

Three

Modra's thoughts flew forward a few months to the night of their pact. It was July 2000, if she recalled correctly. She and Kevin had been in their kitchen trying to regroup and decipher the mental complications the diagnosis of unexplained infertility had brought to their marriage.

They had stood in the kitchen, across from each other with the kitchen island between them—speechless. She could still recall how the sun had been beautifully bright that day and that it had streamed through the windows contradicting the gloomy atmosphere inside. Who would speak first? The unsaid truths had convoluted each of their thoughts and neither had known where to start. A few months before that night, they had spent their energy considering options to conception that neither was truly interested in and now both wanted to move forward with a resolution.

“Alcohol!” Modra said, “That’s what we need.” She sorely wanted to be able to put her reservations aside and leave it up to God, but she didn’t know how. “I just don’t know....” She paused to gather her thoughts and then decided against finishing it. Her courage failed her. She was afraid to seem cold and selfish in her husband’s eyes and she didn’t want to be the one to take fatherhood away from him. She fumbled as her mind

bounced around from unsettling thought to unsettling thought. Kevin watched her as she intensely focused her attention on locating the perfect bottle of wine. “Well, at least I won’t have to think about stretch marks,” she said, as she triumphantly held up a bottle of wine for Kevin to open. Giving up on having children altogether seemed extreme at the tender age of 28 but she had decided there was no point in keeping her hopes up if failure was such a realistic possibility, especially in light of the fact that she was uninterested in becoming a mother. The safest emotional route, though riddled with guilt, could only be to prepare for a marriage and life without children.

“Mod, it’s not like it’s over. We’ll keep trying until we get pregnant,” Kevin said attempting to console his wife. “You may yet have to contend with those stretch marks.”

He wants to keep trying. It was a complicated game that she was playing. Her family expected her to have children, her husband, based on his words, wanted children, but she didn’t know that she wanted them or not. Confusion reigned within her. How evil was it that she didn’t want her life to change; she loved her life as it was. All she wanted from it was for her marriage to continue to be fulfilling, for Kevin to love her as passionately as he had, and to be able to continue to travel at will. She had no desire for the complications of motherhood.

“We . . . we’re still young, Mod, we have plenty of time.” He’d stumbled on his own words, wondering what their true odds were of actually becoming pregnant. They had already been

trying for almost five years with no success. *What would have to change tomorrow to be different from today?* He privately hoped everything.

Modra laughed out loud at Kevin's comment. Based on the diagnosis, he actually made no sense. None of it made any sense. All it did is add confusion to their situation and prolong their misery. "Babe, listen to what you're saying. As time goes on we have less of a window to get pregnant," she said as if stating the facts and being a total bitch would make the situation any better. "It's as though we're suspended in midair. Think about it Kev, what if we try for years and eventually give-up. By then we've thrown away half of our lives waiting for nothing. Or, what if we give up and one day wake up pregnant and we're fifty?" Modra's face had gone pale as the words left her lips. "Oh, God, even forty-something seems old. What do we do if we don't become pregnant until we're . . . would we keep it?"

Modra leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms, preferring not to answer the question. She was torn; she didn't want kids, but if she was going to have one, she would prefer to have it while they were still young and full of energy. And in all honesty, she wasn't sure whether she could go through with having an abortion, regardless of her age; it was simply one of those things she believed could only be decided by that person in that moment of their lives; and she hoped to never find herself there.

“It’s ridiculous that for five years we’ve tried and nothing has happened. With a declining chance, do you honestly think we’ll have better luck next year, or the year after that?” Modra paused. “Feels like wasted effort.” She was desperate for an immediate resolution, but her conscience prevented her from seeking it.

“I don’t want to be a brand new father in my late forties, or fifties. There has to be a limit. .” Kevin said unequivocally.

He left the window open for children, he wants one. She sipped her wine and gave a slow and abstracted nod. Kevin was right, but how could they possibly know where to draw the line? She wasn’t sure he could.

“I agree with you Mod, we can’t afford to waste our lives planning for something that may never happen.”

