

Sixteen

As they drove up the winding road and out of the city, the dark sky seemed to be condemning them and their chore. Inch on top of inch of snow was being dumped in their path, as if the Gods were trying to keep them from reaching their destination.

Kevin looked at Modra, who sat on the opposite side of the back seat of the taxi. She was intensely concentrated on the freshly powdered world outside the window.

"Mod . . . babe, how are you holding up?" He reached across the seat and placed his gloved hand over hers.

"Okay." She exhaled. "I'm ok." She kept her focus on the snow covered world outside. "I just keep re-playing my conversation with Christine . . . she said that abortions don't haunt teenagers when they have them, they haunt the women they become." She paused, closed her eyes and bowed her head. "I was just wondering if it will haunt me when I'm older and I look back on my life."

His heart was heavy for her. It wasn't fair. She shouldn't be going through this. They thought they had done everything possible to prevent such an occurrence

and now it all felt like life had played a bait and switch on them.

"Babe, you can't do this to yourself. *We* can't do this all over again." They had spent the last two weeks going back and forth on whether they would keep the baby, cognizant of the fact that they had a small window of time to choose between the state of Modra's conscience and her sanity.

"I know . . ." She started to cry again. She was genuinely tired of crying but couldn't help herself. "I'm really trying to just accept today and tell myself that everything will be back to normal by tomorrow... at least everything but my conscience."

Kevin heard that last bit about her conscience and knew she was right. He knew that she wasn't wired with the ability to quickly move past life events that contradict her upbringing. It seemed inevitable to both of them that she would require some time to overcome the psychological damage brought on by the chains of guilt that hung around her neck.

"Kevin, I can't believe that you and I are in a foreign country on our way to have an illegal abortion. We should have just flown home and taken care of it there."

Flying home was not really an option for Kevin. He knew that Julie would be there ready to pounce on Modra and work on her until she relented. But there was a more practical reason they had both arrived to: it would work best for Modra's conscience if it were done away from home, somewhere she wouldn't see every time she drove through town, somewhere far enough to be left behind.

Modra was shaking with nervousness. "I keep looking for a sign or something to tell me that this is the right thing for me, for us, to do and I don't see any. If anything I feel like the weather is trying to keep us away and prevent us from doing it."

Kevin's eyes looked to the taxi driver's rearview mirror and realized that he had clearly understood everything they were saying.

"I'm sorry, sir, can you please pull over for a minute? Please keep the meter running," Kevin said as the taxi skidded slightly to a stop before he helped Modra out of the car. He escorted her to the back area where they wouldn't be in plain sight of the driver, but Kevin knew he was watching them in the mirrors.

"Honey, it's freezing out here. Why are we stopping?"

"Because we're having this open conversation about abortion and our taxi driver not only can understand us but he seems to be visibly bothered by our discussion. Don't forget, this is a very Catholic country... and of course there is that thing where it's against the law here. We need to be careful."

"Oh," she said taking a quick glance at the driver, who quickly looked away from the side mirror.

"Do you want to have this baby?" he asked getting back on topic.

"All I know is that I don't want to be a mom. I don't want this responsibility," she said, motioning towards her abdomen.

Kevin wanted to scream. "Ok, so what are you saying? Please, I'm a man who is very confused right now. All I know is that Dr. Draux has gone through a lot to help us set this appointment up so I need to know now, in plain English, what you want to do." He held a dry-eyed Modra by her arms. "If we back out of this now then we won't have another opportunity. I had to have Bill fax Dr. Draux everything for him to believe that we tried to prevent this . . . I just don't think he would help us with this again. The man is putting himself on the line for a couple of American tourists."

"I know, I know." Modra laughed from the ridiculousness of it all, and adding to Kevin's confusion before trying to clarify her thoughts. "It's just that when I think I can go through with this procedure," She said not wanting to say the word again, "I know that the decision will consume me if the day ever comes that I regret not having had kids... and you know that that's my biggest fear, only now it will be compounded and made worse." She paced, "on the other hand, I'm afraid that if we kept this baby, I would forever be angry at the world. I mean... I don't know that I wouldn't resent our baby for having hijacked our life?" her hands went to her face, "I know. I know that I sound like I'm dead inside, but the thing is that I'm just being honest. I love our life the way it is."

