

## Fourteen

Little white lights hung in clusters like grapes on a vine, enunciating the curves of the narrow private drive that lead to the home. They wound from left to right and up the driveway, gradually giving way to the old magnificent oaks whose long gnarly branches reached clear across and above the pathway before opening up to the colonial style home.

As far as nature was concerned, it was a perfect day for an outdoor party: The wisteria and jasmine were in full bloom and their perfume was being disseminated by a delicious warm breeze; thousands of crickets were performing a cappella in the background; brilliant green moss was ornately draped over the massive dark limbs of the old oaks; and the peeling orange-red skin of the tall wispy Madrones added color to the lush green backdrop of pines and oaks. Further down, past the tree canopy, a skinny river could be seen winding its way through the valley, providing a natural boundary between the dense tree-covered hillside beneath Kevin and Modra's home and the orderly vineyards in the distance.

As guests arrived onto the porch, they were greeted by a server holding champagne flutes filled with chilled

sparkling wine from local Healdsburg vintners. Dana was the first guest to arrive. She was given a glass and was asked to join the cocktail party around the corner on the porch. She smiled at the server and looked past him through the glass windows and in the direction he was pointing. The huge glass door and wall of windows gave her a glimpse of the preoccupied family members moving around inside the home, along with a peak of the porch area where the cocktail party was to take place. With an intentional slow of her stride, she scoured the perimeter of the home for any sign of Christine, and when she didn't see any, she relaxed again and picked up her pace.

She had one primary motivation for having arrived early to the party; she wanted to get to know Julie on a one-on-one basis before Christine arrived. Now that Julie was set to adopt her grandchild, it had become imperative that she know that she wasn't as bad as Christine made her to be. Just because she had preferred that Veloria have an abortion over having the baby, it didn't mean that she couldn't or wouldn't love her grandchild. Of course she wanted to be a grandmother, and of course she would love her grandchild with all of her heart, but she was a realist and knew that both her son and Veloria were not mature enough to take on the responsibility of parenthood—and she wasn't so sure they were mature

enough to handle the heart wrenching emotions of giving their baby up for adoption. She knew she didn't have it in her and wished she could be more confident that Veloria did.

Staying out of the decision making process had been a challenge for her, but she fought hard to remind herself of the challenges a single mother faces. Veloria is still very young, and in her opinion, very immature. She would be suffocated and diminished by a world of dirty diapers and screaming babies. That drive and excitement that she has for her future would have to be refocused onto her baby's future; she would have to fight to remind herself that her dreams could still come true, but only if she could muster the courage and find the energy, not to mention the time, to pursue them—it would be a lot for anyone to ask of themselves. Her medical career would be dead in the water.

Dana was not delusional about the fact that a full-time single parent usually gave up a lot more of their life, dreams, and aspirations than the part-time parent. The minute Diego had confided that he loved Veloria but wasn't ready for the drastic changes a baby would bring to his life, she was proud of her son for being honest and counseled him on being honest with Veloria and then

giving her space to make her own decision, and then supporting that decision, whatever it was.

She and her ex-husband Eduardo had decided to marry during her senior year in college, a week after she found out she was pregnant. The news of her pending pregnancy had crushed her. In a matter of minutes she had decided against having the baby; graduation was only three months away and she had already been recruited by a prestigious Swiss firm. But Eduardo had come from a traditional Catholic family and wouldn't hear of her having an abortion. As the father he argued that he should have a say in the final decision, which he concluded should be marriage. She had been young and in love, and had somehow convinced herself that she could still do it all. Besides, she negotiated with herself, the prospect of trying to be a single mother in a foreign country while trying to launch a career seemed terrifying. So, she deluded herself into thinking that a shot-gun wedding was the perfect solution; that they would together raise the baby while supporting each other in their careers. In the end, he was the higher wage earner so all career concessions were made at her career expense, which at first didn't seem so detrimental until he asked her for a divorce.

From the day she and Eduardo had formally separated and his income no longer helped contribute towards the household, she could no longer afford her mortgage, coupled with the utilities, car payment, insurance payments, and health insurance costs, not to mention the horrendous costs of day care. It was suddenly: work more hours and barely see Diego or move to a smaller less expensive place and reduce daycare costs as much as possible by getting a lesser paying job that would allow her to work from home half of the day. And just like that her world was turned upside down.

She didn't want Veloria to struggle with her life the way she had and was glad that the circumstances for adoption had worked out in such a way that made her a little more at ease with what she had to do. It was an anomaly that the pieces of the puzzle had come together in such a perfect way. Dana was confident that if Veloria hadn't known Julie as well as she did, that she wouldn't have allowed herself to be pressured into having the baby only to then give it up for adoption. But it seemed to Dana that if adoption was the only option, it was being made easier on everyone, particularly Veloria, by knowing that a person like Julie was the adopter. It also made it easy to swallow because Julie, at her own bidding and most likely to assuage Veloria's conscience, had

agreed to let Diego, Veloria, and their parents be a part of the baby's life. That was a big concession from Julie, but as far as Dana could tell that was the only way they could get Veloria to go with adoption—barely.

According to Veloria, besides pretty much prohibiting her from having an abortion, Christine had impressed upon her the consequence of lifelong guilt plaguing her if she followed through with having an abortion; that prospect had frightened her to no end. In all frankness, Dana wasn't sure that the guilt of giving her baby up for adoption wouldn't be just as bad for Veloria, if not worse. Veloria was already showing signs of remorse, which was surfacing as depression and making both Dana and Diego worry about the emotional damage the adoption was provoking within the poor girl.

With one last glance at herself in the reflection of the window, and one minor hair adjustment, she closed her eyes and took her first step around the corner. When she opened her eyes, Julie was there with her back to her placing the final centerpiece on the bright yellow tablecloth of a tall and compact cocktail table.

