

Six

The women stood in the kitchen, each entranced in their own thought until Julie broke the silence with an exaggerated whisper. “Oh, look at that. This is great! Look at Kevin. I think he’s drooling.”

Modra stopped working on dinner and broke away from her private thoughts to look over her shoulder at her sleeping husband, who was most certainly drooling. Immediately sensing her sisters devious intentions she said sternly, “Leave him alone you evil girl, he’s been through a lot today.” Julie looked to Christine for a cue, but Modra never noticed, her eyes never left Kevin. She loved that man with everything in her soul and at that moment it was obvious. The ends of her mouth curled into a slight smile as she took note of just how cute he was, even when he was drooling. She said with loving sympathy, “Oh, my poor guy.”

Christine elbowed Julie to make sure she was watching just how corny her sister was when it came to her husband. She produced a wicked smile and said with delight, “No way are we going to leave him alone.” She gave Modra a look that let her know she should know better, “Where’s my purse?”

“It’s in the office on the couch,” Modra answered, wondering what was in there that had her so excited. “You

better not be planning to draw on his face with your eyeliner or anything like that.”

Christine shrugged off Modra’s warning and slipped her beige sandals off before quietly shuffling into the office and returning with a cell phone in hand. “This is great. I’ll make it his wallpaper on his computer before I leave.” She giggled with genuine excitement and flipped open her cell phone as she tiptoed up to Kevin and snapped a picture.

Modra watched from the kitchen as her friend stood a couple of feet from her poor sleeping husband giggling, and could only cringed when Christine’s giggles became louder as she previewed the photo. But then, she couldn’t help but smile as Christine performed a victory dance letting them know she was pleased with the photo. She was in the middle of her dance when Kevin’s eyes opened into narrow slits and both Julie and Modra, with a hand over their mouth to muffle their laugh, began fervently pointing at Kevin hoping she would realize he was waking up.

Catching their drift, Christine instantly bent over as if she had been organizing the random items on the coffee table all along. Then, as Kevin sank back into his sleeping state, she waltzed back into the kitchen and stood between Julie and Modra and showed them her work.

“I want a copy of that,” Julie said as she leaned in and laughed out loud at the picture of her drooling brother-in-law. “I

know Mom will want to print that and hang it on the family wall.”

“I bet she would.” Modra said as she looked at the small screen on Christine’s out dated phone.

“Time for an upgrade, don’t you think.”

“Whatever. It still takes good pictures” Christine held the phone out just far enough to be out of her reach. “See how well it captured the drool.”

“That wasn’t a very nice thing to do.” Modra said, trying not to enjoy the picture too much.

The women watched Kevin started to move. He had a groggy smile on his face as he sat up and casually wiped the drool from his cheek once he realized he had been drooling. At that moment, the doorbell rang and everyone’s attention turned to the fourteen foot glass door that had Bill standing before it holding a bottle of what appeared to be his favorite malt whiskey.

Kristine’s face broadened with a smile as she whispered under the cuff so only Modra and Julie could hear, “Remember, ladies, try not to discuss Veloria and her situation unless Bill brings it up... and if he does, act surprised.” then, she made her way across the rectangle room, from the kitchen straight through the living room and to the front door, to greet her husband who smiled at her the entire time. Both Modra and Julie followed a few steps behind and Kevin remained on the couch.

Bill walked in with a huge smile. Modra watched them as they shared a kiss hello. They were both smiling broadly and seemed to be, as always, a happy couple. Modra thought of Veloria and the trouble she was giving her parents and considered the situation to be nothing more than a temporary hiccup that her parents would have to deal with and resolve. And judging by the way they had parented thus far, Modra believed they were more than capable of finding a resolution that would provide the most beneficial outcome for their daughter's future—even if it meant their daughter traveling to Europe with a boyfriend.