He let her final sentence linger and thought to himself for a minute. It was freezing outside but neither seemed to be affected; they were too deep in their troubles to notice the freezing temperature. "I don't think you're dead inside. I think you're a woman whose in touch with her inner most desires. So you don't want to be a mom, lucky for you, you married a man who doesn't want to be a dad. In all honesty, I'm proud of you for being so honest, but in spite of all that, I still don't know what you mean to do."

I need you to tell me in plain English. Are we keeping the baby?"

"No."

Kevin exhaled and pulled her in for a hug.

"But I'm not having an abortion right now, either. I need you to give me one more week to figure myself out." She could feel his bear hug slacken around her.

"Mod, I'm not trying to pressure you, but I don't think the doctor's contact will be understanding of our situation." He dropped his eyes to hers and said, "I don't think we will get another appointment with him."

Modra understood what he meant. Dr. Draux's connection would still have to be compensated because that was part of the agreement. She was also pretty sure that it would take a lot for them to have a chance at another appointment since they had been clearly warned not to request one until they were absolutely sure they were ready to proceed with the abortion.

The contact was said to be a respected physician who performed the procedure for the women of the local wealthy families who found themselves in an "unplanned situation". The doctor took certain precautions to protect himself from both zealots and the law. He was said to never linger after a procedure, basically handing off the

care instruction to an assistant, and, according to Dr. Draux, he had never been known to rescheduled an appointment.

“I don’t know what to say except that at this moment, I know I cannot go through with it. Please give me a week, we’ll fly home and get it done there if we have to.”

Kevin didn’t like it, but he backed off.

They were popsicles by the time the taxi driver dropped them back to the hotel. Modra was feeling terrible and hoping she’d made the right decision to postpone. When they got out of the car and Kevin settled up the tab, the driver mumbled something in Spanish before he hastily drove away

"What did he say?"

“I haven’t the slightest clue, but it didn’t sound nice.”
He said.

The snow was falling at a continuous pace making everything cold and beautiful. Kevin placed his hand at the small of Modra’s back and guided her into their hotel lobby. The receptionist had by then become a good friend and she offered to send up some spiced wine on the house. Kevin thanked her and asked for cinnamon tea with brown sugar instead, to which she kindly obliged.

They spent the next couple of days hashing out their options, only this time they included the possibility of Julie adopting the baby. Their days were spent walking the streets of Barilloche carefully discussing the pro's and con's of each option.

The option of keeping the baby was taken off the table almost immediately. Neither of the two pretended to entertain the notion of actually wanting to become parents. In fact, their actions up to that point had explicitly proven that the want was not there. They both knew that having an abortion would be their best option; however, though Modra strongly believed in a woman's right to choose, she knew she couldn't choose it for herself. Her Catholic upbringing and the guilt of that upbringing had somehow become part of her DNA, preventing her from being able to follow through with it. The only option left was adoption, and the only way Modra's conscience would even allow that to be the better option over abortion would be to have her sister adopted the baby. It merely became the "lesser of the evils" and it was the only option the two of them could completely agree on.

After a couple more days of chewing on the details, Modra finally worked up the courage to call her sister—

she knew that once the phone call was made there would be no turning back.

“Hey, Julie.”

“Oh, hi sister!” Julie gurgled into the mouth piece. She had been in the process of shoving a juicy orange slice into her mouth when she answered the phone.

“Can you talk?”

“I can.” she said, happy to hear Modra’s voice. “How are you?” and right then, she seemed to have dropped the phone and Modra heard a distant “Can you hold a second?” Modra listened as her sister struggled with something then heard her say “shit!” before the phone rolled around the table for a second.

“Are you okay there?” Modra asked jokingly.