“My, those are beautiful,” Dana said, startling Julie. Her footsteps had been muffled by the music flowing out of the speakers. Table by table, Dana couldn't help but noticed the precision with which each was set. A grin

proliferated on her lips when she realized that Julie had been using a yardstick to pinpoint the exact center of the table. She would measure, place a tiny blue piece of tape in the center, and then place the small fishbowl vase dead center. Each centerpiece was arranged with brilliant pink daisies and dark, almost purple, blueberry clusters which were still attached to their lush green branches, making the environment cheerful.

“Small, simple, and beautiful,” Dana complimented as she gave her champagne glass a whirl. “Are these from the town florist?” she asked, genuinely impressed. As an interior designer and restaurateur she truly appreciated other people’s creativity.

Julie smiled proudly. “You could say that. I chose the blue incense it’s a boy and the pink incense... well, you know.” she said with pride, taking full advantage of the compliment. “The blueberries are from the front yard. Modra has them growing as part of her landscape and the pink daisies are from Christine’s front yard. I won’t take credit for these tablecloths; they were from Modra’s own rehearsal dinner.” She was bubbly and cheerful as she spoke, “I thought they would be a nice touch because they’re so bright... I just want everything to be just right.”

Dana smiled warmly.

Then, perky as all get out, Julie extended her hand and introduced herself. “Hello, I’m Julie, Modra’s much younger sister.”

The way she stood, her voice, her high cheek bones, and her widow’s peak screamed “Modra.” Julie needed no introduction. Dana had known exactly who she was the minute she saw her.

“Hello,” she said, thrilled with Julie thus far. “I’m Dana, Diego’s mom.” She noticed Julie’s huge happy smile turn into a huge forced smile. “I’ve met your lawyer a few times, but it’s nice to finally get to meet you in person.”

Julie was unsure how to respond. She was a little embarrassed. The last time they had spoken on the phone, she had been a little short with her and then, at Modra’s prompting, she had Bruce, the adoption attorney, call her back and set up a conference call with both her and Christine to get “certain unresolved aspects of the adoption” addressed.

“Well, it’s nice to finally meet you as well,” Julie said, looking for Modra to come rescue her. “Dana, please make yourself at home . . . and if you don’t mind, I have to finish the cocktail tables before everyone gets here . . . ahhh...emm . . . I see Modra’s inside,” she said, quickly looking over her shoulder and into the windows.

There was Modra in the kitchen, having what seemed to be an intense conversation with their mother. “Please, feel free to go inside and rescue her from our mother.”

Dana could sense that Julie was uncomfortable so with regret in her voice she agreed to give her some space. “Okay, I’ll do that... but Julie, let’s make it a point to try and get to know each other better before the end of the evening.” With that, she awkwardly pivoted on her heels and walked in through the open glass doors.

Internally, she was completely disappointed with the way their first meeting went down. Truth be told, she had heard so much about Julie’s big open heart and welcoming personality from both Diego and Veloria that she had been hoping they would become instant friends. Perhaps she could ask Modra to make it so that she could sit next to Julie over dinner and she could try once more. All she wanted was for Julie to feel as comfortable with her as she did with Christine.

Modra stopped arguing with her mother when she heard footsteps on the hardwood floors and instantly turned on the charm when she saw Dana.

“Hi, Dana. Please come in. Mom, this is Dana, Diego’s mom.”

Dana smiled at Elena as she mentally ran through everything she had been told of her. Veloria’s description

of Elena was such that she had imagined a much bigger and almost scornful looking woman, but what stood before her was a petite woman with a warm friendly smile.

“Dana, this is my sweet but demanding mother, Elena,” Modra said, instantly regretting the unnecessary footnote she’d added to the introduction.

Modra’s 4’9”, 110-pound mother, handed the silver platter back to her daughter so she could extend her hand to Dana. “It’s so nice to meet you,” she said pleasantly. Then as if confiding to a dear old friend she said, “You should know that Modra thinks I’m demanding because she doesn’t understand what it’s like to be a mother who only wants the best for her children.”

Modra’s face turned red in seconds. Her mother said it as if she was wounded and her daughter had no regard for her suffering. Then, in a dramatic Hispanic mother’s way, Elena picked up the silver platter and abruptly exited to the porch.

“She’s going out to join her perfect and favorite daughter on the porch. You know...the one that gave her a grandson and knows what it’s like to be a mother.” Modra said, laughing. But Dana could tell that she meant every word of it.

They smiled at each other and exchanged a hug as she attempted to comfort Modra with her own war story. “Oh, don’t worry. My ex-mother-in-law was just like that.” She wasn’t kidding. Diego’s grandmother was and is a formidable woman. “There is no question about it; guilt is a Catholic Hispanic mother’s best tool to bend their children to their will.”

“Or they use it to torture them with the redundancy of their perceived shortcomings. My shortcoming is being barren, but you know the story so I won’t burden you with it again.” Modra said sarcastically as she took her own wineglass from the counter. “Let me introduce you to Julie,” Modra said, already moving toward the door. “You’ll like her, everyone does.”

Dana was a little taken aback by the hostile relationship between Modra and her mother.

“Are you alright?” she asked Modra with concern.

Modra paused and realized how she was behaving. She promptly apologized, “Oh, Dana, I’m sorry.” She pursed her lips, “My mom visiting is never a good thing. She makes me feel like I’m walking on a tightrope every minute she’s around and it’s wearing on me right now.” She shook it off and added, “Come on. Let me introduce you to my sister Julie.”

Dana froze. “Oh . . . yeah . . . we just met,” She stood still and didn’t seem to be ready to walk back on that porch and meet her again just yet. She was looking around Modra’s home. She took in the living room that extended directly to the kitchen where she stood. The entire area was a huge rectangular shape with no useless space and high ceilings. “You know, your home looks huge from outside, but once inside, it’s not grossly big.” Her eyes soaked in every architectural detail. “Boy, with all these windows you probably never turn on a light.”

