

A couple moves to a farm that has strange fertility properties, realised when Lila becomes pregnant with multiples again and again. Struggling to keep up with farmwork and her growing body as each pregnancy doubles the babies she has to carry.

Prologue

As morning light spread across the valley, they stepped out of the truck and walked through the gate toward the house. The air smelled like fresh soil and grass. Beyond the farmhouse the fields were already sprouting with early crops planted by the previous owner.

Lila paused on the porch, looking out over the land.

At first glance, Lila Carter did not look like someone who ran a farm.

She was small and slender, with a naturally petite frame that seemed almost delicate compared to the heavy work she handled every day. Her skin was pale, the kind that burned easily in strong sun rather than tanning deeply, and it stood in quiet contrast to the dusty fields and long hours she spent outdoors.

Strands of light brown hair usually escaped whatever loose braid or knot she tied it into while working, falling around her face by midday no matter how carefully she had pinned it that morning.

Her husband, Henry, balanced her in a different way. He was taller and broader through the shoulders, with the solid strength of someone who spent his days repairing machinery rather than lifting crops from the soil. His dark hair rarely stayed neat for long, and by the end of most workdays a faint shadow of stubble settled along his jaw.

After years of saving and years of trying unsuccessfully to start a family, this farm was their fresh start.

Henry squeezed her hand.

"Let's get unpacked," he said.

Together they stepped inside the farmhouse, ready to begin their new life.

The day passed quickly after that.

They started in the barn, checking the animals the previous owner had left behind. The cows were calm and healthy, slowly wandering the pasture while Henry repaired a loose section of

fencing. Lila gathered eggs from the chicken coop, laughing when one stubborn hen refused to move from her nest.

By midmorning they led the horses to fresh grass near the edge of the pasture. Henry inspected the equipment shed while Lila walked through the vegetable rows, brushing her fingers lightly across the soil as she checked the early sprouts of lettuce, carrots, and onions.

The earth looked dark and rich.

By afternoon they were both covered in dust and sweat. Henry spent hours hauling boxes from the truck into the farmhouse while Lila sorted through the kitchen supplies and stacked dishes into the old wooden cabinets.

Later they worked together in the fields, clearing weeds and checking irrigation lines left behind by the previous owner. The sun climbed high above them before slowly beginning its descent across the open sky.

By the time evening arrived they were both exhausted.

Henry finished securing the barn doors while Lila carried the last basket of eggs inside the farmhouse. The smell of simple food filled the kitchen as they cooked a quick dinner together, eating at the small table while the sunset glowed orange through the window.

Neither of them talked much. The quiet felt comfortable.

When darkness finally settled over the fields, they climbed the narrow stairs to the bedroom. The house creaked softly around them while the windmill outside turned slowly in the night breeze.

Lila collapsed onto the bed with a tired groan.

"I think we worked a whole week in one day," she murmured.

Henry laughed quietly as he stretched out beside her.

"That's farming," he said.

Within minutes the long drive, the work, and the quiet countryside pulled them both into deep sleep while the farm around them settled into the calm of the first night.

He turned toward her in the dark, brushing a strand of hair from her cheek. Their eyes met, soft and familiar. Without words, he leaned in and kissed her, slow at first, then deeper.

Lila's hands slid under his shirt, tracing the warm line of his back. Clothes came off in lazy, tired movements until skin met skin. They moved together gently, the simple promise of trying again.

Afterward they lay tangled in the sheets, breathing steady, listening to the faint creak of the house and the distant lowing of cattle.

Henry pressed a kiss to her temple. "Love you," he whispered.

"Love you too," she answered, already drifting.

Chapter 1

Several weeks passed before Lila finally spoke out loud about the strange mornings she had been having. At first she kept the discomfort to herself, assuming the constant nausea was simply the result of the long farm days. Running a property alone while Henry worked in town meant early mornings, heavy lifting, and long hours in the fields. Between hauling feed, repairing fences, checking the animals, and tending the growing vegetables, it felt reasonable that her body might simply be struggling to keep up.

But the sickness kept returning, almost every morning without fail.

At first it arrived as a dull heaviness in her stomach when she woke. Some mornings she barely made it down the stairs before leaning over the kitchen sink and waiting for the feeling to pass. Other days it lingered just long enough to make breakfast unpleasant before fading away once she stepped outside and started moving through the farm chores.

After nearly two weeks of this, the thought finally settled into her mind in a way she could not ignore.

One evening, after Henry returned home from work and the two of them finished a quiet dinner together, Lila stood at the kitchen counter holding a small box she had picked up during a supply run to town earlier that afternoon. She turned it slowly in her hands, studying the printed instructions on the side while Henry rinsed dishes at the sink.

He noticed the moment she set the box on the table.

"What's that?" he asked, drying his hands and stepping closer.

Lila hesitated for a second before answering, her voice quieter than usual. "I stopped by the pharmacy while I was picking up oil for the tractor. I just... thought maybe I should check."

Henry looked down at the box, then back at her. Understanding slowly crossed his face.

"You think you're pregnant?"

"I don't know," Lila admitted, resting her hands on the edge of the table. "But the mornings have been strange lately, and I can't think of another reason for it."

Neither of them said much after that. The kitchen felt unusually quiet while Lila disappeared down the hallway toward the bathroom, leaving Henry standing beside the table staring at the small box. He listened to the creak of the old farmhouse and the distant clucking of chickens settling into their coop outside while the minutes stretched longer than expected.

When the bathroom door finally opened, Lila stepped out slowly with the test in her hand. She looked at it once more before lifting her eyes toward him.

