

Thirteen

July had arrived and with it came a hot summer. The sun was bearing down on Healdsburg, raising the mercury on the outdoor thermometer to a singeing 95 degrees Fahrenheit.

Crunch, snap, crunch, the sound of twigs snapping and dry leaves being crushed peaked Kevin's curiosity. He looked up from his 4th of July special edition issue of *Business Week* and spotted Christine and Modra as they noisily tramped their way under the canopy of pines, oaks, and manzanitas. As always, they were too busy talking to notice him sitting on the porch, looking right at them. His lips curled into a smile as he took in their sweaty mess. Just then, he glanced at the time on his watch and noticed that it was a few minutes before one—they were right on time.

Breathing heavily and sweating profusely they, very slowly, climbed the stairs and made their way onto the porch. Their skin was glistening from the sheet of sweat that covered them and their cheeks were a ruby red. It was a good thing they had pulled their hair back into a ponytail; otherwise, it would all be matted to their face and neck area by now. They were both almost crawling their way towards Kevin as he sat around the patio table, which was kept on the back side of the porch for summer dining. Judging by the fatigue on their face, they had clearly

over done it with their workout. When they were finally able to stop moving, both women hung their heads, placed their hands on their waists, and kept their bodies slightly bent forward in valiant effort to catch their breath.

“Good god we’re getting old Christine!” Modra swore between breaths as droplets of sweat ran down her face and plummeted onto the floor en masse. The curve of her back would concave inward with every breath she let go of before slowly arching out again as she filled her lungs.

Kevin couldn’t help but notice that his wife’s white shirt was saturated in her sweat and had become completely translucent. The brown of her skin, he noted with a grin, would have completely shown through if not for the blue sports bra she wore underneath.

She caught his eyes and was about to lean in and kiss him, but he quickly stopped her with an index finger to her sopping forehead and a smile. He puckered up and gave her a careful kiss without touching her sweaty mess. Her response was a menacing grin before she quickly took his head in her hands and held him there while she rubbed her sweaty forehead against his.

“Yuck.” He said quickly pulling away and using his shirt to wipe off his forehead. “Oh sweetie,” he complained, “that’s really gross.”

“That really is.” Christine agreed, with an expression that supported how she felt.

“Whatever.” Modra said with a smile. She went to wipe her face with her own sweaty shirt and stopped as she realized what a waste of time that would be. Her shirt had no further absorption capacity. Instead, she squeegeed the sweat off her forehead and eyes with her fingers as best she could before once again, to Christine’s displeasure, bemoaning their age.

With a scowl, Christine insisted, “Stop it! Stop saying were old.” Suddenly aware of the fact that she was still hunched over and probably looked old right then, she straightened her posture and tried to calm her heart rate by taking more measured breaths. “Seriously, you said it like ten times during our hike. It gets old...no pun intended.” She dropped her head again for one last big breath then dropped herself into a chair. “Besides, I disagree. We’re not old...we’re just severely out of shape—there’s a difference.”

Kevin perked up. He saw an opportunity to razz Christine and was determined to take it.

“Oh I don’t know Christine.” He said with a wicked smile, “you are only a few months away from becoming a grandma.” Then with gusto he added, “Doesn’t one becoming a grandma arbitrarily posit old age?” The glow and the grin on his face told the girls he was proud of himself. Usually it was Christine who got the best of him, but this time, he was sure he nailed it. He touched his index finger to his tongue and raised it above his head where he drew an imaginary mark on his imaginary scoreboard.

Christine grumbled something then leaned forward and flicked him on the forehead with her index finger. “Ha! Ha! Not funny.”

Kevin flinched and rubbed the spot on his forehead where she got him and said, “Ouch!”

“At least we got off our ass and did something today.” She shook her head at him “It’s not how old you are, but how old you act.” She leaned forward a little closer and said, “My eighty year old grandma was more active than you are.”

He shrugged her off and kept his grin as he said, “Whatever, I got you and you know it. Besides, I’m not the one feeling old.” He took the iced tea pitcher from the table and poured three glasses.

That was Modra’s cue. Apparently she was the only one at the table feeling old. “Fine...I’m sorry Christine. I’ll not say we’re old again, even when we are old.” She earned a wink from her husband for her sarcasm.