As far as Kevin and Modra were concerned, Christine and Bill were exemplary parents. They were not like most other parents; they signed on to the eighteen year commitment of providing moral guidance, instilling a strong work ethic, and being involved parents, and they had followed through. Modra strongly believed that there were too many parents in the world that confused parenting with providing food and housing for their kids and nothing more. She often wondered why someone would bother to commit to an eighteen investment of their lives on a child and then gamble on that child's future by essentially letting society, and television, raise them. But Bill and Christine didn't take that risk, they heavily participated in Veloria's life, and now that it was almost all said and done, their investment would soon pay off by having a happy, well rounded and self-sufficient daughter.

Veloria's 5'6" frame would keep her from becoming a professional volleyball player, which is where her heart really was. She was slender, like her mother, with big, Pacific Ocean blue eyes that contrasted sharply with her thick, black hair. Her skin was a honey-gold, obviously from the mix of her Sicilian mother and German father. She was articulate and smart, with a bubbly, wholesome personality. She was also, bar none, the most impressive daughter Kevin and Modra had ever had the pleasure of witnessing grow up. Modra had once confided to Kevin that she would have tried all alternatives provided by science to have a baby if God would guarantee *in writing* that the child would be as delightful and mindful as Veloria.

The evening celebrations began once Bill had finished inquiring about his patient's health. The group settled in the living room, around Kevin, chatting like a bunch of school girls. There was still some warm sunlight filtering through the oak trees and a warm breeze was wafting in through the open windows mixing with the aroma of dinner that infiltrated their conversation.

"Wow. That smells great, Modra. You're outdoing yourself on your own birthday," Bill said, taking another whiff.

"Duck confit and cassoulet," Modra replied, flattered. She didn't have the skills Diego possessed, but she found her way around the kitchen just fine. "I'm counting on the wine to blur your senses enough so that tomorrow, only good things are remembered."

Bill nodded toward his wife. “It looks like your plan is working properly. I’m pretty sure Christine will only be remembering that it was a fun night.”

Christine, who took offense to his insinuation, elbowed him. “I can assure you that living in the wine country has done wonders for my tolerance.” Everyone heartily agreed.

Bill taped his glass against his wife’s and placed an arm around her. When his stomach growled, no one heard except Julie, who simply smiled and promptly went to the kitchen for the cheese plate she had prepared earlier in the evening. She sliced bakery fresh French bread for accompaniment and placed it on the table. “Now that everyone’s here, we can get the party started.” She saw Bill’s smile broaden.

“I would start with the Roquefort blue cheese on the French bread, Bill. It’s absolutely wonderful.” She had sampled it earlier and her taste buds had exploded with the intense tanginess of the cheese and the sweetness of the French bread.

Bill nodded a grateful thanks to Julie and dug in. Christine as always went for the creamy, yet nutty brie. Modra dug into the feta that was mixed with diced Roma tomatoes and submerged in a local green, earthy olive oil; Julie had picked the tomatoes from Modra’s garden and thought they would go together perfectly over the sweet French baguettes.

Kevin watched longingly, hesitant to sit up and potentially hurt his crotch. Everyone stopped eating and seemed to notice his hesitation at once and burst out laughing.

“I am so sorry, babe. Would you like some cheese, or maybe another wheelchair?” Modra asked, enjoying her husband’s antics.

“He is definitely good at being a baby,” Julie exclaimed in her loud, booming voice. She almost jumped out of her seat, laughing. She didn’t know why, but there was a giggly feeling running through her that made her happy all the way to her soul and she welcomed the reprieve from the sadness that had enveloped her for the last few days. For the moment there was no longing or emptiness, only family and friends.

Modra handed Kevin bread and some of each cheese on a small plate along with her glass of wine.

“How long is it ‘til dinner?” Kevin asked, hoping it tasted as great as it smelled.

“I see your having a vasectomy has not diminished your appetite,” Bill said, grinning.

Modra placed a hand over his knee and squeezed it gently, affectionately, showing her love for him.

“Quite to the contrary, my friend,” Kevin said as he practically inhaled everything on his plate.