"Henry," she said softly, the faintest tremor in her voice. "It's positive."

For a moment neither of them moved. The word seemed to hang in the air between them, too surprising to fully understand.

Henry crossed the kitchen in two quick steps and pulled her into a tight embrace. Lila laughed quietly against his shoulder as the reality of the moment began to settle in.

"We're having a baby," he said, the disbelief in his voice slowly turning into excitement.

After years of trying and more than a few disappointments, the news felt almost unreal. The farmhouse that had only recently begun to feel like home suddenly carried a new warmth to it.

The weeks that followed settled into a steady rhythm as the farm slowly became the center of their lives.

Henry left early each morning before the sun had fully climbed above the fields, driving the dusty road into town to begin his shift at the agricultural repair shop. Most of the farmers in the region relied on the garage to keep their tractors, harvesters, and grain equipment running through the season, which meant Henry's days were usually filled with grease, tools, and the steady clatter of engines being taken apart and rebuilt.

Meanwhile, Lila spent her days working the farm, though now she moved a little more carefully.

Her mornings still started slowly while the lingering nausea passed, but once the feeling faded she stepped outside and moved through the routine that had quickly become second nature. She fed the chickens and gathered eggs from the coop, checked the cows grazing in the pasture, and walked the horses along the fence line to make sure the posts and wire were holding strong.

After the animals were settled, most of her time was spent in the fields tending the crops. The vegetable rows had grown thick and green under the warming spring sun, and the grain field near the back pasture seemed to be filling in faster with each passing week. More than once she paused while working to run the soil through her fingers, quietly amazed at how dark and rich the earth felt.

By the time Henry returned home in the evenings, Lila was usually finishing the final chores near the barn or closing the chicken coop for the night. They cooked simple dinners together, talked about their days, and sometimes sat on the front porch watching the sunset stretch long shadows across the fields they now called their own.

One quiet evening as they sat side by side on the porch steps, Henry reached over and gently rested his palm on the small, firm curve of her belly, barely more than a gentle swell beneath her loose shirt, but unmistakable now at three or four months along.

“Still can’t believe there’s two of them in there,” he said softly, a slow smile spreading across his face.

Lila laughed, covering his hand with hers. “I know. Every time I catch my reflection in the window I do a double-take. This little bump snuck up on me.”

“Looks good on you,” he murmured, leaning in to kiss her temple.

Life felt steady, peaceful, and, despite the surprises, comfortably full.

That calm routine continued until one bright morning a few weeks later when Lila stepped out onto the porch with a mug of tea warming her hands and noticed a car slowly turning onto the gravel road leading to the farmhouse. The vehicle rolled forward carefully, its tires crunching across the loose stones before stopping near the front gate.

Two people stepped out.

Lila recognized them vaguely from across the road but had never properly met them before. A middle-aged couple began walking toward the house with relaxed smiles, their pace unhurried as they looked over the farm with obvious curiosity.

Lila set her mug down on the porch railing and walked down the steps to greet them, one hand resting lightly on the small swell of her stomach out of habit.

“Morning,” the woman called cheerfully as they approached the gate. “You must be the new owners. I’m Doris Pike, and this is my husband Malcolm. We live just across the road.”

Malcolm gave a friendly nod, adjusting the brim of his hat as he glanced over the fields, and then at Lila, his eyes softening with recognition. “And congratulations are in order too, I see,” he added with a warm chuckle. “Looks like the farm’s already bringing good things.”

Lila smiled, touching her bump self-consciously. “Thank you. We’re still getting used to the idea ourselves.”

Doris looked around the property with open interest, her eyes moving from the barn to the vegetable rows and then toward the pasture where the cows grazed lazily in the distance.

“You’ve done a lot with the place already,” she said. “Last fellow who owned it couldn’t keep up with the work anymore. And now with a little ones on the way... you two must be naturals.”

“We’re still figuring everything out,” Lila admitted with a laugh. “But the land’s been good to us so far.”

“Well,” Malcolm said pleasantly, resting his arms on the fence rail, “that’s good to hear. This farm’s been part of the valley for a long time. It’s nice to see someone giving it proper attention again, and starting a family here too.”

The three of them stood together in the morning sunlight for a while longer, talking about the animals, the crops, and the quiet life in the valley. The visit felt neighborly and harmless, the kind of simple introduction that happened naturally in small rural towns.

For now, at least, the Pike family seemed perfectly friendly.

Late summer sunlight spread across the pasture as Lila walked slowly along the fence line with a metal feed bucket balanced against her hip. The grass had grown tall and bright under the long weeks of warm weather, and the fields beyond the farmhouse rippled softly in the breeze. From a distance the farm looked calm and healthy, crops thick in the rows and animals grazing lazily in the pastures.

Up close, the work felt heavier than it once had.

At eight months pregnant with twins, Lila carried her burden low and forward, her growing belly protruding prominently in front of her like a rounded shelf with the weight pressing constantly against her lower back and pelvis.

Her loose work dress, once comfortably oversized, now strained across her bumps curve, the fabric riding up slightly in front no matter how often she tugged it down. Her breasts had grown heavier and full, jumping up to a C-cup and adding to the forward pull.

Bending had become the hardest part of the day, her spine protested every time she tried to lean forward, her balance wavered dangerously, and the babies shifted and rolled inside her like restless weights, making her gasp softly at unexpected kicks or sudden drops. Simple chores now required careful planning: she kept one hand braced on her lower back or under her belly for support, and paused frequently to catch her breath or ease a cramp. Still, the animals needed feeding, and Lila had never been the type to sit idle while work waited.

