

Ten

A puffy-eyed, Julie came stumbling down the stairs in her green robe and purple pajamas. She stopped at the foot of the stairs when she saw Modra and Christine sprawled across the couch, looking like two haggard broads who'd had a hard life. She wondered whether they'd been up all night before their appearance assured her they had. She looked at the clock on the wall—it was almost 5:30 am.

“Why are you two still up?”

Christine was still dressed in yesterday's outfit though Modra had at some point changed into her red flannel pajamas.

They both looked up as Julie made her way down the stairs and gave her a shrug.

Modra was exhausted. She felt so old at that moment. *That's it.* She thought to herself, *I am absolutely done with any subject that revolves around parenthood.* She looked across at Christine, the poor thing looked miserable. Her heart sank as she considered the hell she was now condemned to. Every person they know will in some form inquire about Voloria and her pregnancy, and even though it's really nobody's business, Christine will have to choose between her pride and discussing what will inevitably be perceived as some sort of failure on her part as a parent. The worst part will be the hypocrisy she will be forced to endure. Sure, their friends will all be wonderful and

rally around her, and tell her how it will all work out for the best, but privately, Modra suspected, each and every one of them will be thanking the stars above that it isn't them or their daughter.

Keeping her thoughts to herself, Modra looked down at her empty mug and said to Julie, who had finally reached the bottom of the steps and was lingering around an old family photo that hung on the wall, "It's a sad state around here." Her lips were pouty as she further inspected the cold mug with the cold bitter liquid inside, "so sad that we've been drinking cold stale coffee for the last hour."

As if in a trance, Christine robotically added, "and it tastes like shit."

A smile curled around Julie's lips. The simple fact that her sister and best friend were bitching about the cold coffee and not Veloria meant that Christine was most likely beyond the shock and anger stage. It was a pleasant surprise. Frankly, she couldn't imagine the internal turmoil she was feeling, but outwardly, her composure was a million times better than what she had expected. Twelve years ago, when she had gone to her big sister for help, Modra had oozed disappointment for close to a week. Now, she could see clearly that Modra had not only been disappointed in her for getting pregnant, but for keeping the baby as well.

She quickly glanced at her sister as a feeling of resentment quickly came and left. Then, without thinking, she walked over and gave Christine a squeeze on the shoulder for support.

“Don’t you fret; I shall make us a fresh pot of coffee.”

Christine looked up with an appreciative smile. The warm smile on Julie’s face offered her support and sympathy.

Christine tilted her head to one side and asked, “Wait, do you know?” Her eyes narrowed, not with resentment, but because it dawned on her that she was most likely the last in the household to be told, and yet, it was her daughter that was pregnant.

In the most awkward manner possible, Julie froze, pivoted her body and robotically marched herself into the kitchen. As she walked away, she pondered whether she should lie to Christine. Why should it be her that confirms the fact that she *is* the last one in the house to be told? But she couldn’t bring herself to lie. Her shoulders dropped and she nodded her confession without uttering a word.

Christine closed her eyes and let her head roll back as she asked, “How long have you both known?” she was double checking Modra’s story, though in total, it didn’t really matter anymore. Her soul had been crushed the minute she learned that her daughter had come here, to Kevin, first.

She wasn’t naïve, like every parent, she had made her share of mistakes, but she had never in her wildest dreams thought that she would be “that” parent with “that” daughter. She wondered when her relationship with her daughter had changed so much that she stopped coming to her for advice. They used to talk about everything. A tear rolled down her cheek at the thought of

Veloria going to a younger co-student for advice on birth control. *How could I have let her pull away from me? Why didn't I see what was happening?*

Julie looked to Modra who had closed her eyes as well and answered. "We both only found out last night when we got home from the City. Veloria came to see Kevin while we were gone yesterday. I guess she was hoping that Kevin could help her find a way to tell you." She looked around and hesitated, not wanting to make things more painful for her and said, "You know... I'm pretty sure that she was planning on telling you *and* Bill this morning."

The home went silent for a few minutes. Modra and Christine were both lying down on the couch with their arms crossed, eyes closed, and motionless. Julie couldn't tell if they were sleeping or thinking. She stood for a minute wondering how the discussion between them had gone. What did Christine say when, because Julie knew her sister enough to know she had, Modra proposed her daughter have an abortion? Her pulse quickened as she fantasized that Christine planned to offer her the baby for adoption. *That's it!* She thought to herself, *I need to find a way to make myself an option for Veloria. But I could only do that if Christine is against having an abortion, and even then, how could I be so sure that she would willingly give up her grandchild or Veloria her baby?* She couldn't possibly know any of that, at least not yet. The first step would have to be for her to

figure out where both Christine and Veloria stood, and then she could formulate a plan.