“Mod, it’s 95 degrees out. That’s why we’re so worn out.”

Modra wanted to agree, but couldn’t blame her condition on the temperature alone. Inside, she could feel the beginning of a change. She took a seat and gratefully reached for a cold glass of freshly brewed iced tea. Exhaustion oozed from her every pore as she said in total wonder, “I feel as though Fitch Mountain tried to kill me today.” At that moment, she actually wished she could harness the power of “the force” and will the iced tea down her gullet without lifting a muscle.

It looked as though Modra had lost all of her color, and both Kevin and Christine attributed it to her being tired.

“It’s the combination of the temperature and the fact that we’re completely out of shape, that’s all.”

“Alright, we’re not old...yet, but this has got to be how it happens. I mean, I sort of feel like I’m watching a car wreck happen in slow motion when it comes to my energy level and body.” Kevin and Christine gave her a puzzled look, “oh come on you guys, doesn’t it seem like things are slowly falling apart? At some point we’re going to be so damaged, we’re going to break down completely.” Nausea from her presumed over exertion made her place her head on the table and shut her eyes for a moment. “I feel pathetic right now. I never used to feel pathetic after that hike.”

“I think I know what you mean.” Kevin offered, “You mean the subtle little things that individually go unnoticed but accrue over time and then BAM!—you’re old.” He banged his hand on the table for effect before realizing he had startled his wife.

“Exactly. Small things like you suddenly can’t sit cross-legged on the floor like you used to because your legs might fall asleep and sometimes, you just can’t get up.” Christine said thinking of Modra’s Birthday dinner and how surprised she was to find herself unable to get up off the floor without Bill’s help.

“Have you both noticed that you can’t stay up past ten cause if you do, you need to over compensate the next day for the lost

sleep, otherwise you are completely dysfunctional and your day is wasted.”

“Yes!” chimed Christine and Modra in unison.

“Or,” Kevin continued with a stern jaw, “one day you look in the mirror and you notice that your gray hair holds just as much, if not more, real-estate on your head as your brown hair.” He dropped his head forward so the girls could have a better look at his abundant amount of gray hair.

Christine laughed and said, “Yeah, that’s how it happens. It just sneaks up on you.”

Whether it was their age or their fitness, Kevin could actually see what Modra was trying to say—the girls looked exhausted, but she the most. Their heavy breathing had subsided, but their energy level was well below normal. Christine was slouching in her chair. She had her arms dropped at her sides, her head tilted back, and her eyes shut. Modra’s head was still on the table and her right hand was still wrapped around her cold glass of iced tea, but neither had taken a sip. He was sure that if he stayed quiet long enough they would fall asleep where they were.

“Ehm. Girls, are you alive?”

Modra slightly turned her head to get a look at what Christine was doing then went back to facing the table as she spoke. “I swear I used to hike that same trail every weekend and still come back with energy enough to do it again.” With that, her body stiffened as a thought crossed her mind, “How in the

hell are we going to hike the glaciers in El Calafate if I can't hike Fitch Mountain without feeling as though I'm going to get sick from over exertion?"

Luckily, Modra wasn't looking at him to take notice of the eye roll he had just given her. He had long ago noticed that Christine and Modra could always find something to worry about. Their day-to-day worries were sometimes so trivial that he had come to the conclusion that that's just what they do. They worry. What do they worry about? Well, they worry that the shade of blue on their shoes is not the same shade as the blue on their cocktail dress. Just the week before, Modra worried for days that her gray hair was not coming in evenly and she would have to color it. Christine recently worried herself into a panic that Veloria wasn't gaining enough weight, even though Vel's doctor had personally called her, at Bill's request, and assured her that her daughter's weight gain was just right. The latest and greatest, however, had occurred that very morning when they had openly worried about sagging breasts and he had overheard one confirm to the other that she was still perky.

"Babe," Kevin began, being supportive and mocking her at the same time, "you have three weeks to get in shape. We don't leave until August fifth, so just keep building up your stamina." He wanted to laugh when he saw Christine give Modra a sincere and supportive nod.

"I'll get in shape with you," Christine said with the commitment and true dedication of a good friend.