It was a late dinner, after every last hors d’oeuvre had been devoured, three empty wine bottles had collected on the dining table and everyone but Bill had a glazed look about them, dinner was ready for consumption. Dinner was served around the coffee table so Kevin wouldn’t have to leave his seat. Everyone sat around on pillows, enjoying their duck dinner while tango music

played in the background. Modra lived for evenings like this, where friends could get together and laugh an evening away, temporarily forgetting their problems. She looked around at the beautiful group of people surrounding her and felt lucky to finally have found her family. For the very first time in her life, Modra honestly admitted to herself that she never really wanted children and was relieved they could never become pregnant. Her eyes traveled around to her friends' happy faces as she wondered what they would say if they heard her private confession.

At some point after dinner, Christine and Julie excused themselves from the table and walked out to the car. Modra watched them with curiosity and hoped there were no birthday gifts. Five minutes later they reentered the living room, grinning from ear to ear as Julie handed Kevin and Modra a homemade rum cake from Veloria.

“Vel made this to celebrate your vasectomy... read the note out loud.

Kevin received the note while Modra got up to put the rum cake in the kitchen and read it so everyone could hear, “Don't worry. You'll always have me to spoil.” Everyone laughed.

Impressed Modra said, “Oh, she's so cute!”

“She is, right!” Christine said proudly then added, “She also made these cupcakes for your birthday.” She placed them on the coffee table for the group to see.

“To our Veloria!” Kevin toasted.

“To our Veloria!” the group responded, holding up their wine glasses.

Christine handed everyone a liqueur glass of *limoncello*, Modra’s favorite, and a vanilla cupcake. She proudly announced that each cupcake had a white surrender flag stuck in it with different statements.

Veloria printed the words on rice paper with edible ink then matted them to the fondant before decorating them,” Christine told them proudly.

Modra noticed everyone taking a closer look at his or her flag and smiling.

“Uh-oh, it looks like there’s a theme,” Modra said, grinning, “That girl is soooooo too cute!” Everyone agreed.

“All right, I’ll go first. ‘Just say no to kids,’” Kevin read.

“Here, here,” Christine said, holding up her glass, then sipping. Everyone giggled.

“No kids . . . no worries.” Bill paused, then added, “The bundle of joy certainly grows into a bundle of worry, that’s for sure,” he said before holding up his glass and sipping again. Julie, Christine and Modra raised their glasses and sipped their limoncello, knowing full well what Bill was referring to.

“‘Kids are fun—when they’re not yours!’” Julie read aloud, not enjoying the humor as much as everyone else in the room. “I think kids are fun, including mine,” she said, sounding bitter.

“Yes,” Christine said with patience. “That’s why we won’t put these little flags on your cupcakes when it’s *your* birthday.” She winked at Julie as if to say *mellow out*.

Julie bobbed her head from side to side apologetically. Modra didn’t notice the exchange as she was too busy really enjoying herself.

“We spoil them, you raise them.” Christine read hers and lowered her gaze to both Kevin and Modra. “We parents really appreciate it when you spoil our kids and then drop them off at home because then we get the pleasure of being the bad guys and breaking them of the bad habits they acquired while under your supervision.”

“Here, here,” Bill said, laughing. “I still remember that time we went on vacation.” Bill looked at his wife, his eyes twinkling with the memory. “We were only gone nine days and had no idea that was all the time you needed to corrupt our little girl.” He had been frustrated at the time, but now it was only a fun memory. “We actually had to explain that Uncle Kevin and Aunt Mod’s house was like Disneyland; you go there to have fun. Then you go home and all the old rules apply.” Bill shook his head, grinning. “We are pretty sure Veloria hated us for a little while after that.”

“Oh, I’ll never forget that episode,” Christine said, going down memory lane. “Let’s just say it was not an isolated incident; the girl always got her way with you two. In fact, I can

think of something within the last six hours where Aunt Mod made it so Veloria could have her way yet again.”