Julie let out a giggle. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she was looking down at herself to see where else she had dripped. “I’m a ninny. I was eating an orange when I answered the phone and got a little excited when I heard your voice, and well, now I have juice running down my cleavage.” She laughed again. “I’m going to have to wipe with a moist cloth to avoid having sticky boobs.” She looked into her shirt and grabbed a dish towel to wipe with. After she dampened the towel, she headed to the couch. “Okay.

Well, how is Argentina?" *how is your pregnancy?* Julie placed her feet on the coffee table.

"Where are you? Are you home or still in Healdsburg?"

"Oh, I should probably tell you that I'm on your couch, with my feet on your coffee table." She paused then asked, "Is it ok that I have my feet on your table?"

Modra smiled. She was surprised that her sister wasn't more depressed. "That's not a no-no at our house, you ninny. You can put your feet on the coffee table. Just take your shoes off first." She rolled her eyes for Kevin's benefit.

He was sitting nearby, covertly monitoring the situation, as he pretended to be busy with a Sudoku.

"Oh . . . that's right," Julie said, giggling again before her tone changed to serious as she said, "I'll tell you, it's good that I'm self-employed and I have great help at the store, could you imagine me taking as much time away from work and home as I have these last few months? I'd have been fired by now."

Modra nodded her agreement. "Who's got Daniel?"

"Mom. She loves it when I go away cause she gets him all to herself." She thought for a moment of their mother and how possessive she had become over her

grandson. Then in a somber tone, one that seemed to be a better indicator of Julie's true demeanor, she said, "I was going to go home last week, but I stuck around for a bit longer trying to deal with the loss of the baby." She paused then added, "I was absolutely devastated. I just couldn't bring myself to go back to the store and smile each time one of my regulars asked me when I would get my new daughter."

"Your feeling that way is understandable. Especially after everything you've gone through." Modra said, trying to console her sister.

"I wish you were here. I've been so depressed... but I'm slowly getting over it. From time to time I realize that I was spared the worst, especially when I finally acknowledge to myself how unstable this adoption was from the beginning. At least I didn't lose her after I'd taken her home. That would have been the end of me.

Her sorrow was still alive and well. Modra couldn't imagine how distraught she must have been when it had just happened. "I am so sorry for you sister."

Julie regrouped her strength and said, "Thank you, but please, don't be. I sort of had a feeling that something was going to go wrong. I just wish I had been wrong."

“I wish you had been too.” She hesitated but felt she needed to know so she asked, “I know you must be tired of talking about it, but can you tell me about Veloria’s accident?” Modra wanted to know the details, hoping they’d exonerate Veloria. “Was it an accident?”

Julie pondered her response for a moment then shared what she knew. “There’s really not much to say. Let me see, today is Sunday . . . so, a week and a half ago, Veloria basically flew off the highway and plowed into an oak tree.” Julie said as she pulled her knees into her chest and under her skirt. “The kicker is that there were no skid marks . . . she didn’t try to stop,” Julie sounded a bit angry when she said, “I don’t know what she was thinking.”

Modra felt that she could probably guess, though she said nothing. There was a sense of disappointed and anger in the way Julie said her words and Modra immediately knew that her sister’s cheerful moods were just a performance.

“Is there any way she could have fallen asleep at the wheel?” Modra asked, thinking that it must be a fair possibility. “I mean, she was very pregnant.”

Julie exhaled in contemplation. Unable to get comfortable, she pivoted her body around and lay

vertically on the couch with her legs draped over the back. She felt the blood rush to her head as her eyes went to the ceiling, wishing she could believe that it had been an accident. Maybe if someone could prove that it was really an accident then she wouldn't be so angry with Veloria for losing her baby.

“I don't know, maybe it is a possibility. Though, I'll be honest, I'm having a hard time believing it. There was a witness who swears she actually saw Veloria with her eyes wide open and focused as she accelerated and gunned it straight for the tree.” It seemed impossible that she would ever be able to erase the image that the woman had described for the police report: the young lady's eyes seemed to be looking straight ahead as she drove past me, off the road, and then she seemed to accelerate just before she plowed her car into the tree. The witness had also stated that “she appeared to be in complete control of the steering wheel, with both hands, until she hit the tree”. After that, she said that “her body had pretty much gone limp on impact.” Julie shook her head. “That sounds like a pretty descriptive suicide attempt to me,”

Modra could now hear the sharpness of Julie's anger in her tone. She was definitely still mourning. “Where is Veloria now?”