The architect had given the home more appeal than she had expected; she admired the cathedral ceilings and the huge fourteen-foot glass doors at three sides of the home which were flanked by huge windows on both sides. All doors led to the nine hundred or so square foot wraparound porch that was obviously the focus of the home.

“Thanks. We love it here.” Modra said, noticing Dana still had her purse over her shoulder. “Would you like me to take that for you?”

Dana looked at her shoulder and saw what Modra was referring to. “Oh, yes, that would be great. Thank you.” She handed it over.

As she took the purse she said, “Julie is staying here with us in the guest bedroom upstairs, so please feel free

to stay after and get to know her,” Modra offered as she walked down the hall with her towards the office. “You’ll meet my dad here shortly,” Modra said with affection as she placed the purse on the couch. “You just missed my older brother. He just left for the hotel to pick up Dad and my little brother, Jose. Jose’s my favorite,” Modra admitted matter-of-factly. “I have a large and very curious family who may try to suck the life out of you with questions—avoid it at all costs. Don’t bring up politics unless you’re a Republican and don’t get pushed into a religious discussion unless you’re a staunch Catholic.” She smiled, “trust me, I know. I’m neither of those and even though I know better, I’ll try to defend my views on occasion and end up feeling like a gazelle trapped between a river full of hungry crocodiles and a clan of hyena... don’t do it, it’s not worth it.”

Dana felt as though Modra was both apologizing and giving her a fair warning in advance.

She swallowed hard and asked, “Is there something I should do before they all arrive?” feeling as if she were about to face a pride of lions and needed tips on how to avoid being eaten.

Realizing what she had done, Modra quickly apologized. “I’m sorry, you’ll be fine.” Then elaborated, “You’re better than fine. I’m projecting my family issues

onto you. Please forgive me.” Modra was trying to get Christine as caught-up with the family as possible and to give her an idea of what to prepare for. She loved her family, but they weren’t always an easy bunch to love. “Oh! I almost forgot, I have another sister... her name is Mikaela. She’s actually pretty easy and very self-sufficient . . . you’ll like her.”

“That’s odd.” Dana said giving Modra an uncomfortable smirk, “I’m both excited and nervous about meeting your family.”

Modra grinned, “Oh, don’t be nervous, just be excited. You’re Diego’s mom, they’ll adore you. They’re already gaga over Diego.”

Suddenly aware that she still had a million things to do, Modra seemed to almost jump out of her skin. “Oh, my goodness!” she looked around wishing she could just wiggle her nose and have everything magically fall into place. “I have to get everything ready.”

Dana perked up. “Oh...Let me help you. I run a restaurant, I ‘m sure I have some skills that will lend themselves perfectly right now.” Of course, it would also give her the perfect excuse for interacting with Julie. “Tell me what to do.”

Grateful for the help, Modra smiled. “I’d love it.” Then she dove in and began giving instruction. “All of

the appetizers have been prepped by the caterer, so we just have to make them presentable.” Still a bit frazzled, she added, “Pick any of these platters and load them up. We need to get this done fast cause we need to clear out of the kitchen so that the caterer can set up in here. He’s at Christine’s right now getting everything ready for this evening.” Modra handed Dana an apron to protect her beautiful lilac summer dress. “It’s an interesting assortment for an interesting group. Veloria wanted to make sure we had something for everyone.”

Dana looked at the loaded counter tops. There were all sorts of Spanish *tapas* needing to be assembled and plated. “So we have an hour to plate all this?” Dana asked with a shocked expression.

“Yup.” Modra said with a knowing nod. “That is exactly why I accepted your offer to help so quickly. I had everything under control, but then my mother showed up to ‘help’ me. Suffice to say she accomplished quite the opposite.” She smiled and bumped her hip into Dana’s. “You know, everything on this table is not only on Veloria’s wish list, but Diego’s, too.” She handed Dana a platter.

Dana was admiring the neatly tied smoked salmon wheels and recognized them as similar to those served at

her restaurant. “Did you get these from the Tini House?” she asked curiously.

“Well sort of. Diego had asked for them so I asked him for the recipe. The caterer whipped them up this morning.”

“She couldn’t believe that they had actually gone out of their way to get the kids everything they’d asked for. “I think that when you got the wish list, you were supposed to pick a few items and expand from there.”

Modra shrugged, “well, it’s too late now. Besides, I liked the idea of having several different things to nibble on, and I honestly couldn’t make up my mind on which ones to eliminate—so there you have it.” She gestured towards the small bites of food that covered every inch of the counter space and gave another shrug.

Dana shook her head and smiled, “Well, for the record, I don’t think they intended for you to make everything on that list.” She then bit her bottom lip to hold back the laughter. “You would have made a miserable mother.” She said grinning from ear to ear as she walked to the French Doors and handed the tray to Julie for placement in the large refrigerator.

Modra stopped what she was doing and turned to Dana with curiosity. She could see that Dana was smiling

so she must not have meant what she said in a malevolent way, though she still wanted clarification.

The minute she was back in the kitchen area she picked up where she'd left off completely oblivious of any possible misinterpretation of her comments by Modra. "You can't give kids everything they ask for. If you did, you'd only succeed in turning them into spoiled brats." She shoved a roasted potato in her mouth.

*Oh.* Modra thought to herself, relieved that was all she'd meant by her comment. Then, changing the subject she said, "I forgot, you own a restaurant and have that funny habit of tasting everything before you serve it."

"It's an old habit," she agreed with a full mouth. "How else would I know if it's any good?"

Modra shook her head then looked at her watch. "I see you have this all under control, so I'll just run upstairs and get dressed."

Dana froze. "Are you kidding? I mean, I was wondering about your tee shirt and shorts, but I don't think I can handle this on my own," she said honestly.