Kevin rolled his eyes again. There would be no hardcore hiking on their trip. The whole goal was to see it all and enjoy it. He had no intention of ever sweating through his shirt unless he was strolling around in some humid Amazonian city with a cocktail in his hand. He would later remind Modra that their trip was all about relaxing and taking in the natural beauty of Argentina, not the fat-burning hikes he intended to avoid at all costs. His ultimate goal was to get to Ushuaia and surround himself by nature as they watched the sky grow dark over Antarctica.

Changing the subject, he asked Christine, “We haven’t seen Veloria for a couple of months now, how is she doing with everything?”

For Christine’s sake, he and Modra had agreed to keep the topic of Veloria off the table, but being that they hadn’t seen her at all over the past couple of months, he felt he had no choice but to ask her for an update. He guessed that the last time they saw her was during an evening they spent at Bill and Christine’s home. She had just arrived home from an outing and poked her head into the dining room to say hello before begging off every invitation to join them and rushing off to bed. She had barely spoken to any of them. Since that occasion, he and Modra have discussed her sudden withdrawal from them. They’ve gone over past conversations and things they might have said that would have pushed Veloria away, but so far they hadn’t been able to figure it out.

Christine bit her bottom lip and thought for a moment before answering. “It’s hard for me to admit this, but I would bet that overall Bill and I see her about as much as you do.”

Kevin and Modra both doubted that very much; nonetheless, they left it alone. They couldn’t imagine a reason that Veloria would have as a pretext to pull away from her parents. Both have been incredibly supportive given the circumstances, and incredibly understanding. They haven’t tried to make her break it off with Diego, though Christine would like nothing more. And, they were completely behind her decision to give the baby to Julie for adoption; though frankly, that seemed to be more the result of Christine’s firm prompting than Veloria’s choice.

“Bill thinks she’s struggling with the reality of being pregnant. That it’s all finally sinking in and that she’s panicking. I...I don’t know what to think. It’s like I came out of my depression ready to help her and she went into one.”

“Christine,” Modra grimaced afraid to ask the question, “Is it at all possible that we somehow gave her a complex about the whole thing?” It wasn’t a secret that both she and Kevin had strongly agreed with Bill and his opinion that she should have an abortion.

A recent event came to Modra. She hadn’t shared it with Kevin or Christine, but just over a month ago Veloria had come to her full of panic. She had been having nightmares driven by a fear that she would not be able to give Julie the baby once it was

born. She felt that she was being forced to choose between her future and her baby in an unreasonable timeframe and at too young of an age. She wished she would have just had the abortion when she still could. Modra had been ill prepared and unsure of what to say to her. In the end, the only advice she could give the poor girl was to look at her situation as if she were in a “holding pattern” and that once the baby was Julie’s she could once again focus on her future. She told her that giving Julie the baby, and her being a part of the “family”, would make it easy for her because she would always be able to see the baby through the years and know it’s being well taken care of. Now Modra worried that she had over simplified the situation, leaving Veloria to feel as though no one could understand her.

“No, no, not at all Mod. I think Bill has the right of it. She seems... ashamed...or maybe even mad at herself for letting herself get into the situation she’s in. Last weekend, while you and I were at lunch in Santa Rosa, she went to Bill’s office and apologized to him over and over again for having let us down. He said she was really depressed, crying hysterically, which quite honestly worried us both. When he tried to comfort her... to let her know it would all be okay, she pushed him away and wouldn’t accept his comfort.”

“That sounds bad Christine. I’m really sorry to hear she’s still struggling with it all. But she has no reason to be sorry or ashamed. Why didn’t you tell me she was in a depressed funk?” She reached for her husband’s hand, “That can’t be healthy for

her or the baby.” A flush of guilt flowed through her. They thought they were doing the right thing by giving her space. What they should have been doing was bringing her into their daily lives as much as possible and shown her that it would all work out.

A look of exhaustion returned to Christine’s face and Modra wondered whether it was from their hike or if the subject of her daughter’s pregnancy was the culprit.

“Oh, Mod,” Christine’s voice quivered. She placed her hand over Modra’s as she worked hard to swallow back the tears.

Modra looked over at Kevin for help. He panicked at first instinct then jumped into action, the only way he knew how.