Two horses stood near the far corner of the pasture, their ears flicking toward her as she approached. The chestnut mare lifted her head from the grass and walked slowly forward. Her belly hung enormously low and wide, distended far outward on both sides in a heavy, sagging oval that seemed almost too full to carry, the taut skin stretched glossy and thin, the foal’s

outline faintly visible beneath. The massive swell dropped so low it nearly brushed the tops of the tall grass with each careful step, swaying gently side to side as she moved.

Lila smiled when she saw her, resting one hand instinctively against the underside of her own stomach as she crossed the pasture.

“Looks like we’re both getting close,” she murmured quietly.

The mare snorted softly as if in agreement.

Lila reached the feeding trough and tipped the bucket forward. Grain rattled loudly against the wood as it poured out. The other horse, a tall gray gelding, wandered over from the fence and began eating immediately.

When the bucket was empty, Lila tried to bend down to set it on the ground.

That was when her balance shifted. The bucket slipped from her fingers before she could catch it, clanging loudly against the ground and sending the remaining handful of grain scattering across the dirt.

“Oh, come on,” she sighed.

The sudden movement had splashed dust and grain across the front of her apron as she brushed at it with one hand, before letting out a small frustrated breath and rested both hands on her hips.

“Hello again, Lila.”

The voice came from behind her, making her jump.

She turned carefully, one hand moving instinctively to support the underside of her heavy, sagging belly.

Wade stood a few yards away near the fence, leaning casually against one of the wooden posts as if he had been there for some time. His tall frame cast a long shadow across the grass while his eyes studied her with a quiet intensity that had begun to feel increasingly familiar.

Lila blinked in mild surprise.

“Wade,” she said, offering a polite smile. “I didn’t hear you walk up.”

“You were busy,” he replied.

His gaze drifted briefly over the pasture, then returned to her again, lingering noticeably on the swell of her pregnancy before lifting to her face.

It was not the first time he had appeared like this.

In fact, it was probably the tenth time that week.

Wade owned the neighboring farm just beyond the eastern fence line. Since the early days after Lila and Henry moved in, he had made a habit of wandering over to speak with her while Henry was away in town. Sometimes he claimed he was checking his own fences. Other times he asked casual questions about the crops or the animals. Lately, however, his visits have been happening more often.

Almost every day.

Lila brushed another patch of grain from her apron and straightened slowly.

"You startled me," she said lightly.

Wade stepped a little closer to the fence, his eyes drifting once more to the curve of her stomach before returning to her face.

"Just checking on the horses," he said. "Saw you out here from my field."

The chestnut mare shifted beside Lila, lowering her head to sniff at the spilled grain on the ground.

For a moment the pasture fell quiet except for the slow chewing of the horses and the soft rustling of grass in the breeze.

Lila bent carefully to retrieve the empty bucket, though the movement was awkward and slow.

Wade watched the entire effort without speaking.

"Looks like that one's getting close," he said finally, nodding toward the pregnant mare.

Lila followed his gaze and smiled again.

"Any day now, I think."

Wade's eyes moved back to her belly once more.

"You too," he said.

The words lingered slightly longer than necessary in the quiet pasture air.

Lila shifted her weight, adjusting the way she supported the underside of her belly with one arm while holding the empty bucket in the other hand. The babies moved slowly inside her as she straightened, a rolling pressure that made her pause for a moment until the sensation passed.

"They're both keeping me busy," she said with a small laugh, trying to keep the conversation light. "Henry says they must already be practicing for the farm work."

Wade's mouth curved into a faint smile, though his eyes stayed fixed on her stomach for a moment longer before he finally looked back up at her face.

"Twins," he said quietly. "That's a lot of work for one person to carry."

"I'm managing," Lila replied. "Henry helps when he's home."

"But he isn't home most days," Wade said.

The comment sounded casual, but the way he said it made Lila glance at him more carefully. She brushed a bit more grain off her apron and moved toward the trough, giving the horses another scoop from the bucket she had managed to refill.

"That's the arrangement," she said. "Someone has to keep the farm running and someone has to keep the equipment in town working."

Wade watched her move slowly around the trough, the slight waddle in her steps unavoidable now with the size of her belly. The pregnant mare beside her shifted and nudged gently against Lila's shoulder while she worked.

"You shouldn't be doing all that bending," he said.

"If I stopped every time something got uncomfortable," Lila replied, "nothing on this farm would get done."

For a while Wade stayed leaning against the fence while she finished feeding the horses. The quiet stretched between them again, broken only by the horses chewing and the distant rustle of wind across the grain fields.

Eventually Lila carried the bucket back toward the fence and rested it on the top rail so she could catch her breath for a moment.

"You come by a lot lately," she said, still smiling politely.

"Just checking in," Wade answered. "Neighborly thing to do."

She nodded slowly. "Right."

Before either of them spoke again, the distant sound of an engine drifted across the fields.

Lila turned toward the farmhouse driveway.

A familiar pickup truck rolled up the gravel road and slowed as it approached the house. Dust trailed behind the tires as the vehicle pulled into its usual spot near the barn.

Henry had come home from town.

Lila felt a quiet sense of relief she had not realized she was waiting for.

Henry stepped out of the truck, stretching his back after the long drive before spotting the two figures standing by the pasture fence. He lifted a hand in greeting as he walked toward them.

"Evening," he called out.

"Hey Henry," Wade replied easily, pushing himself upright from the fence post. "Just stopping by to check on the horses."

Henry glanced toward the chestnut mare's enormous belly and nodded. "She looks about ready," he said.

"That's what I was saying," Wade replied.

Henry stepped beside Lila and placed a gentle hand against the side of her stomach, his touch automatic and familiar now.