“We can’t. I know you’re right.” She reached for her wineglass and took the last swig before tapping her wedding ring against the glass to request a refill. “Babe, you need to stop with the wine,” He said as he refilled her glass one last time, “This is it for tonight.” He corked the bottle and placed it on the counter. Turning to face her, he said, “Two things: first, I get that children are important in a family, especially your family, but you have to give us credit for trying if we fail. And second, you can’t feel responsible for something you can’t control.” He reached for Modra’s wine and took a sip. “We have hunkered down five years and worked very hard at this. No one, including your family, can accuse us of quitting. We’ll keep trying, but if

we don't get pregnant, then we don't get pregnant. I can live with the idea of it being just us. I like just us."

This is how. If we try and fail, he won't hold it against me. Our marriage will survive this, but will my family. Modra exhaled a bit and relaxed her body a bit more as well. She still had others to concern her thoughts with, "I like just us too. So then how far should we take this? We have the family to think about as well, I mean, you know my mother, she..."

Kevin put his hand in the air to stop her from finishing her sentence. he knew exactly what Modra wanted to say, but he didn't care to hear her say it. He'd heard it before from her mother, her sisters, and her older brother. They had drilled it into her: Family = children. Family = children. He knew what Modra was worried about, she was worried that she would regret not using every available avenue to conceive, but Kevin was confident they'd regret it if they did.

"Guilt and regret should not be in play when reproduction is a natural phenomenon and we are not privy to it. You can only blame it on nature."

Modra sat on the countertop; her eyes were on her husband while her mind ran over her family's reaction if they somehow ended up not having children. She already knew the pressure from them would be relentless.

"Mod," Kevin said, "I see what you're doing," nodding his head slowly in a knowing sort of way.

Modra gave him a confused and defensive look.

“Oh, come on,” he said as he squeezed himself between her knees and brought his nose to hers. “You’re just sitting there thinking about all the bad things,” he said as he placed his forehead on hers.

“I know,” Modra said resigned, keeping her forehead against his. She lowered her eyes and watched her finger caress his hand as it rested on her thigh. “I know I worry about everything but I have to think this all through for my own sanity, so please, just listen,” she said, grabbing his arms so he wouldn’t pull away. “Just the two of us sounds great now, but—”

Cutting her off, Kevin shook his head, gently removed his hand from under hers, and crossed his arms without moving away. “But what?” he demanded. He was tired of the conversation. This was typical Modra, she was playing devil’s advocate, bringing to surface all of the thoughts that frightened her and then looking for Kevin to dispel them. Somehow through their marriage he had become her conscience’s masseuse and moral compass.

“Aren’t you afraid of being one of those lonely people that never have anyone visit them?”

Kevin laughed, “Come on Mod, you’ll have to do better than that. There are plenty of people with children who never have anyone visit them.”

“Well, what about later when one of us dies and the holidays come around? What if the one of us who’s left is lonely and miserable? What if, when we’re old, we regret not doing

everything in our power to have had kids?” She started to cry, “I don’t know. I am so afraid of regretting not using in-Vetro and having a baby. I mean, this isn’t something we can change our minds about. Once I’m too old, I’m too old.” Only a crystal ball could give her the answers, but she wanted Kevin to tell her she would not regret any of it anyway.

Kevin took Modra’s wineglass and drank the contents before pulling away from her. Now *he* needed a drink. His wife could be frustrating, not because they couldn’t get pregnant, but because she could bend, twist, and disfigure a situation like no one else could. *She has already decided that we are never going to have children and that we are going to be miserable about it.*

“Hey, you drank my wine. I’ll have another glass,” she said, tapping her ring against her empty glass and allowing for no objection.

Kevin pursed his lips; he was beyond frustrated. He reached for a second glass and poured himself to the top of the glass and swallowed half of it in one gulp.

As he refilled her glass, Modra thanked him with a gracious smile for the wine and continued her point. She said, “I don’t want to get old and then for the last, oh, I don’t know, thirty or forty years, regret our decision.”