Modra grinned. "Oh . . . no worries, my friend," she said pointing at Julie and Elena who just happened to be walking in through the door. "Little Mighty Mite and Julie are coming in to help you." Modra whispered good luck to Dana and winked at Julie before sprinting off.

Julie awkwardly excused herself and followed after Modra. Dana was left protesting with no success. Elena, with the efficiency of a mini-Mexican Supermom, stepped in and took control. She organized tray after tray in a flash and had Dana running back and forth, placing the loaded and beautifully arranged platters into the refrigerator or warmers for the servers to later circulate.

“I hope you’re not sorry you got here early,” Elena said warmly. “I am glad to have the opportunity to get to know you.” There was a lot of love emanating from her body language. “Your son and Veloria have brought nothing but happiness to my daughter. I want you to know how much I appreciate yours and Christine’s confidence in Julie. It truly is more meaningful to us than I can convey to you in words.”

Dana was teary-eyed. “Veloria and Diego are wonderful kids, but not quite ready for parenthood. I am very sad that they can’t keep the baby, but I am glad to meet you and see that you will give her the same love I believe Diego and Vel. would have if they had been at a later point of their lives.” Dana went to hug Elena, but she was frozen in place. Her eyes were as big as saucers.

“Did you say *her*?” She asked wanting to cry. “My Julie really wants a daughter.”

Dana stiffened with regret. Holy shit, she thought; I have to learn to be more careful. “Please, please keep it to yourself,” she said, panic-stricken. “I know that Christine really wants it to be her and Veloria who tell Julie the baby’s sex . . . you know, being that you’re *her* friends and all.” Dana was truly sorry she’d mentioned it, though she was a bit thrilled to have stolen some of Christine’s thunder, even if it had been an accident.

Elena kept her eyes on Dana, hoping she wouldn’t turn around and see that Julie was standing right behind her. From the corner of her eye, Elena saw Julie place her index finger over her lips asking her mother to say nothing. Elena gave Dana a reassuring look and took her by the shoulders. “Don’t worry, honey, I won’t say a word.” She winked to say it would be their little secret.

At that moment Julie made a noise to announce her entrance. She gave an award-winning performance. “What are you two gossiping about?” she asked, pretending to be curious.

Dana froze for a second, wondering what to say. “Oh . . . I was just telling your mom . . . ah . . . what a wonderful job you did with the centerpieces.” Dana was a terrible liar.

“Why thank you,” Julie said, maintaining her composure and working hard to keep all of her questions

about her soon to be daughter from pouring out. Not knowing what else to talk about and wanting to only talk about the baby being a girl, she looked at the table and decided they'd better get back to work. Inside it was absolutely killing her not to be able to scream with excitement—she was going to have a little GIRL!

As Dana left with a tray in both hands, Julie pinched her mom and kissed her on the forehead with all of the excitement in the world. Then she looked to make sure Dana was still preoccupied and whispered, “Mom, I’m going to get my little girl after all.”

Elena smiled at her daughter and they both fought back the tears.

Dana happened to glance up and couldn’t help but notice the exchanges between Julie and Elena and marveled at the closeness of the two. She suddenly felt sad for Modra, whose overt interactions with her mother never seemed to be closer than arm’s length.

Modra eventually made her way down wearing a South American cocktail dress.

“I’m ready for Argentina!” Modra exclaimed.

Kevin entered the room, wearing beige slacks and a white guayabera and brown Italian loafers. Modra thought he looked as handsome as ever. He gave the crowd a spin then joined the party.

“Julie, Elena,” Kevin said, pausing, “you need to get dressed. Modra and I will deal with whatever needs to be done.” He gave Modra the once over and then a kiss.

“Okay, I think everything is ready except for the sangria,” Elena said over her shoulder as Julie pulled her along.

Kevin turned and said, “Hey, Dana.”

She said hello and gave him the customary hug.

“Oh. I meant to ask you. I spoke to Veloria on the phone this morning and during our conversation she mentioned that Diego was planning on going abroad once the baby is born.”

Dana smiled and nodded. “He is, but it’s sort of a sore subject. I think he should stay close for a little while after to make sure Veloria is doing ok. But, I think there’s more to the story that he’s not sharing with me.” She let out a deep breath, “Well, anyway, why don’t you tell me about your trip. I had completely forgotten that you are leaving on your own extended holiday in just a couple of days.” She was embarrassed for having forgotten that today’s celebration was as much a going away party as it was a pre-adoption celebration.

Modra looked at her and laughed out loud. “Oh, don’t worry, Kevin and I are celebrating a little of both but everyone else we invited can concentrate only on

celebrating the families coming together through the adoption. My entire family is pretty unhappy with us for being gone through these *very important times* —for Julie—so we're not discussing our vacation plans at all today.”

“And that reminds me, is Diego coming?” Kevin asked. He had been invited, but they had not received a reply from him and he hadn't returned their calls. “We don't want him to think that we have discounted him.” He knew there was a definite possibility that Christine might have withheld his invitation, just as she had withheld Dana's. He also got the feeling, from his conversation with Veloria, that they were having relationship issues.

“Oh, don't worry you guys. You're not the ones who're discounting him,” Dana threw out with bitter condescendence before she thought to consider that she was speaking with Christine and Bill's best friends. Hmm, she thought, probably not a good idea. “But never mind that. Now tell me, how does one go about making sangria?” she asked as she considered the pre-measured halved grapes, sliced oranges and cherries piled high in their respective bowls, all neatly arranged around a case of varied cheap wines and ports.

The attitude that Christine had taken toward Diego and Dana, blaming them for all her anger and frustration

had become a touchy subject between Kevin and Modra. Kevin would become infuriated with Christine's one-sided comments and Modra felt that as her best friend she had to allow her to vent, even if it was at Dana's expense.

"We are painfully aware and sorry for the way Christine has treated you and we want you to know that we love her, but don't share her opinions." Kevin wanted to clarify their stance before Christine arrived, in case things got out of hand between the two of them that night. "But there is nothing we can do about how she feels, so if we say nothing it's because we simply can't."