"And how's my hardworking farmer doing today?" he asked.

"Tired," Lila admitted, though she smiled up at him.

"You should have waited for me to get home before doing the heavy stuff," Henry said.

"It's just feeding horses," she replied.

Wade watched the exchange quietly for a moment before stepping back toward the fence line that separated the two properties.

"Well," he said, giving a casual wave. "I'll let you two get to your evening. See you around, Lila."

"Goodnight," she said politely.

Wade climbed over the fence and walked back toward his own fields, his tall figure gradually disappearing behind the tall grass and fading light.

Henry watched him go for a moment before turning back to Lila.

"He's been stopping by a lot lately," he said.

"Just neighborly," Lila replied, though her tone was softer than before.

Henry shrugged and picked up the empty bucket from the fence.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get you inside before you try to wrestle the cows too."

Together they walked slowly back toward the farmhouse as the sky shifted toward evening. The animals settled into their pens and the long shadows of the barn stretched across the yard.

Inside, the house felt warm and quiet after the open fields.

Lila washed her hands at the kitchen sink while Henry set his tools and work jacket on the chair near the door. The familiar rhythm of evening returned quickly as she moved around the kitchen preparing dinner.

Despite the weight of the day and the strain in her back, cooking still felt like one of the few calm parts of the routine.

She chopped vegetables from the garden and set a pan heating on the stove while Henry leaned against the counter watching her work.

"You really don't have to cook every night," he said.

"And let you starve after fixing tractors all day?" she replied with a smile.

Henry laughed quietly and stepped closer, resting a hand once again against the side of her belly where one of the babies shifted beneath his palm.

"They're active tonight," he said.

"They always are after I've been on my feet all day," Lila answered.

Soon the small kitchen filled with the smell of warm food. Outside, the last light faded over the fields while the farm settled into the calm quiet of another night.

Now that Lila had reached full term, Henry decided that tractors and repair orders in town could wait. He had taken time off from the shop and stayed home with her, not necessarily because he thought the farm work had become too heavy for her to manage alone, but because neither of them had the faintest idea what to expect when the babies finally arrived.

The change in routine was noticeable immediately.

Instead of leaving before sunrise, Henry now started his mornings beside Lila in the farmhouse kitchen while the kettle warmed on the stove. The early light slipped through the windows while the farm slowly woke outside. Chickens scratched near the barn, the cows shifted lazily in the pasture, and the horses stamped their hooves waiting for breakfast.

Henry handled most of the heavier chores now. He hauled feed sacks, checked fencing, and worked the fields while Lila moved more slowly through the house or supervised smaller tasks around the yard. Walking had become an effort for her. Her belly had grown big in the past few weeks, the twins sitting low and heavy so that every step carried a careful sway.

Henry watched her constantly now, half fascinated and half worried.

Sometimes he rested both hands against the curve of her stomach while they stood together in the kitchen, feeling the powerful movements shifting beneath the skin.

"Feels like they're wrestling in there," he said one morning.

Lila laughed softly and rubbed the side of her belly. "They probably are."

Despite the uncertainty ahead, the farmhouse felt warmer than it had since they moved in. Henry being home brought a sense of calm to the property. After years of trying for a child, the thought that two babies might arrive at any moment made everything feel strangely bright.

One afternoon Henry leaned against the porch railing and looked out across the fields where the sun hung low over the grain rows.

"We should celebrate a little," he said suddenly.

Lila looked up from the porch chair where she had been resting her feet. "Celebrate what?"

"Us," he replied. "The farm. The babies coming. Everything."

The idea quickly turned into a small gathering and that evening they baked two pies and prepared a simple supper in the farmhouse kitchen while the sun slowly dipped toward the horizon. Lila insisted on helping despite Henry's protests. She moved carefully between the counter and the stove while he handled most of the lifting and cooking.

Guests began arriving just before sunset.

Doris and Malcolm Pike came first, walking up the gravel path with a jar of preserved peaches wrapped in a cloth. Doris immediately wrapped Lila in a warm embrace and stepped back to admire the bum[she was sporting.

"My goodness," she said with a delighted laugh. "You must be ready any day now."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me," Lila replied with a smile.

Malcolm nodded thoughtfully. "Twins too. You two are jumping straight into the deep end."

A little while later Wade arrived from the neighboring farm. He stepped quietly through the gate and greeted Henry with a firm handshake before settling near the porch railing.

Soon after that a young man from town approached the house.

Caleb worked at the repair shop with Henry and had agreed to spend a few weeks helping on the farm while Lila rested before the birth. He was broad shouldered, friendly, and eager to learn, though still slightly unsure around the larger animals.

"Figured I should finally meet the boss," Caleb joked as he tipped his hat toward Lila.

Henry laughed and gestured toward her belly. "You mean the real boss."

The final guests arrived just as the sky turned a deep orange above the fields.

Anna and Samuel Holt stepped out of a small car near the gate. The quiet couple had become friends with Henry through the shop and had often spoken with Lila during her visits to town. They had been hoping for a family of their own for years and always seemed especially gentle whenever the subject of babies came up.

Soon the porch filled with easy conversation.

Plates of pie were passed around the table while the evening air cooled and the smell of the fields drifted across the yard. The cows settled in the pasture and the horses shifted lazily near the fence while the last light faded across the valley.

Henry moved easily between guests, pouring drinks and telling stories from the repair shop while Caleb asked Malcolm questions about the older farms in the valley. Doris sat beside Lila chatting happily while Anna listened with a soft hopeful smile whenever the conversation drifted toward babies.