“Perhaps a little bourbon with our tea to ease the tension?” Kevin asked, noting it was still early morning, but lately, the *five o’clock somewhere* rule had been used freely. Besides, he wasn’t sure what other type of support he could offer.

“That would be great.” Modra quickly jumped in rubbing her hand over her friends back. Christine didn’t say yes, but she wasn’t protesting either. “Christine, you don’t think we should be worried about her do you?” It was a trivial question because she was sure they were all already worried.

Kevin was in and out of the house with a decanter of bourbon in seconds. He wanted to hear what Christine had to say. Depression could be a serious concern, especially after Bill had shared with them that both Christine and Veloria had severe depression tendencies. As he reached across the table with the

decanter of bourbon ready to pour into Christine's glass, he stubbed his big toe on the table's leg, causing him to almost drop it.

"Shit!" Kevin yelled reaching for his toe.

A much needed giggle escaped from Christine.

"Are you all right sweetie?" She would have elbowed Christine to wipe that grin off her face, but she was sitting on the other side of Kevin's seat.

"Yeah," he said, giving the girls a head shake, "my fault. I was just thinking about Veloria and not paying attention to what I was doing."

A warm feeling went through Christine as she considered how loved her daughter was. "I'm sorry you guys," she said feeling badly, "please try not to worry about Vel. I promise she'll be fine and anyway, Bill and I are doing enough worrying for all of us." She gave them her best smile and added, "Besides, for all we really know, we could be worrying about nothing. I realize she's my daughter, but we don't really know much of what's going on with her. When we see her, we try to ask questions without annoying her, but for the most part, she avoids giving us answers.

"Of course, that behavior only serves to make everyone more nervous about what she's not telling us." Modra said shaking her head with disappointment. She had to keep reminding herself that Veloria was only eighteen years old and not yet mature enough to properly handle her situation.

Christine's hands started shaking with emotion, "I don't know what's going on with her. Sometimes she seems to be functioning well and other times she's like a zombie bumping around the house in a total funk."

"We had no idea." Up until that conversation, Kevin and Modra thought she was only avoiding them. "Has Bill diagnosed her with depression?" Kevin asked, curious as to what Bill opined. He had just talked to Bill the day before and he hadn't mentioned a thing about Veloria's behavior, which now made him wonder whether Bill was in denial or just being private about the situation.

Christine shrugged. "Veloria has been doing her best to avoid us as well and if it weren't for her living with us, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't see her at all right now. Now that she's showing a little," Christine said, demonstrating Veloria's pregnant belly with her hands, "she has become . . . reclusive. We're guessing that it's all especially hitting home right now because all of her friends are talking about their last summer at home and going off to their colleges while she's left behind . . . in beautiful Healdsburg," Christine looked at her surroundings as she spoke with her hands in the air like a music conductor . . . *beautiful Healdsburg*. "A few nights ago, Bill and I were in bed and he whispered that he heard Veloria crying in her bedroom that night—it wasn't the first time, either. He's heard her before as he's passed by her bedroom door, but when he goes to check on her, she pretends to be asleep. It's just been devastating for

him; he knows she's awake, pretending to be asleep so that she doesn't have to talk to him. It breaks his heart." Christine's eyes had welled up with tears. "I'll tell you, I can't wait until this is over. Veloria is my baby and she will always take priority over a grandchild." Christine's tone was now defiant and controlled as a few tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Should she be put on something for her depression?" Modra asked, wondering if she'd be allowed to take anything at all while she was pregnant.

Christine exhaled as she raised her brow in a resigned expression. "You know Veloria. She never takes anything, not even for a headache."

The group was quiet for a few minutes before Kevin broke the silence. "Do we need to be worried about her?"

Christine thought for a moment, she wanted to say yes, but decided that it wouldn't be fair to them. "Bill doesn't think so. He's certain Veloria, understandably so, is going through emotional phase as she mentally digests reality. It makes it difficult to know for sure since she's avoiding everyone who's important to her, but Bill thinks this is pretty normal behavior. She's being forced to grow up pretty quickly here. The biggest responsibility Veloria has ever been saddled with has been keeping her room clean, which is a far cry from giving birth and then having the maturity to hand the baby over to someone else. I don't know, but Bill is confident that once the baby is with Julie, that she'll be back to normal."