Quite uncomfortable with the conversation, Modra said, "Okay, now that we've said that . . ." and in an attempt to change the subject, she went on to describe the family concoction that was their version of sangria. "Every year our huge family and friends get together on our parents' farm. We set two to three long picnic tables at the very edge of the cherry trees." The story flowed off Modra's tongue as though it were a perfect fairytale. Her hands were busy making the wine punch that seemed to evoke wonderful memories. "Julie and I usually spend hours in the kitchen preparing the meal, while Mikaela and Mom are in charge of dressing the tables and cutting flowers for the centerpieces." Modra took the cold punch bowl out of the refrigerator, then she measured four cups

of port wine, a half cup of freshly squeezed lime juice and stirred them together.

“Honey, tell her what your brothers do,” Kevin said as he brought his index finger to his lips, asking her younger brother Jose, who’d just walked in, not to say a word.

“Oh stop it.” Modra said, pinching his rear. “They do a lot.” Though when she thought about it, she really wasn’t sure what exactly they did or if they did anything at all. “Well... I guess they don’t really do much... it doesn’t matter anyway,” she said as she mixed four bottles of unremarkable dry red wine with the port and the lime juice. Then she bruised the fruit gently with a wooden spoon and poured it into the bowl with the wine mixture. “I should have made this last night, but I never got around to it.” she washed her hands and dried them on her apron as she said, “We’ll just hope the flavors blend and check the sugar and sour levels later. It should be ready by the time the guests get here.”

“We make the sangria with Vodka and grape juice in the restaurant, but do something similar to what you just did at home with left over wines.”

“I don’t care how it’s made. I love the stuff on hot summer nights.” Kevin said with a smile.

Feeling the need to clarify an earlier comment, Modra looked to Dana who was standing immediately to her right and said, “Dana, about our conversation earlier, I just wanted to add that when our family gets together, it can be overwhelming, as you will see tonight,” she paused for a moment to measure her words, “but I think you will also see that there is a lot of love floating around as well.”

“It’s just mixed in with all the family drama,” Jose said, tapping Modra on the shoulder. “Hey, sister,” he said as soon as she turned around and gave her a bear hug.

“Lots and lots of family drama!” Kevin added cheerfully. “No need to ever plan a family intervention, either.” He laughed. “The family’s daily M.O. is basically what constitutes an intervention.” Kevin never had an issue sharing his opinion about Modra’s family. He cajoled them all the time and they dished it right back.

“Dana, this is my baby brother, Jose.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“I just want to add that no one in Modra’s family has ever denied the fact that they are firmly on the dysfunctional side. I think they actually embrace being dysfunctional.”

Jose gave an agreeing nod. His chubby cheeks were compacted over his high cheekbones by his big grin. “Yeah, but you like it,” Jose said, patting his brother-in-law’s back. “He really does like it,” he said directly to Dana. “He comes back every year and if you couple that with the fact that he hasn’t gone running for the hills yet, it definitely says that he enjoys being around us.”

“Well,” Dana conceded, “you do have a point.” She was already intrigued with the family dynamics and how the siblings played off each other.

“It all depends on how you look at it,” Modra cut in. “The way I see it is, if he wants to keep his wife, and I’m pretty sure he does, he has no choice but to embrace my chaotic family.”

“My wife is absolutely correct—I have no choice.” He gave Modra a wink. “But I must say that I have learned my lesson. Next time, I’m definitely going to spend more time with my fiancée’s family before I get married,” he said, grinning at Modra, who rolled her eyes at him as the group laughed. “In particular, I’m going to spend a little extra time getting to know the soon to be mother-in-law before I propose.”

Julie and Elena were getting dressed and could hear the laughter downstairs. They zipped up one another’s dress. Elena sat by the bathtub while she put on her shoes

and Julie was busy looking at her midsection, wondering if she had gained weight. She ran her hand over her abdomen feeling the pressure of the dress against her small but visible belly.

“Why do I buy shoes with small buckles?” Elena asked, having trouble bending all the way over to see the itty-bitty buckle. Julie, engrossed with her weight gain, finally noticed her mother’s struggle and immediately went to her rescue. “Thanks, sweetie,” Elena said to her favorite daughter. “I’m too old. I should just give up and give into the grandma slip-on clumpy shoes.” Elena shook her head with disappointment at her aging body. She watched her daughter as she seamlessly kneeled to help. “Your sister better hope she and Kevin go together or she’ll have no one to help her with her shoes when she’s too old to do them herself.”

*Here we go*, Julie thought, allowing her mother’s comment to linger while she wondered what to say and how to say it to her mother. She didn’t want Elena and Modra bickering on such a wonderful occasion. The purpose of the evening was to have all of the families come together with some of their closest friends, both to show support for Veloria and to form a bond as a unit around the baby to come. It wouldn’t do to have Elena poking at Modra all night, not on *this* night.

“Mom, you need to keep those comments to yourself, especially today,” Julie said in a sympathetic tone. “Modra is leaving in two days and she’ll be away for six months.” She tapped her mother’s foot to let her know she was done with the buckle and then slipped on her own sandals. Not wanting Elena’s feeling to be hurt, she gave her mom a kiss on the forehead then stood to appraised herself in the full length mirror. “Shit.” She whispered as she sucked in her breath and straightened her back to minimize the bulge.

Elena stood next to her daughter. “I know, *mija*, that’s why I only tell you these things.”

“Mom,” Julie paused forgetting her tummy issues and going back to the Modra/Elena issues, “don’t tell me today. You can’t attack Modra today. You need to just leave her alone and be supportive of her lifestyle.”

“It’s a very selfish lifestyle.” She said condemningly.