Doris leaned closer to Lila, lowering her voice slightly while the others talked around the table.

"Twins must keep you busy already," she said kindly.

Lila rested a hand beneath the curve of her stomach and smiled. "They certainly make themselves known. Especially at night."

Anna looked over with quiet interest. "Do they move a lot?"

"More than I expected," Lila admitted. "Sometimes it feels like they're both trying to stretch at the same time."

Samuel chuckled softly. "Sounds like they already take after their father then."

Henry lifted his hands in mock surrender. "Hey now, I was a perfectly calm child."

Malcolm snorted. "Nobody who fixes tractors for a living was ever calm as a child."

Laughter moved around the table.

Caleb leaned forward with curiosity. "So what happens with the farm once the babies show up?"

Henry nodded toward him. "That's where this guy comes in. Caleb's going to help keep things running for a while."

"I just hope the cows cooperate," Caleb said. "They're bigger than anything I've handled before."

"They'll behave," Lila said reassuringly. "Most of the time they just want food."

From the railing Wade watched the conversation quietly. His eyes drifted once toward Lila again before he spoke.

"The mare in your pasture looked close earlier," he said. "She might foal soon."

Henry nodded. "Yeah, I noticed that too. Might be a busy week around here."

"Sounds like this farm is about to get very lively," Malcolm added.

As the evening deepened, the conversation slowed and the air cooled. One by one the guests began to stand and gather their things.

Doris hugged Lila again before leaving. "You take it easy now," she said warmly. "Send Henry over if you need anything."

"We will," Lila replied.

Malcolm tipped his hat before following his wife down the gravel path.

Caleb lingered a moment longer near the porch steps. "I'll be here early tomorrow," he said to Henry. "Figure I should learn where everything is before the babies arrive."

"Sounds good," Henry said.

The young man waved and headed toward his truck.

Anna and Samuel said their goodbyes next. Anna gave Lila's hand a gentle squeeze.

"We're very happy for you both," she said sincerely.

"Thank you," Lila replied softly.

Finally Wade stepped away from the porch railing.

"Good evening," he said, offering a small nod to both of them. "Looks like everything's going well here."

Henry shook his hand. "Thanks for coming by."

Wade gave Lila one last look before turning toward the gate and walking back across the darkening fields toward his own property.

Soon the farm grew quiet again.

The last car disappeared down the road and the porch settled into the soft sounds of crickets and distant cattle.

Henry stacked a few empty plates while Lila slowly pushed herself to her feet.

"That was nice," she said.

"Yeah," Henry agreed. "First real gathering we've had here."

He placed an arm carefully around her shoulders as they walked inside together. The farmhouse felt warm after the cool evening air, the kitchen still smelling faintly of pie and cooked vegetables.

Lila sank into one of the chairs while Henry cleared the last dishes from the table.

"Tired?" he asked.

"A little," she said, resting both hands beneath the heavy curve of her stomach.

Henry knelt beside her chair and rested his hands gently against her belly, feeling one of the babies shift beneath his palm.

"They're still moving," he said quietly.

"They always are," Lila replied with a tired smile.

Outside, the fields stretched quietly beneath the stars while the farmhouse lights glowed warmly in the darkness. And inside, the two of them sat together in the quiet kitchen, waiting for the new chapter of their lives to begin.

"You did good tonight," he said softly. "Hosting like that. Everyone loved seeing you."

She gave a small, tired laugh. "I mostly sat and let them talk at my belly."

He smiled, then reached down and took both her hands, helping her rise. The motion was slow; she had to brace one palm on the table edge and let him pull gently while she rocked forward to counterbalance the forward-heavy swell. Once upright, her belly pressed briefly against his abdomen, warm and firm between them.

Henry's hands slid to her hips, then around to the small of her back. He kissed her forehead, then her mouth, slow and unhurried. She tasted faintly of cinnamon from the pie and the sweet herbal tea Doris had pressed into her hand earlier.

"Come on," he murmured against her lips. "Let's get you comfortable."

They moved together toward the stairs. Climbing was an effort now, Henry stayed close behind, one hand on her lower back, the other ready in case she needed steadying.

In their bedroom the moonlight spilled through the half-open curtains, silvering the wooden floorboards. The bed was already turned down, pillows propped high so she could rest semi-upright when the pressure became too much to lie flat.

Lila paused at the foot of the bed, fingers going to the knot of her apron strings. She untied it slowly, letting the stained cotton fall to the floor. Then she reached for the hem of her loose dress, the only thing that still fit comfortably over her modest middle, and began to draw it upward.

The fabric caught briefly on the widest part of her belly before sliding free. She lifted her arms and let Henry help pull it over her head. When it dropped away, she stood bare except for simple cotton underwear, her pale skin luminous in the low light.

Her breasts were full and heavy, swollen beyond their usual size. Below them her belly, perfectly round, the skin so taut it shone faintly. Henry's breath caught. He stepped closer, eyes tracing every changed curve of her body with something close to awe.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, voice rough. "All of you."

He sank to his knees in front of her and pressed his lips to the tight skin just above her navel. One palm flattened against the side of her belly, feeling the slow, rolling shift of a baby beneath. The other hand slid up her thigh, gentle, asking.

Lila threaded her fingers into his hair, exhaling shakily. "Henry..."

He looked up at her, waiting.

She nodded once.

He rose again, guiding her backward until the backs of her knees met the mattress. She lowered herself carefully while he helped ease her legs apart just enough for comfort. Her belly rested heavily between them, a warm, living barrier that made every touch feel new and careful.