“Off somewhere with Diego. Don’t waste your time worrying about her. Amazingly, she’s practically recovered and has gone back to normal, almost as if she’d never been pregnant. Christine, on the other hand, has been a total mess. Bill took her away for the weekend. I think they went to Portland or something.” Julie rubbed her left eye with her thumb and stared at the sprinklers on the ceiling as she spoke. “I don’t know if you’ve spoken to Christine lately, but I’m pretty sure she is in the midst of another nervous breakdown.”

The minute Julie shared that, Modra instantly felt guilty. She hadn’t bothered to call Christine or anyone back home since they found out she was pregnant. “I have been a lousy friend. I haven’t called her to talk about the accident. I wish I would have. Poor Christine.” Her head throbbed with everything that was going on.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. What’s happened has happened. There honestly isn’t much anyone can say or do for her right now. It seems like this is just one of those things that only time can heal.” Julie wanted to ask Modra about her own pregnancy but decided not to. She had been assured by Christine that Modra would ultimately decide to terminate it, if she hadn’t done so already, and

she knew herself enough to know that she couldn't deal with the confirmation of that at the moment.

Modra sat at the edge of her hotel room bed, surprised at herself for sympathizing with Veloria. She felt that she had some sort of real understanding of what the poor girl had been going through, and, at the same time, she knew that it would be very hard for most women, especially Julie, to understand even a fraction of it all; because to feel that way has never been a socially accepted behavior. A silence fell between the sisters as they both went to their thoughts.

Kevin cleared his throat trying to remind her that she had called Julie with a purpose in mind.

“Oh.” She said, breaking the silence. “Um... well Jules. I'm sure you've heard from Bill that only God knows how, but we've managed to get ourselves pregnant.” Modra suddenly sounded more depressed than Julie had earlier.

“I heard.” *and I've been dying for you to call me.* She stopped herself from finishing her thought, bracing herself for what her sister was about to tell her. She had a feeling that Modra would feel obligated to call and tell her that she was having an abortion because she had happened to be there when Kevin called Bill. Had she not overheard

Bill's conversation with Kevin, she probably never would have found out about the pregnancy and Modra wouldn't have felt the need to explain the fact that she no longer has a baby. She had no expectations that Modra and Kevin would keep the baby especially after she'd overheard Bill tell Christine that they had already made an appointment to take care of it.

“Well, I have a favor to ask you.”

Her heart stopped. “I'll try to help you, but if it has anything to do with you having an abortion . . . I can't be there for you . . . I'm sorry.”

Modra suppressed the flash of anger that surfaced and said, “Well you don't have to worry about that. For all the pro-choice that I am, I can't even go through with it myself.” Julie perked up, “After everything, do you know what I've realized?”

“Do I want to hear it?”

“Oh stop. I'm going to tell you because I am such a hypocrite! Poor Veloria. I've realized that although we all may have very strong opinions, until we are the person living through the decision and the consequences of the decision, we really don't know, and cannot know what to do.” She thought of herself and her own situation: though she feared the thought of having to choose so much that

she tried in vain to avoid going through exactly this decision-making process, she hadn't even been close to the amount of mental anguish that is a crucial piece of intricate process of choosing. "What I mean is that I can't bring myself to go through with it and Kevin and I would be honored if you would consider adopting our baby." Modra felt ashamed of herself for not wanting the baby but she couldn't help how she felt about keeping it—some women were meant to be mothers and some weren't.

Kevin, who had been watching her from the chair by their hotel room window, came over and rubbed her back.

"Modra!" Julie exclaimed ready to say more.

"Wait, I have a lot to say before you say yes," Modra said, wiping the tears from her cheeks with her thumb. "I want you to know that I would have an abortion if my conscience would allow it, but it won't. So, I'm going with the second best option available to me." Modra took a deep breath. "I have some ground rules and you have to follow them or no dice," Modra said, point-blank.