“Christine, I’m not sure if you’re aware that you are sort of slurring.” Modra said unsure how else to change the direction of the conversation and hoped that Christine picked up on her cue.

“Don’t worry Mod,” Kevin said giving her a funny look, “Bill’s here. He’ll make sure she gets her jammies on before she gets into bed.”

Bill smiled and nodded in confirmation.

The group stayed on light topics as they followed up on the kids in the family, trips, and Julie’s dating life laughing the night away and making the evening a complete success. Both Kevin and Modra were relieved to find that the vasectomy was the topic of conversation only a couple of times. As soon as Bill and Christine left for home Modra declared as she twirled in her living room, that she couldn’t have asked for a better birthday. She felt great and she knew that she would sleep tonight with a light heart. As she went around the house turning off the lights she noticed that Julie was already upstairs, probably in bed and that Kevin was standing at the foot of the stairs waiting for her. It seems he had decided he was tired of the couch and preferred to sleep upstairs in his own bed. Modra was pleased with his decision not to mention excited about the prospect of actually getting a full night of sleep.

“I have to tell you something.” She said as they walked up the stairs, “tonight there isn’t a doubt in my mind that we did

everything right and that we made exactly the right choice for us.”

He stopped at the top of the stairs, turned and kissed his wife on the forehead. “I’m relieved to hear you say that,” he said, holding his wife’s face in his hands, “because there is no way in hell you’d get me to reverse this.” He kissed her and limped dramatically to bed.

Modra watched him limp for a minute before following him into the bedroom with a huge happy smile.

The next morning, Modra was in the office, researching travel to Argentina, when Julie walked in, holding her coffee.

“Did you sleep well?” Julie asked, looking at the computer screen. It read “Mendoza, the Argentine Wine Country” across the top. Next to the computer was a small 3x6” notepad with Modra’s scribbles on it.

“Mmmh,” Modra moaned, “it was the best night’s sleep I’ve had in years . . . I slept nine hours.”

“Good.” Julie said as she sat down on the couch close to her sister. “So, now that it’s all done, when do you leave on your extended vacation?”

Modra smiled with desperate anticipation. “Not for at least three months; we’re looking at July or early August.” She stopped typing, put her feet up on the couch next to Julie and faced her. “What was up with you yesterday?”

“What do you mean?” Julie asked, knowing full well that Modra was referring to the backhanded comments about children

she had randomly doled out all day. But when she saw that Modra wasn't accepting her clueless act, she tried, "I had no down time after my flight. I'm sorry if I said something inappropriate. I was tired all day and I just wasn't always thinking straight." Julie ran her finger over the rim of her coffee mug while keeping her eyes on the computer screen and away from her big sister.

"No," Modra said carefully and shook her head knowing there was more to the story than that, "That wasn't it, try again." She knew her sister well enough to know something was on her mind. Christine had also noticed something was up with Julie and had asked Modra if she knew anything about it last night as they were leaving. When she saw that Julie wasn't going to be forthcoming she said, "You don't have to tell me, but you know I'm going to call Mom at some point, and she'll spill the beans—she always does, even if you're her favorite."

Julie's tensed up and said "You wouldn't!"

"Oh, sister, I would... and you know how mom just shares." she said with sweet victory in her tone.

Julie felt like a cornered animal looking this way and that, wondering which way to charge. It has been a challenge for her not to call Modra and tell her about undergoing hormone therapy. She has picked up the phone a thousand times wanting to call her big sister and tell her that she was having her eggs harvested for surrogacy, but she could never dial the number because she couldn't muster up the courage to do what she

needed to do with the “proper sensitivity”, rather than what she was sure would become a stumbling, bumbling episode. Julie knew there was no logic in her asking her sister to be her surrogate after she refused to consider hormones or IVF to have her own baby, but she saw the possibility in that perhaps Modra might say yes if she understands that the burden of raising the baby wouldn’t be hers—it would be Julie’s.