Henry shed his shirt quickly, then his jeans, leaving him bare too. He climbed onto the bed beside her, kissing her deeply while one hand stroked slow circles over the vast curve of her stomach. His palm followed the shape downward until his fingers slipped beneath the waistband of her underwear.

He drew them down her thighs with care, lifting each leg gently to free them. When she was completely bare, he settled between her parted thighs and lowered his mouth to her.

Lila gasped softly at the first warm slide of his tongue. Her hands gripped the sheets; her hips lifted instinctively, though the movement was small, limited by the sheer size and weight pinning her pelvis.

He rose up, kissing a path along the underside of her belly as he moved. When he settled above her, he aligned himself slowly and pushed inside inch by careful inch.

Chapter 2

Two months had passed since the night the twins were born.

In some ways it felt like the longest stretch of Lila and Henry's lives. In other ways it felt impossibly short, as if time itself had been moving at a strange uneven pace since the babies arrived.

The farm certainly seemed to think so.

Lila stood near the garden fence watching the two small figures wobble across the grass toward the chicken coop. The twins moved with the uncertain enthusiasm of toddlers, their short legs carrying them forward in quick determined steps while they pointed excitedly at every animal they saw.

They were only two months old.

Yet they looked closer to two years.

Henry leaned against the fence beside her, arms folded as he watched them chase a hen that darted out of their path.

"I still can't get used to it," he said quietly.

Lila let out a slow breath. "Neither can I."

When the babies had first been born everything seemed normal. Two small newborns, tired cries, sleepless nights, and the quiet amazement of finally holding the children they had waited so long to have.

Then the changes began.

Within days the babies were growing faster than either of them expected. Their limbs lengthened, their movements strengthened, and their eyes followed the world around them with an awareness that felt too sharp for infants only days old.

By the end of the first month they were sitting upright.

Now, only weeks later, they wandered across the yard like small toddlers discovering the world for the first time.

The farm animals seemed perfectly comfortable around them. The horses lowered their heads curiously when the children approached. The cows watched them with slow patient eyes. Even the chickens tolerated the small hands reaching toward them.

Henry rubbed the back of his neck as he watched one twin squat down to inspect a feather in the grass.

"You think it's the land?" he asked.

Lila looked out across the fields where the crops had grown thick and tall under the late summer sun.

"Everything else grows faster here," she said quietly. "The vegetables. The animals. Maybe the babies too."

For a moment neither of them spoke.

The strange truth had settled into their lives more quickly than they expected. The twins were healthy, energetic, and surprisingly independent. They slept through most nights and spent their days exploring the farmyard under Lila's watchful eye.

In many ways it meant life had returned to something close to normal.

Lila could work again.

She had already started easing back into the daily chores over the past few weeks. Feeding chickens, tending the garden beds, and checking the horses were manageable tasks as long as she paced herself. The twins often followed behind her, fascinated by every bucket, tool, and animal they encountered.

But that morning something felt different.

Lila rested a hand against the porch railing and closed her eyes briefly.

Henry noticed immediately.

"You alright?" he asked.

She nodded, though the motion came slowly. "Just a little dizzy."

The feeling had started earlier that morning while she was collecting eggs. A familiar wave of nausea had rolled through her stomach, the same kind of uneasy heaviness she remembered from months ago.

Henry studied her face carefully.

"You've been quiet all morning," he said.

Lila hesitated before answering.

"I felt like this before," she admitted.

Henry frowned slightly. "Before what?"

She glanced toward the twins playing in the yard, then back toward him.

"Before we found out about them."

The words hung between them.

Henry blinked.

"You don't mean..."

"I don't know," Lila said quickly. "It could be nothing. But the sickness feels exactly the same."

For a moment Henry looked out across the farmyard, then back toward the house.

"Maybe we should check," he said.

An hour later they stood together in the farmhouse bathroom while Lila stared down at the small plastic test resting on the edge of the sink.

The silence in the room felt heavier than it had the first time.

Henry stood beside her, arms crossed, trying to read the result before she spoke.

Lila slowly exhaled.

Then she turned the test toward him.

"It's positive," she said.

A few weeks later Henry took the day off work and drove Lila into town for an ultrasound.

The morning started earlier than usual. The twins were already awake when the sun rose, wandering around the yard in their small boots while Caleb kept an eye on them near the barn. Henry had packed the truck while Lila slowly made her way down the farmhouse steps, one careful hand resting beneath the growing curve of her stomach.

Even though the pregnancy test had only been positive a few weeks earlier, her body had changed quickly.

Her belly had already grown large enough that strangers in town would have guessed she was at least six months along. The loose dress she wore stretched tightly across the front and she moved with the same careful balance she remembered from the end of her previous pregnancy.

Henry opened the truck door and helped her climb inside.

"You comfortable?" he asked.

"As comfortable as I can be," Lila said, adjusting the seatbelt beneath her stomach.

The drive into town was quiet. The road wound through the same farmland Henry traveled every day for work, but that morning he drove more slowly than usual. Every now and then he glanced toward Lila as if making sure she was still comfortable.

"Feels strange doing this again so soon," he admitted.

Lila nodded. "I thought we would have a little more time before the next one."

Henry laughed softly. "Apparently the farm had other plans."

The clinic sat near the center of town beside the pharmacy and the small grocery store. It was a simple building, the kind that served the surrounding farms and villages. Henry parked the truck and helped Lila down before they walked slowly inside.

The waiting room smelled faintly of disinfectant and coffee. A few other patients sat quietly flipping through magazines while a nurse called names from the hallway.

When Lila's turn came, they were led into a small dim examination room where the ultrasound machine hummed softly beside the bed.