She doesn’t get it, Julie thought already weary of her mother’s sometimes hurtful tongue. “Mom, we need to let Kevin and Modra live their life as they see fit. They are the ones who will bear the ultimate consequences for their choice.” Julie bent her knees slightly to lose a few inches, placed her forehead against her mother’s, and locked into her eyes to show her she was serious.

Elena took Julie's gentle discipline as a request and nodded as she took her daughter's head in both hands. "Okay sweetie. I am going to make sure I don't make a mess of today, just for you." She stood on her tiptoes to reach the three inches she was lacking to deposit a kiss on Julie's forehead. "I know today is a very important day for you, and even though your sister was too selfish to help you have a baby, I have to give her credit for at least throwing this party to celebrate Veloria's courage in doing something she wouldn't do."

Oh, this is painful, Julie thought, closing her eyes and dropping her head. Finally, she decided that trying to make her mother understand that this was not a good time to be unforgiving was a waste of energy. She was just going to have to ignore her mother's comments and ask the other family members for their help in keeping her away from Mod for the evening. Feeling completely defeated, Julie said, "You look beautiful, Mom," as she took a deep breath and prayed that the night would end peacefully. Mustering up all the energy she had, Julie took her mother's arm and dutifully marched her down the stairs to join the group.

The fact was that Julie had more to worry about than just her mother. With Ricky, her older brother and family in town, the probability of a family conflict was quite

high. His staunch opposition to Kevin and Modra's childless marriage had become a cause for concern among the siblings. Jose and Julie had already taken matters into their own hands; last night they had a family meeting with their father to discuss what to do about him. In the end they agreed that everything possible should be done to avoid ruining the party. They agreed to act as a unit to immediately control and stamp down any inflammatory comments that he might spew throughout the course of the evening.

As Julie and Elena walked onto the porch, it seemed the entire clan had arrived. Christine spotted Elena and walked over to greet her. Daniel saw his mother and ran over to show her the new plastic watch he'd won at Speed Zone, where his Uncle Ricky had taken him and Darius, his cousin, for the afternoon. Julie looked around to see who else had arrived. It appeared to be the core group of family and friends at the moment. Dana was chatting with Jose, Kevin, and Diego next to the champagne table and Modra appeared to be in a very private conversation with their father.

"Hey, if you're Mom's favorite, then she's Dad's favorite," Ricky said, standing next to Julie and handing her a champagne glass.

Julie took the glass and acted quickly. “Knock it off Rick. You know Mom and Dad don’t have favorites.”

Ricky instantly knew she was being *Ms. Politically Correct*. “Don’t worry, sis, my wife has already made me promise to behave or she’ll leave.” He didn’t seem too happy about being disciplined by his wife, but Julie was thrilled.

“I’m glad. I always said you married a good woman,” she held up her glass and took a sip. “Where is she anyway?” Julie looked around for her favorite, and only, sister-in-law.

“She and Veloria are by the car catching up. I don’t know if you know, but Gracie hasn’t seen Veloria in almost two years.”

She wasn’t surprised. “If you came to visit your sister more often . . .”

“Whatever,” Ricky mumbled, preferring not to respond. “I wanted to congratulate you. You’re a great mom and no one deserves to be a mom again as much as you,” Ricky said it with complete sincerity, causing Julie’s eyes to moisten.

She was excited and wished she could take the baby home tomorrow. Secretly, she feared that Veloria might change her mind and decide to keep it. Modra had tried to reassure her time and time again that it was not in

Veloria's or the baby's best interest for her to keep it, but it didn't help.

"Thanks, Rick. I'm going to leave you alone now so please try to behave," she said before swigging the entire glass of champagne. "I'm going to go find Veloria and Gracie. I haven't said hello to either of them yet."

"Can you ask Gracie where she put Kevin and Modra's gift?"

Julie gave him a pleasantly surprised look.

"Oh, stop it. We got them some wool sweaters. A friend of ours, who's an Argentine, just went to Ushuaia and suggested that they would come in real handy down there pretty much all year long." Ricky shrugged. "Don't look at me, it was all Gracie. She said I've behaved like a total ass and this was the least we could do. It appears my wife is embarrassed by my strong beliefs in the family unit," he said, realizing he needed to shut up and walk away from the conversation before he got caught up in his personal opinions as usual. He reminded himself that he had, grudgingly, promised his wife he would wave a white flag today.

"Hey, sister," Mikaela said as her hands went around Julie's waist from behind to give her a hug.

Julie turned, happy to see Mikaela had made it. She'd been forced to delay her travel plans from Wenatchee

because she'd been asked to work through yesterday, causing her to cancel her flight at the last minute. Her husband and two children had arrived two days earlier in order to spend some time at Great America in Vallejo, which was only an hour southeast of Healdsburg.

"Hey, when did you get here?" Julie asked, impressed by her prompt arrival. Then, doing the math, "Did you drive?"

Mikaela laughed. "Hell, no," she said. "My boss decided to let me go early yesterday so I took a three o'clock flight from Wenatchee and basically spent the night at Sea-Tac on standby and caught a flight into SFO this morning. Eric picked me up before he made his way into town from Great America with the kids." She pointed at Eric, who had joined Diego and Dana's little group. "Dana has them entertained. She's been sharing some really embarrassing but great Diego stories. Poor guy, his introduction to the family and his mom is taking some serious liberties," Mikaela nodded over to Diego. "You know, from what I've heard so far, he's a total nerd underneath that Rico Suave exterior."

"Oh, that's great." Julie laughed. "I'm going to have to get the scoop from Eric later."

Modra stood in the opposite corner with her dad, having a conversation about his cherry farm. He had made

some modifications around the property and decided that he would only have a couple of employees this season to do the picking. He was sorry that she and Kevin wouldn't be around to help this year, but was happy for them and their extended vacation. At that moment, all the grandkids came over to give grandpa a kiss. It was time for them to leave the party and be shuttled by the hired nanny to Christine's home, where they had set up a few workshops: finger-painting, pottery-making, working with Legos, and a Wii station. They would have their own dinner prepared by a cook from Diego and Dana's restaurant. The kid menu offered chicken strips, mac and cheese, hamburgers, and Pepsi floats for dessert—hello good times.

