take the edge off before you go get snipped and stitched?” Julie swirled her index finger in the general direction of Kevin’s penis.

“Thanks for the reminder,” Kevin said as he slowly put his glass down and placed a hand against the wall for support. The reminder seemed to weaken him at the knees.

Modra smiled at Julie but said nothing, deciding to let Julie’s insinuation slide. She handed Julie a plate with a pita and led the way to the porch where Kevin joined them to have their lunch. The spring sky was crisp blue and the girls both put on a thin sweater to protect against the mildly cool breeze. They each took a rocker. Julie made it a point to rock back and forth like a five-year-old while her lunch rested on her lap. Modra laughed at her sister’s immaturity, took her drink from her before she spilled it on herself, and placed it on the small table next to her.

The conversation was light, a contrast to their heavy hearts. They were cordial towards one another. The sisters had made up, but Modra knew that Julie still believed they were making a mistake. Modra sidestepped the subject and asked about Daniel, Mom, and Dad. Julie responded leaving out the snide comments their mother had asked her to pass along to her older sister. The sisters sat next to each other talking, but not sharing everything they wanted to share, not the way they normally shared; their walls were up. Their smiles and false pretenses were impeccable. Julie hid her sadness from being a broken woman, and tried to imagine what Modra’s reaction would be once she finally worked up the courage to ask her if she would please be her surrogate. Modra on the other hand enjoyed the conversation because it made it easy for her to pretend

everything was fine and dandy. She knew how much Julie wanted another baby, and it made her feel guilty that she could not find a reason to want one for herself.

Kevin, however, was a genuinely happy man. He was a bit nervous about the procedure he was about to undergo, but overall, he was thrilled to get past this juncture in his life. His smile was from ear to ear. There were absolutely no false pretenses behind his smile.

After lunch, Kevin went inside to relax before his surgery. The girls stayed outside, enjoying the warming sun, and the rest of the lemonade. The minutes seemed to pass slowly as their generic conversation continued. Grateful for the distraction, they took a break when they heard a jogger approaching. Their eyes were scouting for the runner through the branches of the oaks that stood between them and the road that wound its way up the mountainside. It was like an unspoken challenge to be the first to spot the runner. They let the silence fall in around them as they listened to his heavy breathing, trying to gage his location. Each breath exploded out of his body, breaking the silence in perfect sync with every footstep as he lifted the weight of his body and brought it down again, pounding it into the pavement. They listened and watched until the filtered image of a man ran towards them through the trees and then away from their sight. A light hearted discussion ensued as to who spotted him first, but it was impossible to declare a winner since they both reached for the others arm and pointed at the same time. They didn't

scream, because the last time they'd played the game, they startled the runner.

After the runner was long gone, Modra worked up the courage and asked Julie, "Have you been crying?" She didn't turn to face her sister. She continued, "I noticed your puffy red eyes earlier when we were in the kitchen." She gave Julie a sincere apologetic look and said, "I'm sorry, but your eyes just get so puffy that I can't help but notice when you've been crying.

Julie took her time answering while she debated how she should respond. Measuring her words and remembering that she flew down to California under the pretense of being a support base for Modra, she responded, "Yeah, It's nothing, I'm just PMS-ing." She decided that *now*, just before the vasectomy, was not the best time to tell her sister about the surrogate arrangement she was hoping to make or that she was desperately hoping she would agree to be her surrogate. Julie shrugged her shoulders to give the impression that the reason for her tears was not important.

"Oh, is that all!" Modra said, pretending to understand even though she got the feeling that Julie was holding something back. She thought about it for a second and decided to move the conversation along. Julie's life was pretty complicated all the time and Modra didn't want to know about it today. "I talked to Mikaela a couple of days ago and she said that Daniel was doing really well in school."

Julie lit up immediately. “He’s doing wonderfully.” Her head bobbed as she spoke. “His grades are excellent. He’s got the mellowest personality ever and he’s the handsomest kid in his class.” Her straight face and her tone suggested that her comments were substantiated facts and not merely a mother’s biased opinion.

“Wow! He is the man,” Modra said, noticing how Julie’s personality lit up every time they spoke about her son. “I know you’re not exaggerating, otherwise you would have said he’s the handsomest in the school.” She smiled.

“Well, as a matter-of-fact he is, but that would be bragging.” Julie gave a solid nod and smiled broadly.

Modra shook her head. “Mothers, I swear.”

They nursed their lemonades for almost an hour before Modra decided it was time to deliver Kevin to the butcher. She walked into the house in search of her husband. Julie watched, biting her lip and reminding herself to keep her opinions to herself.

Kevin was sprawled on the couch reading *The World According to Garp*, by John Irving. He put the book down on his chest and looked at his wife, who was now standing directly above him with an apologetic look about her.

“Hey babe, are you ready?” Her eyes showed concern as she looked at her husband who had sprawled himself across the couch with his legs hanging off the arm rest. Suddenly, for the

first time, she noticed that he was nervous underneath his relaxed facade.