The technician greeted them warmly and helped Lila settle onto the examination table. Henry stood beside her, one hand resting gently on her shoulder while the technician prepared the equipment.

"First ultrasound for this pregnancy?" the technician asked.

"Yes," Lila said. "We just found out recently."

The technician nodded and spread a cool layer of gel across Lila's stomach before moving the scanner across the surface of her belly.

The screen flickered to life.

For a moment the technician simply studied the image.

Then her eyebrows lifted slightly.

Henry noticed the change immediately.

"Everything alright?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she said quickly. "Just give me a moment."

She adjusted the scanner and the shapes on the screen shifted.

Henry leaned forward to see better.

Lila watched the monitor as well, though she could not make much sense of the grainy shapes.

The technician took a slow breath before speaking.

"Well," she said carefully. "I can tell you one thing right away. You're not six months pregnant."

Henry blinked. "We're not?"

"No," she replied. "Based on the development here, you're closer to three months."

Lila turned her head toward Henry in confusion.

"Three months?" she said. "But then why am I already showing this much?"

The technician hesitated.

Then she turned the monitor slightly so they could both see more clearly.

"That part is easier to explain," she said.

She pointed at the screen.

"Because you're not carrying one baby."

Henry felt his stomach tighten.

"Twins again?" he asked.

The technician gave a small nervous smile.

"No," she said.

Her finger moved across the monitor, tracing several small shapes clustered together on the screen.

"Four."

Henry and Lila left the clinic in stunned silence. The late afternoon sun hung low over the town streets, casting long shadows across the sidewalk as they stepped outside. Henry held the door open for her and walked slowly beside her toward the truck, both of them still trying to process the word that had just changed everything.

As they reached the parking lot, a familiar voice called out across the pavement.

"Henry Carter, that you?"

They both turned.

Mayor Roland Keene was standing beside a dark sedan a few spaces away. The tall man wore his usual pressed shirt and tidy jacket despite the warm weather, looking every bit the public figure of the small farming town. His sharp eyes moved quickly between Henry and Lila before settling on the very obvious curve of her stomach.

"Mayor," Henry said politely, lifting a hand in greeting.

Keene walked closer with a practiced smile that never quite reached his eyes.

"Didn't expect to see you here today," the mayor said. "Everything alright?"

"Just a checkup," Henry replied.

Keene nodded slowly, his attention drifting again to Lila's belly. "Looks like things are moving along quickly for you two."

Lila forced a polite smile. "It certainly feels that way."

"First pregnancy was twins, wasn't it?" the mayor asked casually.

Henry nodded. "That's right."

"And now another on the way already," Keene said thoughtfully. "That farm of yours seems to be treating you very well."

There was something about the way he said it that made Henry shift slightly beside Lila.

"The land's been good," he said carefully.

Keene glanced toward the distant farmland beyond the edge of town as if he could see their property from there.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I've heard that."

For a moment the mayor simply studied them both.

Then his pleasant expression returned.

"Well," he said, clapping Henry lightly on the shoulder. "Take care of your family. The town likes to see young farms doing well."

With that he stepped back toward his car.

Henry watched him go before opening the truck door for Lila.

As she climbed inside she looked back once toward the mayor's sedan pulling out of the lot.

"That man notices everything," she said quietly.

Henry started the engine.

"Yeah," he replied. "And that worries me a little."

Chapter 3

When Lila truly reached six months of the new pregnancy, she was already larger than she had been the day the twins were born.

The difference was impossible to ignore. Her belly pushed far out in front of her now, round and heavy with the four babies growing inside her. The curve of it stretched tight and high across her middle, sitting both beneath her ribs and low across her hips at the same time, making every movement slow and deliberate.

The heat that day only made things worse.

Summer had settled heavily over the valley, the sun beating down across the fields and barns with almost no breeze to soften it. Even standing still in the yard made sweat gather at the back of Lila's neck.

Her usual loose farm dress had lasted less than an hour that morning before she gave up on it entirely. Instead she wore a short crop top and a pair of loose work shorts, the only clothes that felt even slightly bearable in the heat.

The thin cotton crop top was strained across her now E-cup breasts, the fabric stretched tight and riding high, the swollen, heavy curves spilling slightly over the hem and pressing firmly against the material.

Below the cropped edge, her belly was exposed completely to the sun, the pale, glossy dome protruded so prominently it cast its own soft shadow across her thighs even when she stood upright.

Even then she still felt overheated.

The twins, on the other hand, seemed perfectly happy.

They had grown even more since the first strange changes began. Though they were only a couple of months old in truth, they now looked closer to three or even four years old. Their legs had lengthened, their balance had improved, and they ran around the yard with the fearless energy of young children discovering the world.

At the moment they were waiting impatiently near the porch while Lila dragged a small plastic paddle pool across the grass.

“Almost ready,” she said, slightly out of breath.

She connected the garden hose and turned the water on, letting the cool stream splash loudly into the pool. The twins immediately crouched beside it, watching the water level slowly rise.

“Water!” one of them shouted excitedly.

“Yes, water,” Lila said with a tired smile.

She rested one hand beneath the heavy underside of her belly while the pool filled. The babies inside her shifted slowly, pressing outward against her skin as if reacting to the heat just as much as she was.

When the pool was full enough, she shut off the hose.

The twins needed no further invitation.

They splashed straight into the shallow water with delighted laughter, sending small waves sloshing over the plastic edges. Within seconds they were stomping happily through the pool while the sunlight reflected off the moving water.

Lila watched them for a moment, grateful for the distraction.

Then she turned back toward the garden rows.

The seed potatoes still needed planting.

Even with the heat she refused to leave the work unfinished.