Finally, deciding it was necessary to be honest with her Kevin put the wine bottle down and turned to face her. “You’re right, once it’s too late, it’s too late. Babe, I need you need to listen to your own words.” He leaned into her and locked his

eyes on hers, “If the only reason you want to chase children with science is because you’re afraid of regret, then babe, you don’t have a valid argument for us going through it.” He turned to grab the glasses. “I think you’re just afraid you may still be happy regardless of which way nature decides for us.” He knew this wasn’t about having children, this was all about guilt and the possibility of regret. It had been obvious by her comments. “You should really try to remember that one, we do have a thirty percent chance of becoming pregnant, and two, that right now we don’t have children and we’re still very happy.”

Modra said nothing. She held the wineglass with both hands—they were shaking. Kevin had hit a nerve. The selfish truth for Modra was that the older she got, the more selfish she became, and the reality of this self-awareness kept her up at night. She had always thought she wanted children, but she never questioned why. At the moment, guilt and the fear of regret were the reasons, and she knew that Kevin was right; those were not good reasons to pursue children at all costs.

“Admittedly, children and all of their needs can make a weary person skeptical about having them and sometimes even fearful because of the change they bring.” she admitted sliding off the granite counter and causing her sandals to plop onto the flagstone floor. As her mind was probing her conscience for more objections, she realized some time had passed and that it had grown late and dark outside, making the mood inside more depressing.

“That’s what guilt is for,” Kevin said, shaking his head in disbelief at his wife. “I mean, look at you, babe, everything coming out of your mouth is regret, regret, regret.” Desperately wanting it to be her that said it, he added, “You’re making an argument for having children using all the wrong reasons. What are your valid reasons? Do you have any?”

Kevin, on the other hand, had no doubts. After the unexpected feeling of relief the day Lina told them they may not be able to have children on their own, he had debated parenthood for himself, and he apparently had come to the conclusion that he was absolutely not interested in being a father. He paid attention to the families around him, their dynamics, and their interactions. So far, the only kids he’d had the pleasure of meeting were clueless, irresponsible, and were without manners. He felt that the arrogance of teenagers today was overwhelming and their condescendence was wearing.

“I don’t know,” Modra said, with desperation in her voice. “I just don’t know for sure that I’m ready to be a mom and I don’t know that I’m not.” She surprised herself for admitting her own indecisiveness out loud. She looked at Kevin for his reaction and was confused by it. “What if we are not meant to be parents? What if we go through with in-vitro and have a baby, and hate being trapped in parenthood. What if we love it and die before we can raise the baby?” Kevin rolled his eyes and groaned with frustration, but Modra ignored it and continued. “I just don’t know what to decide. I’m tempted to roll the dice and

let nature decide whether or not we have a family. I just don't think I can handle the responsibility of being the one that forces the hand of nature when I know it's not what I want, but I also don't think I can face my family if we don't at least try to have a baby. I need to be able to say that it wasn't me." She looked at him apologetically, "I just need to."

And there it is, Kevin thought, she is bending and twisting the situation until it is so ugly that he is left wondering how they got there. His wife was nuts. He loved her, but she was nuts. "Mod, I agree things happen for a reason, but you need to remember that the reasons aren't always bad. Sometimes the reasons are unknown, but that doesn't mean something bad is going to happen." he shook his head with disbelief, "listen to yourself. Did you just hear the reason you gave for having a baby, right after you said you weren't even sure you wanted to be a mom?" He was no longer surprised at the things Modra did to avoid guilt, and though he detested the fact that she allowed herself to be governed by fear and guilt, it had become something he had to learn to accept. Every time he worked with her to get her over her guilt, she only shut down and stopped talking about it while it continued to consume her inside. "You have to remember that with or without children, we are a family. Now we'll try to have children, but if we don't, we're still a family." Kevin growled. His frustration was more and more evident with every word. "You and I became a family when we got married."

The light in the kitchen was completely gone. Kevin looked around the room and noticed that the brightest part was the moonlit sky outside the window. Not wanting the room too bright, he turned on the one light that sat directly above the wet bar.

Modra thought about what he said for a moment and then nodded her agreement. Kevin was right about everything. This was not her fault. The whole infertility thing should make the decision easier, and it would have if she didn't still have the thirty percent chance and the alternative options available. Now, if she would at least try by continuing what they were already doing, that wasn't working, she wouldn't feel as though they were going against the grain.