"Anything! Name it!," Julie said still in shock. There was nothing Julie wouldn't do for the baby, a baby who would carry the family blood.

"Kevin and I are going to remain in Argentina for the remainder of our pregnancy and we're going to give birth

here,” Modra said to a concerned Julie who couldn’t understand why.

“Is that wise?” She stood up and began pacing around the living room, waiting for the rest of the rules. She was hopelessly desperate for all the details, and the baby.

“We’ve spoken to a doctor here and we’re going to see about getting your name on the birth certificate as the "mother" and "unknown" as the father,” Modra said, looking at Kevin, who was looking right back at her, willing her his strength. “I’m not exactly sure how or how much this will cost, but we will pay for it all. The good news is that we have over seven months to figure it out. Kevin has a friend who is a lawyer in Uruguay; apparently he’s done this before, though not in Argentina.” Modra considered giving more details but decided it was unnecessary information. “The main thing...and this is very important Julie, is that you can tell Mom and the family that you are adopting a baby, but you can never tell them it’s ours. They are never to know we were even pregnant. If they ever need to know, then I will be the one to tell them. I don’t want the guilt. Right now the only people who know are the Merckles’ and it

needs to stay that way. I didn't ask for this so I don't want to hear it from anyone."

Modra knew that if her family got ahold of the news it would be just as bad if not worse than having the abortion. Elena would be absolutely incredulous of her daughter's behavior and would never let her live it down. It just felt morally different, even to Modra, than had she gone into it knowing she would be a surrogate.

"Never! I swear to you, I will never say a word to anyone." Julie wished she could write it in blood to dispel any reservations that Modra might have about her ability to keep the secret. "I know Mom and I have been almost evil to you lately and I'm sorry. I promise you I'll do everything exactly the way you want it done, with no questions asked." *This is almost too perfect, it's practically unbelievable*, Julie thought.

"You can't in any way acquire more children. This is it. Kevin and I will help put Daniel and the baby through college and we'll begin providing a monthly contribution to help you with expenses so that hopefully you won't have to work long hours. But if you do, then Mom gets to baby-sit . . . or us, if we're in town."

Julie was grinning from ear to ear. It was all so wonderful. So far she could live with all of the rules. It

was a better arrangement than she could have ever dreamed of. She was hopping up and down in the living room, hoping Modra couldn't hear her. But even if she could, she didn't care; containing her excitement right then would have been impossible.

“Just a couple more things,” Modra said as if she were executing a business transaction. She was working very hard at keeping her emotions in check to get through it all. “If you ever have the need to tell the baby, we need to be told first and we need to be there when you tell it. We know we are losing all rights to the baby by placing you as the parent on the birth certificate, but we ask that you make us the primary two people, behind only you, in the baby's life. We also ask that we get invited to everything from graduations to recitals to first communions. And, we must be made its sole godparents.” Modra stopped to think. “Oh, the last thing,” Modra said in a guttural voice brought on from the shame, “You can never, ever, throw this in my face. I am not callous and I am not heartless. I am doing what I believe is best for the baby because the reality in all of this, in a cold-sounding way, is that I don't want to raise a baby and I never wanted to become pregnant. Don't forget that I tried to prevent this.” Modra could live with her family scorning

her for remaining childless, but she couldn't live with them knowing that she was cold-hearted enough to give away her own baby—especially her father.

Julie swore again and again that she would never throw it in her face or mention the arrangement to anyone. Kevin and Modra would handle all legal paperwork and citizenship papers for the United States and Argentina and all medical and legal costs. Julie was getting a perfect package with no real strings or expenses attached; it was a dream come true for her. She would be receiving monthly emails keeping her posted on the baby's progress, from ultrasounds to Modra's weight gain and her daily eating habits—what more could she ask for.

When it was all said, Modra's conscience felt right. She knew she had made the right decision and it gave her piece of mind. Sadly, that piece of mind only lasted a couple of days.