“Well, Bill would be the one to know about that stuff.” Kevin felt a million times better knowing these were not only Veloria’s father’s opinions, but those of a respected doctor as well.

“We’re keeping an eye on her. That’s all we can do. Bill wants us to give her room . . . and I’m trying to.” Christine sat back in her chair and noticed that her shirt was dry again, she had finally stopped perspiring. Bill would be home at two-thirty for a late lunch; her watch told her she had fifteen minutes before she needed to be home.

“So what’s going on with Diego?” Modra asked, wondering why the baby’s father was never mentioned in any conversation unless she brought him up. She hadn’t heard anything from him or of him for a couple of weeks now.

As expected, a sour look came over Christine. She did not seem happy about the mention of his name. “Well, they’re still seeing each other,” Christine said indignantly. “In fact, he’s the only person who gets to see her nowadays. It kills me. Do you know that his mother is all for the adoption!” Christine crossed her arms and put her nose in the air with distaste.

“Wait, I thought that was what you wanted, too?” Modra was definitely lost. The last thing Modra knew was that Veloria was having the baby and Julie was adopting it because Christine had insisted on it being that way.

“Yes but, do you know that she had the audacity to call Julie and introduced herself as the “other” grandma? I mean . . .

she actually asked Julie to include her in the baby's life as a sort of third grandma!" She looked at Modra with disbelief and disgust. "That's just ridiculous."

Modra pursed her lips. Er . . . she already knew about Dana, Diego's mom, calling Julie. In fact, Julie had been so shocked to hear from the woman that she called Modra the minute she was off the phone wondering if Modra had encouraged the phone call, which, of course, she hadn't. Modra heard all about their conversation a few weeks past. And honestly, Julie's problem wasn't just Dana, it was Christine too. The two "grandmas to be" had been hammering her with competitive phone calls as if wanting her to pick a favorite. Julie's exact words to Modra were, "I really want this baby, but I'm afraid that Christine and Dana are going to fight me *and each other* every step of the way for the next eighteen years. I'm afraid it won't really be my baby." There had been undercurrents of hesitation and despair in her sister's voice which was not surprising once one witnessed the aggressiveness and determination of both Dana and Christine.

Modra had recommended she use confrontation. She suggested that Julie get on an airplane and personally meet with everyone—her lawyer, Christine, Dana, Diego, and Veloria—and establish some guidelines and boundaries for them. Then Modra recommended that she drop her Washington state attorney and work with a California one who better understood the state adoption laws. She also suggested that she go onto one

of those adoption support websites and get advice on how to proceed so she had a better idea of what she was getting into. Perhaps a contractual agreement would be a good idea, one that would include all the necessary verbiage for protocol. Modra had privately hoped that an attorney wouldn't be necessary to establish the rules of engagement amongst the "friends and family", but it now seemed as though it might be necessary. As the due date neared, it was becoming clearer and clearer that a binding agreement describing the terms under which they would be included in the baby's life, and the degree of their authority, would be needed.

Noting Modra's silence, Christine wondered if Dana had called her as well. "Do you already know?" In all honesty, it gave her a complex that her best friend didn't find Dana's actions as reproachful as she did. She knew she was being overzealous in wanting to prevent Dana from seeing her grandchild, but it was irrelevant because Veloria was her daughter and she was the one, in her opinion, paying the highest price. The idea of that woman, whose son was responsible for her daughter's situation, being present at all family functions that included Julie and the baby, was too much to bear.

"Julie called me a few weeks ago," Modra regretfully admitted.

Christine scowled at her, "A few weeks ago? Why didn't you tell me? I just found out a couple of days ago."

Modra went back and forth on how frank to be with Christine before deciding that some honesty was presently necessary. Christine seemed to be living on a selfish island at that moment, feeling the victim. What she didn't stop to think about was that Diego was still very much standing by Veloria and that Dana was just as committed as he was.

“Look, Julie is really having a hard time with the two of you. She is willing to include you both in the baby's life, but you two are going to have to figure out how to get along. You're *both* really making Julie nervous.” Kevin agreed with a nod, “She is grateful that you chose her, and she doesn't want to make you regret your decision, but if you two want the right to visit the baby, then you're going to have to get over your issues with Dana. You're not going to be allowed to make negative Dana comments around the baby, she's grandma, too.”