Her curiosity got the best of her and she asked, “Have you discussed all her options?” She kept her head behind the wall, hiding from Modra’s glare.

When there was no audible reaction from Modra, she poked her head out just barely enough to peak at her sister. Her eyes were still closed. Julie exhaled and relaxed her shoulders, confident that her sister had fallen asleep.

Christine sat up slowly and nodded. She took a deep breath and said, “Yes, we discussed all of them, though it’s not going to be up to me. Veloria is an adult now. All I’m going to do is make whatever decision she makes as easy as possible... and... that would include having an abortion... if that’s what she chooses.”

Julie perked up when she caught her tone. It was obvious that she would be opposed to Veloria having an abortion. She took it as a good sign.

“So then... if it were up to you,” she glanced at Modra who still had her eyes closed, “abortion would not be an option?”

“No, Julie, it wouldn’t.” Modra answered suddenly, catching Julie off guard. She too sat up and said to her friend, “You’re not the only opponent of abortion. Julie is firmly in your corner.” Modra spoke loudly enough for Julie to hear hoping she would stop with the line of questioning.

Christine took her cold empty coffee mug and pressed it against her forehead.

“How come you two are so different when it comes to abortion...or children for that matter? You’re polar opposites. ”

There was a sudden awareness that the two sisters were vastly different in their response to a baby in their presence. Julie would fawn, oogle, and go gaga over the baby where Modra would slowly and casually step away as though she were allergic.

Modra gave it a second of thought then shrugged and dismissed the question. She felt her pro-choice stance was morally responsible and saw no benefit in throwing an eighteen-year-old into a tailspin and forcing her to play catch-up for the rest of her life. As far as she was concerned, she was being responsible. Julie on the other hand, saw herself as compassionate, love filled and selfless, quite the opposite personality of her sister.

“Honestly, I don’t know what happened to Modra.” Modra rolled her eyes, but Julie pretended not to notice and continued, “But I know what it’s like to want a baby and not be able to have one.” This would be her subliminal pitch for the baby and she dearly hoped Christine would make the connection. “I’ve spent the last year looking into adoption and the reward of finally getting a baby, but the risk of not knowing the child’s genetic background, the parent’s psychological and physiological condition.” Julie was still speaking as she squeezed herself between them on the couch with the promised fresh pot of coffee. “I’ve also spent months looking into surrogates and the

absorbent cost of going that route. The cost is higher, but the benefit is that you know everything you should know about your new baby because it's your own and you know who the carrier is." She shook her head slowly as if trying to emphasize the tragedy of her life and said, "An abortion is throwing away a human life and it seems wasteful when there are people like me who would love to adopt the baby."

Julie was seizing the moment to make her pitch and caught both Modra and Christine off guard in the process.

"What? How long have you been trying to adopt? How come mom never said anything?" There was surprise in Modra's tone, not because she hadn't been told that her sister wanted another baby, but because she was actually pursuing it. Daniel was almost eleven years old and Julie was just finally able to afford to live again. She wondered why in the world her sister would want to go back to having sleepless nights and years of expensive daycare.

Julie cleared her throat and with a quivering voice she said, "Actually, I was going to ask you if I could borrow your uterus first." Modra flinched but said nothing. She thought she must have heard her sister incorrectly, but that misunderstanding was quickly clarified as Julie continued, "I'm here because I have been wanting to ask you if you would please be my surrogate." Her hand quickly went over her heart to check that it was still beating. She was nervous and very afraid at that moment, but she felt that she had waited long enough to ask. She couldn't

believe that of all the times to ask, she chose now, but she figured that the odds were stacked in her favor—she would either walk away with her sister as a surrogate or Veloria’s baby as an adoptee.

She looked at Christine who was stunned into silence.

“Oh. I’m sorry Christine. I didn’t mean to take away from your situation. It’s just that as I was listening to you I realized that you of all people would understand where I was coming from—I really need an ally right now.”

Christine was flabbergasted. There were no words on Earth that could describe the feelings of shock and dismay that Julie had brought on. They both looked to Modra whose color had drained from her face.

Aloof, Modra thought, the girl is completely aloof. She wondered how Julie could so arbitrarily ask her to be her surrogate and simultaneously jockey for Veloria’s baby. Had she not been listening to her the last couple of days?

“Like I said, you two are on totally opposite sides of the fence.” Christine said, eyeing her friend, who didn’t appear to be breathing. “I’m sorry Julie, but I can’t be your ally in this. This is something you two need to hash out...and as for Veloria’s baby, it’s like I said, it’s all up to her.”

Fear washed over Julie as Christine carefully extricated herself from her web. And those fantasies of her sister sympathizing with her and embracing her as she offered her her uterus were suddenly shattered as the gravity of what she had

asked for set in. Julie was looking at her sister with worried eyes when they heard a knock and turned to see Veloria standing on the other side of the door.