Julie suddenly felt that she had to pose the question to Modra right then and there because she was sure that if Modra decided to pick up the phone and call their mother, it would all be over. Though Elena supported Julies quest, she would most likely ruin any chance of Modra saying yes, or of even considering the request, by attacking her and making her feel responsible for her sisters childless dilemma. Their mother had already said as much before Julie left Wenatchee, charging Modra with disappointing her and accusing her of now being a bad sister and daughter. It wouldn’t be good if Elena talked to Modra first and thought of Modra saying *no* was devastating. If she said no, Julie would have to consider alternatives, such as using a foreign uterus, or adoption, both of which she chose not to think about until she had to. Surrogacy through a sibling would be quicker than adoption and the baby would carry all the family traits. Julie knew this was a prayer. She had lost night after night of sleep and she still hadn’t figured out how to ask Modra, a woman who clearly lacked all motherly instinct and desire to carry her own child.

Summoning the courage to ask Modra without losing her composure and showing her desperation, she prepared to speak then... chickened out and blurted out some old worthless news instead. "Tom is getting married again," Julie said, hoping her sister would take the bait. Her ex-husband was a total jerk and she really couldn't care less that he was re-marrying, but she needed a bone to throw to her sister and that was all she could think of. In reality she was relieved hoping that it gave him something else to focus his attention on rather than making her life difficult.

"Oh . . . I'm really sorry. Did the bastard call you himself to gloat or did Daniel tell you?"

"Daniel told me. I think *he is* having a hard time with it, and just so you know, I personally don't care that he's getting remarried... It's just that his fiancé is the embodiment of Cruella De Vil and now she'll be Daniels step-mom." Julie finished her coffee. "I honestly don't know who's getting the raw end of the deal between those two... I believe they belong together. I just wish my son didn't have to be a part of it."

Welcome to the realities of the blended family, Modra thought, but wouldn't dare say. Instead she asked, "Is she abusive?"

"No, nothing like that, I think she's just very jealous of Daniel and his relationship with his dad."

"Great! Another insecure woman." Modra shook her head and reached for her sister's hand. "Sister, don't worry too much,

Tom may be a jerk, but he is a good father. You'll have to ask Daniel how his visit goes every time and read between the lines..." she paused and frowned, "and if you suspect that she's mistreating him you tell me and I'll fly up to Wenatchee and kick her ass." Modra said hoping to make her sister feel better about it all. She felt better now that she believed she fully understood the reasons for her sister's behavior. "I'm sorry it's all become a complicated divorce mess for you. And if I were a mother, any potentially evil stepmother to my son would make me nervous too."

Julie cringed as Modra said, *if I were a mother*, and responded, "Thanks sister, I'll manage so don't you worry about it. I was truly hoping to spare you the drama."

"Whatever. I'm your sister; this is the stuff you're supposed to tell me." Modra stood up from behind the desk. "I'm getting more coffee and a scone. Can I get you anything?"

"Please," Julie said, holding up her coffee mug for Modra to take.

Julie moved into Modra's seat and began to scroll down the page, reading about Mendoza, Argentina, and wondered what it offered compared to Healdsburg, the California wine country.

Fifteen minutes later, Modra came back with fresh coffee and scones. She had quickly checked on Kevin and she was happy to see the poor guy was still asleep. Modra forgot all about their prior conversation and moved back into making

travel plans. She showed Julie the map of Argentina with cities highlighted in yellow, orange, or both.

“The yellow ones are the ones I want to see; the orange ones are Kevin’s choices.”

“Have you been to Argentina before?” Julie asked, trying to jog her memory without success.

“No. And for no particular reason. We’ve pretty much neglected South America except for Brazil, which is Kevin’s favorite by default—he loves Brazilian models.” She said rolling her eyes. Modra looked at the bookshelf behind Julie where all their travel photo albums were lined up; each photo album represented a different trip. “You see those three books to the far right on the second shelf?”

Julie nodded.