“Errh! The thought of considering that woman a part of my grandchild's life is agonizing,” Christine said, shivering at the thought of their Christmas dinners to come.

Modra couldn't dislike Dana and she wouldn't for the benefit of Christine. The thing was that it was all going to be difficult as it was, especially knowing when or if they would tell the baby he or she was adopted. That would be something that would need to be worked out between the biological parents and the adopting parents. Julie warned Modra that Christine had tried to raise the issue of the baby having too many grandmothers. Julie dispelled her concern by countering that

many of today's kids had four sets of pseudo grandparents because of divorce rates and the "blended family" trend.

"I don't know what to say. I can't imagine how you two will work out the schedule when Julie and baby come to town if you can't get along."

Christine knew Modra had a point, but wasn't ready to concede just yet.

"Well, ladies," Kevin said as he stood to leave the table, "I must get going if I'm going to get any work done today; I'm helping a couple of friends put together a business plan," he explained for Christine's benefit. "I can freshen up your drinks if you'd like before I put this away." He held the bourbon decanter out as Christine and Modra put their hands over their glasses to say no thanks.

Modra looked at Kevin with an apologetic look, which he expertly ignored before walking into the house.

"I hope it's nothing I said," Christine said sarcastically, not realizing that it had been something she said.

Kevin pretended not to hear her and let the door close behind him. He was tired of listening to Christine rail on Dana; it was uncalled for and unfair. Christine seemed to be the only one who couldn't understand that Veloria was not as innocent or free from responsibility as she made her daughter to be. He decided it was better to just leave the conversation than get riled up.

With an awkward smile, Modra smiled at her oblivious friend and changed the subject. “Did I already give you a copy of our flight itinerary?”

Christine paused to think, then shook her head. “I hope you’re planning on giving me a copy of your entire travel itinerary,” Christine said, correcting what she thought was Modra’s error.

Modra smiled. “We’re actually going to backpack. So, we don’t exactly have a full travel itinerary.”

“What!” Christine exclaimed, her eyes as big as saucers. “Are you sure you want to do that?” There was disbelief in her voice. “We could barely get through the hiking this morning and we both looked as though we were going to expire at any minute.” She wasn’t kidding. Toward the end of their hike, Christine was sure that she was going to collapse from exhaustion before they made it back to Modra’s. “That sounds extreme! We barely made the hike this morning and now you’re telling me you want to tramp around Argentina with a twenty-pound pack on your back?! Do you realize it’s a massive country?”

Modra smiled broadly. “We’re not literally going to backpack our way around the entire country. We’re too old to do that. Besides, it would take us years.” She laughed out loud. “They have a fantastic bus system, sort of like Greyhound, only better. We’ll be bussing our way as we go.” Neither Kevin nor Modra were sure as to how it would work out, all they knew was

that it added extra excitement to their trip. “The thing is we don’t know what we want to see, except for the typical tourist stops so we want to be able to extend or shorten our stay in places at will. We just want the freedom to custom tailor our trip as we go.” There was a huge ear-to-ear smile plastered across Modra’s face as she spoke. “I guess you can say that we’re going to bump around Argentina . . . literally.”

“I’m sure you know what you’re getting yourself into,” Christine said, a bit concerned. “Your trip is still three weeks away and I have to admit, you seem to be bursting at the seams to get there.” She grinned at Modra and told herself that there was nothing wrong with living vicariously through her best friend.

Shaking her head as she continued to flaunt that smile, Modra said, “I just want to get to the airport. It all starts from there.”

Arriving at an airport and walking through the automatic doors with bags in tow could almost be as exhilarating for Modra as the planned trip. She once compared the feeling to the butterflies one feels just before *the* kiss on a first date, or the climax before the orgasm. The feeling of being in an airport and seeing the travelers with all of their equipment—laptops, iPods, backpacks, water bottles, etc.—and their bored expressions, pretending to be blasé about travel when inside they were probably bursting with excitement, heading to some exotic destination. She swore her senses flipped to full alert: colors

seemed brighter and the people-watching more entertaining. Her ears always buzz with the sound of the foreign languages as they waft through the air with their exotic sound. For Modra, walking into SFO International said: “It’s time to forget what you were thinking about when you left home and start focusing on the adventure ahead of you.”