Modra quickly got up to let her in. *Perfect timing*, she thought, *but what is she doing here at the wee hours of the morning? Doesn't anyone sleep anymore?*

“Hi, sweetie,” Modra said, opening the door and quickly embracing her. Judging by her quivering body and clammy hands, she seemed ready to throw up at any second.

Veloria was pale and terrified. Her eyes went to her mother, who stood up, but was unable to move from her spot. She held up her cell phone apologetically and said, “Uncle Kevin called me and thought I should come over right away. He said mom was here.”

It was obvious she too had been up all night.

Christine felt as though she had lead weights strapped to her feet keeping her where she was. Her mind told her to walk to her daughter and give her a big hug and comfort her, but her legs wouldn't let her.

“I'm so, so, sorry, Mom,” Veloria said, breaking down instantly as she ran into her mothers embrace.

Julie and Modra looked at each other and excused themselves. Christine nodded gratefully as they left the room.

“Can we go to the office so I can explain?” Julie asked Modra who was still in shock.

She nodded and followed her like a mule being pulled by a rope. Life is just cruel, she thought, angry at this new affront. The exhaustion from zero sleep and the events of the last few days were really getting to her. It was taking all she had not to collapse into a sobbing mess. She dropped herself into the couch in the office and Julie took the chair for a second before standing again. Modra dropped her head into her palms. She wanted to understand Julie's emotional situation, but she had to admit that she couldn't. She didn't feel the way Julie did about children—she had never wanted to have one . . . ever.

“Julie,” Modra started talking with her head still in her hands, “you and I both know I can't get pregnant, so why are you even bothering with asking me?” Modra lifted her head to look at her sister, who was pacing back and forth in front of the window trying to get her thoughts together.

Modra noticed the sun was almost completely out and guessed the time was just before six o'clock in the morning.

“I'm asking you because I can't have my own and because you can get pregnant.” Julie was still pacing back and forth. At that instant she decided that if Modra agreed to do this for her, that she would need to go with IVF; it was obvious that Modra would never go for hormones to produce her own egg—it might be too much of a connection, anyway. Julie hoped she could better her odds of Modra saying yes if there was minimal commitment genetically and emotionally on her behalf. “I'll pay for the IVF process. We'll use my egg and I already found a

sperm donor,” Julie said, as if she were plotting a great scheme that would greatly benefit the two of them. She searched Modra’s face for a glimmer of hope that never came. She did, however, take Modra’s lack of protest as a good omen and continued on. “You’ll have no real connection to this baby except—”

“My blood flowing through its veins.” Modra cut in, bothered by her sister’s assumption that she was capable of being indifferent to a child born from her body. She put her head back into her hands in disbelief that they were even having the conversation.

Julie stopped pacing and kneeled down before her older sister. “Yes, but that’s it. Everything else will be from me. That blood is our family blood and the baby will have my genome.” Her eyes showed her desperation which served only to cause Modra more heartache. “Modra, please think about it. Just think about it, please. I’ll change my flight to leave tonight. I know this is big and I want to give you room to think. Please, please, please consider it and call me at home once you’ve made a decision.”

Modra’s eyes were wide with disbelief. Could her sister really not understand that she was never going to do this for her?

“Julie, you realize that my husband just had a vasectomy because we didn’t want to go through the process of having a baby. It’s not about paying for the process, or using someone else’s egg . . . it’s about avoiding it altogether,” Modra was

wondering when her siblings would finally understand that childbearing was not in her future.

Julie knew her sister didn't want to have a baby, but she was absolutely convinced that Kevin and Modra's decision was based on strictly selfish reasons, such as not being able to enjoy an evening at the opera because the baby had a fever and they couldn't find a sitter for the evening. Why else would they not have a baby when science could most likely fix their infertility problems?

"I promise you that if you do this for me, you won't have to worry about a thing. I'll raise the baby and take on all the responsibilities—financially and emotionally." Julie paused, seeing no sway in Modra's expression. "Mom said you'd help—" Julie stopped herself, but knew it was already too late. She saw Modra's body go tense the minute the word *mom* left her lips. Stupid, stupid, stupid thing to say, she would pound her head against the wall right now if she could because she was certain that she had just killed any glimmer of hope with that word.

"What? Mom knows you're asking me for this? Who else knows? Oh, there's no pressure here! Do you know that mom has sent me article after article about the *miracles of science* and *conceiving with science* for the last ten years?! Or that your priest has been doing the same, shaming me on the importance of family? I'm sure he's doing it on Mom's behalf . . . or is it on your behalf? How dare you tell Mom without giving me the opportunity to turn you down first!" Modra stood abruptly. "You

know, it's a good thing that you're leaving tonight because the truth is that I have had enough of this." She went to the door hesitated a minute then said with gritted teeth, "Do you want to know why Kevin and I chose not to deal with hormones and egg harvesting, or any of the other crap you have to go through?" Modra took a deep breath and continued. "It's because of people like you who sit here, judging me for accepting a woman's right to choose yet see nothing wrong with creating life in a synthetic Petri dish." Modra stormed out of the office and stopped, realizing that she had been screaming while Christine and Veloria were in the living room dealing with similar issues.