“Those are each for Brazil: Brasilia; Rio de Janeiro; Manaus, where the Amazon starts; Fortaleza, where all the gorgeous Brazilian models are discovered; Sao Paulo, which I hated because it was a huge, clustered city; and the last visit to Brazil was to meet up with some friends who went on a camping adventure in the Amazon. You’ve got to love adventurous people because they can tell you all about it and you never have to do it yourself . . . unless you want to.” Modra spun her seat around and was facing her computer again in seconds. “Anyway, that’s as much of South America as we have done.”

Kevin came limping into the office, a bit hunched over. “Good morning,” he said in high spirits.

“Good morning sunshine,” they responded cheerfully in unison.

“Oh my god,” Kevin laughed, “you guys are feeling cheesy this morning.”

“And you’re hunching a little. Are you in pain?” Modra asked, concerned.

Kevin shook his head. “No . . . I’m just being careful. I don’t want to stand up straight because I have this vision of the stitches being pulled apart if I did.” Realizing he had just shared a little too much, Kevin continued, “Never mind, the answer is I’m fine and in no pain.” He turned around and limped back to towards the living room. “May I ask you for some coffee, please?”

“Sure, I’ll be right there.” Modra stood up immediately, committed to babying her husband as much as possible.

Julie also stood up, waiting for her sister to vacate her seat. “I’m going to check my email, if it’s all right with you and then I’ll be right out.” Modra nodded. “Thanks. Would you please close the door behind you, I’d like some privacy, if that’s okay”

“Sure,” Modra said as she gave her sister a big hug, “and if Tom is sending you nasty emails, you can tell him I said to jump off a cliff.” Modra walked casually out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Julie gave her sister a puzzled look, wondering why Tom would send her any emails, nasty or not, before she remembered that she had just conveniently blamed him for her behavior.

Grasping her error, she gave Modra an absolute nod alongside an awkward and crooked smile. As soon as the door closed and behind Modra, she logged onto her email, eagerly waiting for the page to load. She had joined a new support group for barren or low ovulation women who were using science to conceive. She had turned to the group for support and guidance early on. In fact, she used the support group to find the courage to pursue becoming a single mother. She found her strength in relating to other women, and couples or men, who were grappling with a similar problems or concerns. The group provided support, information, experience, and guidance. There were numerous members who had stayed in touch with her after their success, providing insight into their ordeals and the procedures that had or had not worked for them. It was through this group that the concept of Modra being her surrogate was formed; she'd heard of a woman who underwent a treatment that left her barren and whose sister stepped in to carry her baby. Any moment now, she was expecting to receive an email from Elizabeth who could produce no viable eggs of her own, so her brother gave her his sperm to fertilize an egg from another woman because it was important to her that the baby looks like her and its grandparents. She was ready to deliver any day now.

She'd been advised by other group members that the most cost effective sources for surrogate mothers were outside of the country. Apparently, an American surrogate mother could attempt to take the baby back up to a few days after the baby was

born, without breaking the law or the contract, depending on the state. California, she was told, was a good state to use a surrogate; the laws were sympathetic to individuals or couples using IVF or IVF surrogate gestation, but the cost could be astronomical. Some of the costs Julie had been quoted ranged from \$32,000 for traditional IVF or substantially more for IVF surrogate gestation, but it was warned it could all vary widely. According to everything she had read, the only difference between the two was whether she used the surrogate's egg or her own egg for implanting, but the difference to Julie meant much more.

Julie had to rule out using a surrogate from the United States because she simply could not afford the U.S. rate for the legal fees, her own fertility treatments, and the surrogate's medical expenses, notwithstanding, the very real possibility of the surrogate mother wanting to hold claim over the new born baby. No. If Modra wouldn't do this for her she would be left scraping together everything she had to do it and she would have to look out of the country for a womb. She really wanted it to be her sister that carried her fertilized egg for so many reasons other than just cost, but she wasn't sure how to vocalize her feelings to Modra so that her older sister could somehow understand why she was asking her for this huge favor after everything she had just been through.