The very day after their conversation, Julie had ceased her grieving and had flown home with so much excitement that she could barely contain herself. On her second night back home, Julie had gone to her parent's home to pick up her son. She had no intention of telling her mother a thing, but she had also not intended to drink as much as she had. Elena had prepared a wonderful

dinner to help her daughter cope with her anguish. She felt, and strongly believed, that Julie was in denial and that bottling up her feelings was unhealthy for her. So, throughout the course of their dinner, she repeatedly pressed for her to share her feelings until Julie broke and told both of her parents everything.

As a drunken Julie so happily shared the great news, both Elena and Ray sat before her conflicted. On the one hand, their daughter would finally get her long sought after second child, but on the other, they both found it difficult to believe that one of their daughters would be “that woman”; the one everyone snickers about and thinks negatively about because she was capable of giving her baby up for adoption. The judgment and disappointment in their daughter ran deep and both waited until Julie, who was in no condition to drive, and Daniel had gone to sleep before arguing about whether or not they should call Modra. Elena won and Ray walked out of the room as soon as she began to dial. He was disappointed in his daughter, but he wanted to part of the phone call that was about to take place.

Sadly, Modra had only a few days of piece-of- mind. She had still not figured out how she would tell her father

when she found out she wouldn't have to. It was midnight when the phone rang in Argentina.

"Hello?" Modra answered wondering who in the world was calling them in the middle of the night.

"I cannot believe that you are that woman. I mean, I am absolutely happy for Julie, but I cannot believe that I raised a daughter who is so callous... who is so..."

Modra stopped listening as she registered what was happening. Suddenly she felt as though someone had poured a bucket of ice water over her. It was her mother and the only thought she had was *Shit! She knows.*

"You are so lucky that you have a sister who is ready to step in clean up your mess. Your father and I are very disappointed with you."

Modra was suddenly overcome with anxiety—her father knew and she hadn't been the one to tell him. She hadn't been the one to answer his questions as to why she was doing this. How could Julie break her promise? Why would she do that?

Kevin turned over to see who it was. When he saw his wife's water filled eyes and the anguish behind them, he gently pried the phone from her hand and placed it to his ear. Elena was still ranting. Anger filled his veins and as the protector of his wife he said, "Elena. I want you to

stop calling us. We don't want to hear from you anymore. Good night." And he dropped the phone into its cradle. He reached over, took his wife in his arms and brought her back into the blanket where he held her while she cried herself to sleep.

Over the next couple of days, they received tens of messages from Elena, Julie, and the other family members, but they were all deleted before they could be listened to. On the third day after Elena's midnight phone call, Julie received a phone call from Dr. Draux letting her know that her sister had had a miscarriage. Julie dropped the phone and fell to her knees in tears. That was it. That had been her perfect opportunity. From that day forward, she would always wonder whether Modra had truly had a miscarriage or whether she had gone through with the abortion. She would also always blame their meddling mother for costing her her baby. Elena's behavior towards Modra had made no sense to anyone in the family. It was only a few of months before that Elena had verbally assaulted Modra for not agreeing to be Julie's surrogate, and yet once Modra had offered Julie her own baby for adoption, their mother assaulted her again. What was the difference? Was it the origin of the egg that made

the difference for Elena or, in her rage, had she failed to see that it was all essentially the same thing?

A lot of family relationships had been destroyed by that phone call. Kevin and Modra disconnected from the family completely, aware that some wounds only heal with time and distance.

On their last night in Barilloche, once they had packed their bags, they stood at the window facing the lake as the sun went down. Modra said, "I have no regrets . . ." she turned to her adoring husband and sincerely asked, "Is something wrong with me?"

He smiled at her and brought her into his arms. "No babe, you're just right."

And, as their last day in that beautiful town of San Carlos de Barilloche came to an end, they turned and watched for the last time as the sun slowly fell and sank into the grand lake Nahuel Huapi. As darkness settled in outside and their window, they stood there, left with only the memories of being in a beautiful place at a difficult time of their lives, vowing never to return again.