Modra apologized hastily and ran upstairs. At that point, all she wanted was for everyone to get the hell out of her house.

Kevin was showered, dressed, and sitting in the chair reading when Modra stormed into the room. She was so angry she couldn't cry a tear.

"I could hear you up here. What happened?" Kevin put his book down to hug his wife.

He made her lie down and spooned her as she told him everything. His hand stroked her hair and the protectiveness over his wife emerged.

"And mom knows that she came here to ask me so now it will just be one more thing I let her down on." Was the last thing she said before finally going to sleep.

It felt like a lifetime had passed before Modra had finally regurgitated the entire morning's events. Once he was sure that

she was in deep sleep, he carefully crawled out of bed and went back to his chair where he worked on controlling his frustration with Julie before he had to face her.

Once he was ready to exit, he stood by the door and listened. There was still light conversation downstairs so he decided he would stay in the room a bit longer in order to reduce the risk of confrontation with his sister-in-law while Christine and Veloria were still there. A few minutes passed before he heard the sound of the front door opening and closing. Only seconds passed when there was the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs followed by a tap on the door. Kevin quickly put his book down and went to open the door so Modra wouldn't be woken. It was Julie. He motioned for them to go downstairs so Modra could sleep.

"I'm sorry," she said the minute they were down to the foot of the stairs. It was obvious she had been crying quite a bit.

"Don't worry about it," Kevin said and gave her a hug. "It's over. You got her at a bad time. This Veloria thing has really let her down," Kevin said as he patted his sister-in-law's back.

Julie nodded. The sadness on her face had traveled from miles within, stemming from well below the surface, and deep in her heart. This was a very deep pain she was expressing and Kevin couldn't ignore it. Still, his wife has gone through her own emotional roller coaster and he wouldn't ignore that, either.

"Julie," he said carefully, "I wouldn't have let her do it anyway." He lifted her chin with his index finger and looked into

her eyes, causing more tears to spill. “She’s way too emotional right now. The vasectomy and the entire process we’ve been through have really taken their toll; it’s something that you and your family don’t seem to understand. We kept both families out of the loop because we wanted to make the call without the influence of family pressure and assumed once the decision was made the conversation would be over. Only we know the painful process we’ve gone through just to get to the point of the vasectomy. To still be talking about it after the fact, makes it more difficult.” He crossed his arms and said, “This isn’t something we can take back.”

Julie’s big sad eyes could only look at his and listen to what he had to say, she didn’t have the energy to go through it all over again with Kevin. She exhaled loudly and moped.

“I don’t know if you know, but Modra’s biggest fear is still that she’ll one day regret not having had a baby.” Kevin said. “I mean, think about it, what would you do if she said yes to you, then couldn’t deal with the idea of giving up the baby, and decided to keep it once it was born?” He wondered if Julie had even considered that Modra would or could change her mind, and by her look alone, he knew she never even thought it was a possibility. He shook his head and wondered why people with children assume that you have no heart if you don’t have any of your own. “Just so you’re clear, this wasn’t an overnight decision. This was literally a ten-year process. We’ve already made our decision and I don’t want her going through the

emotions and rethinking our decision when I've already had the vasectomy.”

With nothing more to say on the subject, Julie said in a soft voice, “My flight leaves at six tonight. If you wouldn't mind taking me to the airport bus stop in Santa Rosa, I think I'd like to go now and stand by for an earlier flight.”

Kevin pursed his lips. He was sorry things were being left this way, but he knew it would be better if Julie went home now. He saw no possible way for them to work this out without letting some time pass.

“Okay, give me a few minutes to get my stuff and leave Modra a note,” he said before heading up the stairs.

Nodding, Julie took a seat on the couch. She couldn't believe what a mess this had all turned out to be. She decided she wasn't sorry for asking Modra to be her surrogate. She had to at least try. She was sorry about the timing, with the vasectomy, and Veloria being pregnant. She was willing to apologize if she thought she could truly be sorry for asking, but she wasn't sorry. Her desire for a baby was on auto pilot, there was no rhyme or reason for the gut-wrenching emptiness she felt inside or for the tears that fell.

Julie committed herself to working on the anger she felt toward Modra for being so flippant about children and not chasing one down with every bit of life in her body. That avenue was closed and now she would go home, give her little guy a hug, and find another way to have a baby.