If only it didn't seem like such an inappropriate time to ask her. If only Modra would agree to be a surrogate. "Oh, if only,"

Julie said to herself. She was sure that with the help of science, Modra's uterus could carry a baby to term. Julie rubbed her eyes, no new emails. She dropped her head into her palms, letting the dead weight press her elbows into the walnut desktop. She couldn't stop thinking of how a simple yes from Modra would solve most of her problems from genetics to costs; the anxiety of wanting to ask, if only to know the answer, made her nauseous. Thinking only a few minutes had passed Julie sat up to realize she had just spent the better part of an hour staring at an empty inbox fretting.

There was a knock at the door.

Julie was startled by the knock. She sat up with her back straight and said, "I'm done," skillfully changing her tone to a cheerful one and scrambling to get out of the chair.

"Sorry to interrupt," Modra said apologetically, "but we only have about forty minutes to get dressed before Christine comes a-honking."

"Ok. I'll be right out. Please give me a minute so I can log out."

Julie gave herself a quick pep talk and left the room. As she turned the corner she saw that Modra was in the kitchen making Kevin what looked to be a bacon, avocado, and spinach wrap. Watching her sister wrap the tortilla made Julie realize she was hungry.

"What is that?" she asked, popping a piece of bacon into her mouth.

“Oh, it’s a club wrap.” Modra looked at it then laughed. “It’s really a club burrito, but whatever, it’s the same thing.”

“Can I have one?” She knew they would be going out to lunch soon but that wouldn’t be for at least another couple of hours and the scones she had earlier wasn’t enough.

“Sure,” Modra said, warming two tortillas on the stovetop. “I’ll have one with you.” She diced more tomatoes, avocado, bacon, and turkey, then tossed it all into a bowl with fresh spinach, crumbled blue cheese and just a bit of ranch dressing. “Now, we’ll just sprinkle the salad in a thin layer on the tortilla and roll.”

Julie was practically drooling. “I would never think of making this at home.”

Modra’s funny grin asked her sister—why not?

“It just never comes to mind.” She was looking around the kitchen for a plate. When she found one, she placed it right where Modra could see it and said, “I have to admit it looks wonderfully healthy.”

Modra grinned. “I think *looks* is the operative word here, with the cheese and dressing it can’t be too healthy.” She sliced the wrap at an angle and served it up.

“I’ll get us a glass of Chardonnay,” Julie said with two wineglasses already in hand. Modra had iced tea in mind but she wouldn’t protest the wine. Julie, on the other hand, was ready for a little alcohol. She admittedly loved hanging out at Kevin and Mod’s, where alcohol was never a taboo.

When Christine arrived, Kevin motioned for her to come in without leaving the couch. She looked brilliant standing on the other side of the glass door. She wore a knee-length, beige cotton dress; it seemed a bit plain for Christine, who usually liked small, printed patterns. She'd accented the dress with a mauve-colored shawl that draped elegantly over her petite shoulders. The pearl necklace and earrings were a sophisticated touch to her cute summer outfit.

Julie made her way down the stairs, wearing a white knit top and light blue slacks that gave her rear end a perfect tear drop look. As soon as he realized he was checking out his sister-in-law's behind, Kevin looked away, embarrassed.

"Wow, you ladies look fabulous," Kevin marveled out loud.

"Thanks," Julie bubbled.

About five minutes later Modra arrived, holding a pair of white, sling-back, sandals in her hand for Julie to borrow.

"Are all your shoes this nice? I'm afraid to ruin them." Julie said still admiring the sandals her sister just handed her.

Modra blushed, a bit embarrassed.

"Yup," Kevin said. And with that one word he let Julie and Christine know it was a sore subject.

"I can't help it, they're beautiful . . . all of them," Modra said, tying a sage-green scarf around her neck. She focused her eyes on the shoes she was wearing, happily exclaiming, "These aren't."

Kevin looked at them and closed his eyes, yet another sore subject. “You’re right, sweetie, they’re not,” he said condescendingly.