Kevin truly enjoyed his time with Modra's family, in particular the time he spent with her father. Granted, the dynamics in a larger and culturally different family than his own could initially be stressful and intimidating, but once he'd learned to navigate through the landmines of such a family he found that it could be downright entertaining. In Modra's family opinions are always abundant and no one shies away from sharing them. In addition, the components that make up the family can be overwhelming: the siblings talk over each other and have a tendency to speak at a million miles an hour; they have been known to yell at each other and make each other cry,

but they also seem strangely connected and tend to be very protective of one another. A potential in-law could be scared away or accepted in as little as an hour. Had Veloria been a true sibling, or a child of a sibling, they would have surrounded Diego like a pack of wolves, pelting him with questions until they were satisfied.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, and more importantly, they seemed to be getting along. Kevin stood on a chair and proudly announced that there was a huge punch bowl of sangria inside on the dining room table and to please “help yourselves.” There was a mass exodus from the porch as the group immediately herded its way toward the sangria table.

Modra came up and sneaked her arm around his waist. “Do you think we should bring the sangria out?” She looked at the 3’ diameter tables that dotted the porch.

Kevin shook his head. “We just don’t have a table for it. In the next hour as the other guests arrive, every table will be full of glasses.”

The group swelled to about thirty guests; they were spread inside the house and spilled onto the porch. The shuttle was busy going back and forth between homes driving the arriving children to the alternate location. According to the cook, who called Diego because one of the children happened to be a vegan and he wasn’t

prepared, the kids were having a better time than the adults. At his last count, there were fifteen sleeping bags in the family room ready for the same kids he'd overheard vowing to stay up all night. The cook, who happened to be related to the nanny, seemed to be entertained by his low maintenance guests. He had apparently found his ideal clientele: the unsophisticated easy to please palate.

Eventually, Bill, the co-host of the party, tapped his wineglass and asked everyone to join him for dinner on the lawn. Christine had prepared the seating chart and no one thought to look it over. She had Bill, Kevin, Modra, Julie, Elena, Ray, Veloria, and herself at the main table and had sat Diego and Dana at a separate table with the rest of Modra's family. Veloria was mortified and offered Diego an apologetic look that wasn't wasted on Kevin. As soon as they took their assigned seats for dinner, Kevin whispered something into Modra's ear. Modra's eyes went to Christine as she nodded. She looked around the table and excused herself and asked Christine to join her in the kitchen.

Christine slammed her napkin on the table knowing exactly what the issue was. Bill looked at her with concern then leaned into Kevin, who quickly explained what was going on. Bill then looked around and nodded in agreement.

The instant they set foot in the Kitchen, Christine declared, “I am not asking that woman to join us at our table,” the chef, who found himself trapped in the kitchen, pretended to continue working on dinner and to be deaf.

Modra stood eyeing Christine with frustration. “You can either do this for your daughter and look like the hero or I can do it and make you look bad. It's your call,” Modra crossed her arms waiting for her friend who didn't respond. “We're all grownups here, Christine. You need to swallow your pride. Like it or not, Diego and Veloria are a couple. I honestly don't get what your issue is with him, he's a good kid,” Modra said to her friend who was in complete denial. “He's stood by her side and is still there and will continue to be there throughout the pregnancy. For all you know, they could end up married later in life. Have you thought about that?” Christine stood with her arms crossed, vehemently shaking her head. “Christine, don't make a mistake you won't be able to take back. One day in the future, that kid could be sitting at your dinner table as part of your family and you're going to look like the total ass.” She turned her head slightly and looked back at the group, who were alternately eyeing them, awaiting an outcome. “Look, you and I both know that they are going to try to work through their relationship, even after they hand the baby to Julie.

He has been the person Veloria has been leaning on the most. She loves him and I don't see them breaking up anytime soon."

Christine was tapping her heel against the hardwood floor. "I know, Mod. I just can't help wishing their paths had never crossed."

Modra took her friend and embraced her. "Oh, honey, if you think like that you're going to go crazy." She brushed her friend's hair with her hand. "I know all about worrying about possible outcomes. It's a juggernaut, Christine. I've lived with that for the last ten years. Don't do that to yourself." Modra could feel Christine nodding her head on her shoulder. They pulled apart.

"Fine, I'll ask her and Diego to sit at our table because it's important to my daughter," she said not willing to admit she could be wrong about him.

"Perfect," Modra said, almost satisfied. "Make sure to seem genuine when you invite Dana to our table."

Christine pursed her lips and gave her the evil eye. "Fine, but I'm not happy about this."

"Great, whatever it takes," Modra said, pleased. "I'll ask Mom and Dad to switch seats with them."

Once everyone was where they should be, dinner was served. A local caterer, Dil & Dally, prepared a simple dinner with a choice of swordfish with a crab crusted

topping or prime rib, both served with roasted potatoes and fire-roasted vegetables. Bill had requested a no-frills dinner that everyone could enjoy.

Kevin and Bill both stood to make a toast.

Clink, clink, clink. The guests went quiet as they looked to their hosts who tapped their champagne flutes with their knives.