“I think I’m as ready as I can be.” He got himself up off the couch, ready to get it over with. Modra followed him close behind as they said goodbye to Julie. He was being overly dramatic as he hung his head and mournfully marched himself down the porch steps, and onto the driveway. Julie giggled, she thought he looked like a prisoner of old who was being marched out to the town square to be executed. Waving goodbye from the porch, she watched them both until the smart car turned out of the driveway and drove out of sight.

They arrived at Dr. William Merkle’s office in all of four minutes, a luxury of living in a small town. Veloria, the receptionist, stood to greet and give them each a hug. “Dad will be out in a minute,” she said as she dug out a few *Sports Illustrated* magazines to hand to Kevin.

“Oh, no thanks,” he said, holding up his 4x6 paperback, “I brought my own reading material.” He grinned as she read the title and looked perplexed.

“Okay.” She shrugged and put the magazines back on the table next to the other ones titled *Motherhood* and *You and Your Baby*. “I thought you might like something big enough to block your view, but if you want to watch . . . Dad will be happy to give you a narrative as he goes along.” Modra swung her attention to Kevin, who gulped hard as the blood appeared to drain from his body.

Placing a hand on Modra's shoulder for support, he said, "I- I didn't think of that," Kevin said, reaching for the magazines. "I was hoping I wouldn't be awake."

Veloria watched Kevin with amusement. He was behaving like every other man that came into the office for a vasectomy. "I'm just a little queasy— It has something to do with a scrapple being used on me in that area." Veloria smiled. She sympathized with him and patted him gently on the back to tell him it would be all right.

Veloria was Bill and Christine's daughter and both Kevin and Modra held her in an equivalent esteem as their own true nieces and nephews. The mutual affection worked out perfectly for both parties because neither party had other family near-by. Kevin and Modra treated her as if she was one of their own. They included her in their outings to the theater, the city, and of course, all of Modra's family gatherings where she gets spoiled and absorbed and treated as part of the clan.

Modra gave Kevin a Kiss on the cheek and turned to leave him with Veloria, before she realized she was being absent minded. She paused and asked, "Oh, I guess I should ask, what time should I be back to pick him up?"

At that moment, Bill made his way into the lobby. He handed off his current patient to his daughter and turned his attention to Modra and Kevin.

"Hello, Mod," Bill said, bringing her back into the room and giving her a warm hug. "Christine wanted me to let you

know that she'll be over later today at around two-ish, if that's okay? However, I won't be arriving until about six, just in time to eat, drink, and celebrate." He looked at Kevin with concerned eyes and said, "I still think you're crazy, but I'll celebrate with you if you insist."

"I tried to tell him he needs to rest and heal first, but you know how stubborn he is." She pinched Kevin's nose, something she did regularly to tease him about having a big German nose and she smiled. "Ok, Well, I better get going. I left Julie on the porch with a pitcher of special lemonade." She giggled when she realized how early it was, "I guess we started early today." They exchanged an air kiss before she said, "Remember, I want it to work when I get it back," she was pointing at her husband's crotch.

Kevin shook his head and joked, "That's all she's concerned about, Bill. Can you believe it?" Kevin chuckled as he shook Bill's hand hello.

"That's okay, my friend. She'll be waiting on you hand and foot for a few days while you recuperate." Bill turned to Modra and gave her a wink. "Now, let's get started so I can get to your house in time for cocktails."

Modra couldn't believe that Kevin had invited guests over to celebrate her birthday, which happened to be the same day they had chosen to have the vasectomy. She would have been fine with either a deferred celebration or a deferred vasectomy, but Kevin insisted that either would be unacceptable. There was

no question that he wanted to be done with this. When she suggested postponing the vasectomy another week, he flat-out refused. For his sake, she would rather wait to celebrate; however, she could totally relate to his enthusiasm. Their pact was finally coming to a head and though they were both nervous about the operation, they were also ready to move forward and be done with this chapter of their lives. They both wanted to be done with indecision and prevent any possible twist of last-minute fate.

When all the greetings were over, Bill escorted Kevin toward the back of the office. He returned briefly, as Modra and Veloria were saying goodbye, to let her know it would be forty-five minutes and that he would have Veloria call her cell phone as soon as Kevin was ready for pic- up. She smiled and thanked him before he disappeared behind the white door again. The magazine in her hand was shaking as she placed it back on the table and pretended not to notice. The shaking was unexplainable, she was feeling fine, there was nothing bothering her that she could point to. For the first time in several days, she wasn't feeling guilty—at all.

Minutes later she sat in her hot car with the windows rolled up. Her hands held before her, she marveled at the uncontrollable shaking and told herself it was all very unnecessary. *After today it won't matter whether we made the right or the wrong decision because there will not be any going back. After today we will officially move on, no more what if.* She took a deep breath and

put the gear in reverse, ready to drive home, when an unexpected and overwhelming feeling of sadness violently slammed into her body as if her chest was caving in and her lungs were suddenly unable to expand for air. Then, just as quickly, the weight was lifted and relief washed over her soul, turning the streaming tears into hysterical laughter. Finally, when she couldn't cry or laugh anymore, she wiped her eyes and looked around, hoping that no one had seen the emotionally unstable lady in the car. She straightened herself behind the wheel, opened the window for fresh air, and slowly drove home. No more tears, no more laughter, just thought.