Noticing Kevin’s irritation, Julie said, “Well, they are beautiful. That green matches your scarf.” Julie was almost kneeling to look at Modra’s sandals a little closer. She just loved the colors. “It’s like different swatches of beautiful material patched together perfectly and placed on a wooden sole. They really pick up the colors of your dress, too.”

“Women are nuts,” Kevin said, shaking his head. “You could wipe out poverty with the money women spend on shoes.”

Modra went over to kiss Kevin goodbye. “Now, now, babe, just remember that it was your grandfather who went through the Depression, not you.”

Kevin scowled at her. “Go,” he said, pretending to be irritated. Modra gave him a kiss and he whispered, “I love you,” with a little smile.

“I love you, too,” she whispered back, pinching his nose. “Oh, babe, I almost forgot. Veloria will be here at around three. She’s coming over on her own accord with Diego, her boyfriend who I will tell you all about later.” Kevin didn’t know the background on Diego because he had slept through their conversations the day before. “She’s coming to entertain you and play a game of hearts with you, so play nice.” Modra gave Kevin a warning look and warned, “You need to be nice to

Diego. Don't pellet him with questions, and please, do not try to be the intimidating uncle again."

"Okay," Kevin said, bowing his head like a good, obedient servant. "So, do I know this Diego? Have I met him before?"

"Oh, yeah, from what your wife said, you'll recognize him," Christine said.

"So, is he a nice guy?"

"We don't particularly care for him." Christine answered him sourly.

"You are so dramatic, Christine." Modra rolled her eyes and turned to her husband. "Babe, why don't you form your own opinion and tell us all about it when we get home tonight? Love you lots."

Christine grabbed Modra's arm to pull her out of the room—she was done with the conversation. As Modra was being pulled out, she turned and reminded Kevin to play nice.

"Or not," Christine interjected as the door closed behind them.

Modra looked at Christine with a "shut up" glance, then turned and looked at Kevin again. "I don't want to find out you were . . ." she was pecking at him from the other side of the door when he cut her off and waved for her to go already.

"I know . . . I'll behave. Please leave so I can watch my golf," he said eager to flip on ESPN. Pivoting his feet onto the couch, and pulling the blanket up over himself, he waved over his head not knowing whether the girls could still see him or not.

The girls chatted up a storm in the car as they drove to start their day in San Francisco. The first thing they did was to park their car in the multilevel parking lot around the corner from the Curran. From there, they hired a cab for the entire day to drive them from place to place. The fun began with a glass of wine at Cave, accompanied by a charcuterie tabla; a few hours later they followed up their adventures at Cave with an early dinner loaded with garlic at the one and only Stinking Rose Restaurant, which was followed up, of course, by another glass of wine, this time at the Ferry Building overlooking the bay; and finally, to top the evening off, they were off to see *Wicked* at the Curran Theater. As the driver delivered them to the theater entrance, he thanked them profusely for their generous tip and the experience of having three very entertaining women in the back seat of his taxi. He assured them he would miss them and then drove off.

At the end of the show the girls walked out of the theater with huge smiles plastered across their faces, the conversation going a million miles an hour.

“That is by far the best theater show I have ever had the pleasure of seeing,” Julie said, feeling euphoric. “Thank you both for letting me tag along and making it a complete San Francisco experience for me.” She had goose bumps and wasn’t sure if it was from the chill in the air or the excitement of the show.

Christine and Modra looked at each other knowingly. They were just as pleased with their San Francisco experience.

“You guys are a lot more fun than Bill, I’ll tell you,” Christine said with a smile.

“I agree, girlfriends make it better,” Modra said as she put on her sweater. “And that was absolutely a fantastic show. I would see it again, right now if they invited me.” She began tearing the wrapper off the *Wicked* CD as they walked. “I just want to hear that *Pop-u-LAR* song a few times on the way home,” she said, sounding like a teenager with a new CD.

“Me, too,” Christine said, linking her arms with Julie and Modra and leading them across the street to Starbucks for a Grande House caffeine boost to take on the road.