“Good evening,” Kevin started and smiled as the group replied. “Okay, I know we all want to get to dinner so I promise we’ll be done with this toast by the time the servers get to everyone.” He grinned and looked to Bill and Christine. “Tonight we thank all of you for coming to our celebration of our families coming together through this adoption, and for our friends, for all of your love and support.” He then turned to Veloria. “You are very special to us and we will always be proud of you, just as if you were our own little girl. You have made Julie . . . and Elena . . . very, very happy and by doing so, you have become a cherished and very permanent part of our family.” he said to an already teary-eyed Veloria. “And Diego, like it or not, you are now forever tied to this family and all of its dysfunctional members: Julie, Jose, Mikaela, Modra, Elena, Ramon . . . and Rick. I don’t want you to worry, I will entrust you with the Perez Family instruction manual entitled, ‘The Do’s and Don’ts of the

Perez Clan.’ With that, Kevin held up a two-inch stack of papers and the guests laughed and those familiar with the family nodded enthusiastically. Then wrapping it up, he said, “We love you both very much and look forward to all future holidays with you both as part of the family.” He raised his glass and the guests raised theirs to the sound of thirty voices in unison chiming, "Hear, hear!"

Bill choked as his first word tried to come out. He paused and cleared his throat. “Let’s try that again,” he said to a giggling audience. “Don’t you worry, Diego, our family manual is only half that size.”

Diego smiled and bowed his head.

“I want to toast Kevin and Modra, who this year closed a chapter in their lives. I just want to tell them we love them and they are going to be sorely missed while they are gone. To you,” Bill said, holding up his champagne flute. “Our dear friends, may we lean on each other when we get too old to stand on our own.” Bill took Modra’s hand and gave it a squeeze.

The evening went on for hours. The guests seemed lost in conversation and the warm summer breeze seemed more intoxicating than the wine. On occasion, Modra looked over at her father and it filled her heart with joy to see him so happy, surrounded by her siblings and their spouses. She has always wanted to make him proud and

never wanted to disappoint him. As she looked at him now, she could see his age as his smile exposed the broken lines around his eyes and mouth. His brown leathery skin seemed worn by time and the sun, and his hair that was once as dark as a crow was now dusted with snow.

It was just after midnight and only the core group remained on the porch. The sisters commented that sitting Elena and Rick away from Kevin and Modra couldn't have worked out better. Rick, of course, had periodically attempted to corner Modra for a few choice words but his wonderful wife, Gracie, had rescued her by pulling him away by his tie. There were still a couple of parents waiting for their children to be brought back but they didn't seem to mind the wait; they were enjoying their conversation as they stood in the driveway. It was just a shame that the evening had come to an end.

"How many cars are we holding overnight?" Kevin asked Modra.

"I'm not sure, Julie has the keys. I know I saw the taxi come by at least three times," she said, thrilled not to be driving anywhere.

"Don't worry about a thing," Julie said with glossy eyes as she approached Kevin and Modra. "I'll take care of everything in the morning." Modra guessed Julie's

body was currently holding about two bottles of wine. “I just want to hang out and enjoy the rest of this night with the whole family.” Julie gave Modra a huge hug. “I’m so sorry about being so inconsiderate before,” Julie said. “I wasn’t thinking when I selfishly asked you to—”

“Julie, it's fine. Let’s not talk about it. I am honestly just glad that everything worked out for you.”

Modra accepted Julie’s apology and noticed that everyone in the room, including Diego, was silently watching the exchange. It occurred to both Julie and Modra that they were a bit over the alcohol limit and may have been speaking at higher decibels than was necessary.

“I just want to say to the Perez Clan,” Kevin had apparently gone to coffee as he held up his coffee mug, “thank you for a wonderful, issue-free evening.”

The group laughed.

“You have no idea how much work it is to keep your brother-in-law well-behaved,” Gracie admitted, feigning exhaustion.

Ricky rolled his eyes at his wife. “What are you talking about? I said I was going to leave Mod alone and I did. Didn’t I, sis?”

“He did,” Modra supplied.

“See, honey, I have decided that it’s her call. It’s her choice to lead a selfish life and I am accepting that.”

The sisters exchanged looks and Mikaela said, “He’s an asshole, ignore him,” and turned her attention to Jose, who was cracking up.

“Dude, what about Mom?” Jose started, steering the conversation back to safer ground. “It took the coordinated efforts of the entire family, not to mention poor Veloria and Diego, to keep her well-behaved.”

Elena gave him an astonished look. “*Mijo*, that’s not funny. I’m not misbehaved,” she said, truly believing it.

The group laughed in unison.

“Mom,” Mikaela cut in, “you are misbehaved. They had a meeting at the hotel bar last night about you and Ricky. They tried to figure out how to keep the two of you and your opinions away from Kevin and Mod.”

Kevin shook his head, laughing. “Mikaela, you always just come out and say it. I am always impressed with you. I’m guessing you don’t have a knack for politics.”

“Boy, is that the truth,” her husband Eric attested.

Elena was shocked. “What? That is ridiculous. Modra already knows I’m disappointed in her. She doesn’t need me to bring it up at Julie’s party. You all don’t need to babysit me.”

Mikaela swallowed and looked at Mod, feeling badly. “I am willing to bet that I got my political abilities from Mom.”

“Oh, stop it. She knows I love her, I have to . . . she’s my daughter.”

“Mom, stop talking,” Jose interrupted with a giggle at his mother’s oblivious scorn.

“That woman speaks without thinking,” Ramon said, referring to his wife. He shook his head. “Elena, sometimes your tongue is poisonous.” He looked at his daughter with sympathy. “I’m sorry, *mija*, but your mama, sometimes she just says things that she doesn’t mean.”

Modra smiled warmly. “Don’t worry Dad, I have at least six months to think about Mom and how she says what she says to me.” Modra placed her hand over her father’s calloused hand. “When I come back from Argentina, I’ll be able to tell you if her opinions will ever mean anything to me.”

“Oops,” Kevin said, proud of his wife, “I’m going to bed now. Love you all and see you in the morning.” Kevin took his wife by the hand and pulled her with him.

The room went quiet and everyone except Ricky was suddenly applauding Modra for finally saying something to her mother.

“That’s not okay. She shouldn’t be talking to Mom that way.”

“Wow, lots of family stuff happening here,” Diego said to no one specific.

“Welcome to the family,” Jose said as he slapped Diego on the back. “You should see Christmas.”