The international airports around the world are where the thrilling mayhem of people in transit takes over the senses: a short tubby woman, with no elbows or ankles, rushes by in a hurry wearing her all-important navy blue skirt suit and short fat pumps. She bips past with her short-thick-calves and her “carry on” bag in tow, causing onlookers to jump back so their toes don’t become a speed bump; or strolling through an international terminal as the sound of a foreign language, maybe Hindi or German, gets louder and louder before fading as the speaker passes in the opposite direction; or the time that must be spent in the terminal pub, regardless of the hour, enjoying a cocktail with a smile and nothing but travel on the mind.

The home phone rang and Modra heard Kevin answer it.

Christine closed her eyes and shook her head. “Shit,” she said with her eyes shut, “that’s going to be Bill.” There was no doubt in her mind. Minutes later, Christine was getting ready to leave. Kevin walked out holding the phone as she rushed past him, waving him off. Kevin grinned. “She should actually be getting there any minute now,” he said, laughing. “Yeah, she left

about a minute ago.” He winked at Christine, who slammed the car door and barreled out of the driveway.

“Oh,” Kevin said, listening intently with a frown. “Sure go ahead, no, no, don’t worry, Modra and I would be happy to.” He looked at a weary Modra, who was watching him, wondering what he was committing them to. “Mhmm, absolutely. Anything for our Veloria . . . us too.”

A resolute no to bourbon in her tea would have been a wiser choice. Her head was back on the table and her eyes were shut tight. How was she supposed to pour wine for the dog shelter event in a couple of hours when she was so exhausted? A nap would have to be squeezed in somewhere.

“All right, give Veloria our best. I’ll talk to you later,” Kevin hung up the phone and grinned at his wife.

Modra sat up. “Why are you grinning and what are we happy to do?” she was using her remaining strength to hold up her head.

“Well, Bill wants to throw us a farewell and a meet-and-greet party for us . . . er, them and Diego’s family. He wants to include Julie and your entire family too. By the way, the party will be here.” Kevin was obviously holding back some information.

Modra stared at her husband for a bit, debating whether she had the energy to extract whatever he was holding back from her and after a moment’s thought she decided she’d try. “Only if you tell me everything,” she said point-blank. “I’m too tired to go

round and round with you, so if you love me, you'll just spew it."

"All right," he said, not really sure why he'd held it back to begin with. "We're hosting the party here because Bill wants to take the home-court advantage away from Christine. You have to admit, she does become this sort of evil person when she talks about Dana," Kevin shrugged. The difference between Christine and Dana was that Dana didn't blame Veloria and Christine for everything; she tended to spread the blame more fairly, including her son.

A large shadow flew a few feet away from Modra, startling her before she saw the source. It was huge turkey vulture circling above, probably looking for roadkill.

"I know, I know," Modra acknowledged. She was well aware of Christine's dislike of Dana. "But you do realize that if we didn't know and like Dana before all this happened that we would probably be agreeing with Christine right now." Modra wasn't sure why she bothered to defend Christine's unfortunate behavior except that she sympathized with her.

Kevin shook his head, disagreeing. He looked so cute standing there with his old worn-out button-fly jeans and a plain yellow tee shirt. "No, we wouldn't," he said sternly. "You need to tell her that she's acting like those mothers who deny their child's imperfections and can't accept that they are just as responsible for their situation as the next person. She's acting as though Veloria had nothing to do with getting pregnant." With

clear annoyance, he went to go inside then stopped. “You know what, never mind, don’t tell her anything. This is not our issue. Julie wanted to adopt the baby, let her figure out what to do with those two.” He paused. “Why are you smiling?” he asked clearly annoyed.

Modra shrugged. “I was just thinking that this is only a small sampling in the life of a parent and we’re all stressed out,” she said, laughing off her feeling of relief that this was the extent of parenting for them.

Kevin thought about what she said for a second before shaking his head and rolling his eyes at his wife. He then turned and walked inside without uttering another word. “Thank God,” he mumbled to himself as the door shut behind him.