Kevin walked over to Modra, picked up her wineglass and poured the remaining bit in her glass. "I'll open another bottle." He conceded as he walked over to the bar before deciding to go for a Manhattan instead.

"It's time for the heavy stuff." He said as he held up the bourbon and sweet vermouth.

"Sounds great." she agreed.

Kevin caught sadness in her tone, "Mod, what is it?" He leaned both hands against the bar and focused on his wife. "I've listened to everything you've had to say and you haven't convinced me that you want to have children. In fact, it doesn't sound as though you've convinced yourself. I'm having a hard

time understanding why you are set on tormenting yourself rather than accepting the facts.”

She shrugged. He was right, but she wasn't sure how to verbalize her fear, and then she apologetically threw out, “I hate *what ifs*, that's why. I especially hate it when the *what if* comes with the huge possibility of regret.” She looked at her husband who was looking at her with sympathy. “And I can't help it. You're just going to have to blame it on my Catholic upbringing.”

Kevin stood speechless behind the bar for a minute. His eyes were trained on their wedding photo sitting on the counter just above the bar. Modra's 5'6" stature seemed small compared to his 6'3" frame. Her brown, Hispanic eyes were looking into his blue German eyes; her happiness was evident in her smile.

Inspired by the happiness in her eyes he said, “We won't regret anything and we should never feel guilty. This decision has been made for us.” Kevin's tone was very matter-of-fact. “I would much rather regret not having children than paying fifteen, twenty or a hundred thousand to get pregnant and have a child who decides that it hates us when it's old enough to think on its own.” Kevin held his Manhattan in one hand and Modra's in the other. He handed her a glass and placed his on the counter next to her. “There are regrets both ways, Mod. One just costs less physically, emotionally, and financially.” He reached out and took his wife into his arms. “I love you, babe. It won't matter.” He kissed the top of her head and pulled her into his

arms to give her a reassuring squeeze. Then, with both hands firmly holding her arms, he said, “We are going to live long, happy lives together, with or without children.”

Now that ten years had passed since that night, it was so much easier for Modra to sit in her rocker in Healdsburg and look back on that day and actually process her fears more clearly. Back then, when it was all happening, it seemed surreal. Modra went through nights of insomnia for weeks on end. Her mind and her conscience had a major power struggle as she contemplated both sides: going the natural route or using science to conceive. She would even bargain with herself over what the guilt load should be if she had no control of the outcome.

For Modra, the memory of that night has served as positive re-enforcement of their decision and every time she has needed it for support, she has recalled it through her memories and reassured herself that they made the right decision. Incredibly, after years of having gone round and round about the same subject, it had come down to that night. That was the night they had both agreed that life was too long to live in limbo and too short to waste. The deal had been drawn and agreed on with a clink of their glasses.

There would be no ovulation tests, no hormones, no IVF, and no adoption. They would do nothing to prevent a pregnancy. Conversely, they would not use science to enhance their chances, either. They decided they would let nature make the call and accept their fate. Nature would be given a chance until Modra’s

thirty-eighth birthday, at which point if they weren't yet pregnant, they would take matters into their own hands and have a vasectomy; neither wanted to be parenting a teenager into their sixties.

Their agreement provided Modra with a reasoning that minimized her guilt; however, some mental adjusting still had to take place. She experienced bouts of depression that came and went and sometimes she found herself second-guessing their decision. Eventually, Modra stopped talking about it all together and chose to deal with her anxieties on her own.

With their ten year secret pact in place, they would continue to live their lives as they had until they were either pregnant or having the vasectomy, whichever came first. It was agreed to that family and friends would be kept in the dark about the pact until they knew what the outcome would be.

Three months later, they listed and sold their four-bedroom home in Pasadena. Modra and Kevin needed new surroundings, so they moved into chic hotel in Healdsburg until they found a home that suited their new goals. Their home in Pasadena had suddenly become too big and only downsizing made sense. Their new home would be smaller and have more land. A hobby vineyard, a vegetable garden, and travel were the new guidelines of their lives as they prepared to remain just the two of them—hopefully.