She walked slowly back to the vegetable beds, picking up the basket of cut potatoes she had prepared earlier that morning. The soil had already been loosened, leaving small holes ready for planting.

Normally it was one of the easier tasks on the farm.

Today it felt like a challenge.

Lila placed one hand beneath her stomach and carefully bent her knees, trying to crouch without folding too tightly over the massive weight of her belly. The four babies shifted immediately, the movement inside her deep and heavy.

She dropped a potato piece into the hole. Then she tried to stand again.

Her stomach pressed firmly against her thighs while she straightened slowly, breathing through the pressure until she could stand upright again.

Across the yard the twins laughed loudly as one of them splashed water over the other's head.

She lowered another potato into the soil and brushed dirt over it with her hand.

The babies inside her kicked again, a firm rolling push beneath her ribs that made her pause. She rested both hands on the curve of her stomach and let out a slow breath, feeling the heat pressing down across the garden.

"Alright," she murmured softly, rubbing the side of her belly. "You win."

She stood there for a moment longer before walking slowly back toward the porch where the twins were splashing happily in the paddle pool.

The sun had grown even stronger while she worked. The taut skin across the top of her stomach was already warm from being exposed all morning. Lila grabbed the bottle of sunscreen she had left beside the porch steps and squeezed a generous amount into her palm.

"Hold still," she told herself with a quiet laugh.

She spread the lotion carefully across the broad, gleaming curve of her belly, starting at the high, rounded top where the skin felt hottest under the direct sun. Her palms glided in slow, wide circles with gentle pressure to ease the tightness. She worked lower still, lifting the heavy underside of her enormous belly with both hands so she could reach the tender, hidden curve beneath

Behind her the twins continued stomping through the shallow water, sending splashes across the grass.

Lila watched them for a moment, then glanced back toward the unfinished row of potatoes in the garden.

Only a few holes remained.

With a small determined sigh she walked back and finished the last bit of planting, lowering each potato carefully into the soil and brushing dirt over it with slower, more deliberate movements than before. By the time she reached the end of the row she was breathing harder than she expected, sweat collecting along her temples and across the top of her stomach.

“That’s enough for today,” she said quietly.

She carried the empty basket back toward the yard and set it beside the porch before turning toward the small plastic pool.

“Room for one more?” she asked.

The twins cheered immediately.

Lila lowered herself slowly to the ground and stepped into the shallow water. The coolness spread instantly across her legs and around the underside of her belly as she eased down until she was sitting comfortably in the middle of the pool.

The relief was immediate.

She leaned back slightly, letting the water cool her overheated skin while the twins splashed beside her. One of them pushed a floating toy toward her belly and laughed when it bumped against the round curve.

Lila reached for the wide straw hat resting on the porch step and placed it over her face to block the sun.

The warmth, the gentle sound of splashing water, and the constant weight of the babies inside her slowly pulled her into a quiet stillness.

By the time Henry’s truck rolled up the gravel driveway an hour later, the yard had grown peaceful.

He stepped out of the truck and paused when he saw the scene in front of him.

The twins were still happily playing in the pool, and in the center of it Lila reclined in the shallow water with her hat tilted down over her eyes. Her enormous, sunscreen-slicked belly rose above the waterline like a glistening island, the taut skin catching the afternoon light.

For a second Henry thought she might be asleep.

He walked over quietly, careful not to disturb the twins too much.

“You sunbathing now?” he asked gently.

The hat shifted as Lila lifted it slightly and looked up at him.

“Cooling off,” she replied with a tired smile. “It’s unbearable out here today.”

Henry laughed softly and crouched beside the pool, reaching out to rest a hand against the warm, lotion-smooth curve of her belly.

"Looks like the whole family beat the heat," he said.

The babies inside her shifted beneath his palm, answering the touch with a strong push.

"They're still awake," he said.

"They always are," Lila replied.

Nearing 9 months pregnant with the quads, Lila spent most days on the farm, partly because moving around had become slow and difficult, and partly because there was no real way to hide what the land was doing to her anymore. Her body had changed too quickly and too dramatically for anyone in the valley to think it was ordinary. Even if people did not know the details, they could see enough to start asking questions.

That morning, though, she needed supplies badly enough that staying home was no longer an option.

Henry was in the yard with the twins when she came down the porch steps, one careful hand braced beneath the heavy curve of her stomach. The children had grown again, old enough now in appearance to run the yard with the noisy confidence of four year olds, and they were circling Caleb near the chicken coop while he tried to mend a loose hinge without becoming their climbing frame.

Henry turned when he heard the screen door open.

For a second his eyes simply moved over her.

Lila had spent far too long standing in front of the wardrobe that morning. Most of her clothes no longer fit properly, and what did fit never seemed to fit well. In the end she had chosen one of the few dresses she could still get over her body, a soft, pale yellow summer dress. The thin fabric clung desperately to her frame, stretched so thin across her enormous belly that the seams creaked with every breath. Her breasts, swollen and heavy from the pregnancy, were held very high and round, pushed upward and outward by the tight bodice until they looked ready to burst free from the low neckline at any moment.

She tugged lightly at the skirt. "It was this or stay home in one of your shirts."

Henry walked toward her, his expression caught somewhere between concern and admiration. "You could still do that," he said. "No one in town's going to complain if I go for you."

"You already missed half a day last week getting feed and seed because I couldn't decide what we still needed," Lila replied. "I'll be fine. It's only the bus, the grocer, and the pharmacy."

He glanced down at her stomach. "You say that like you're not carrying half the farm in there."

Lila laughed softly and rested her free hand on the top of her belly when one of the babies shifted. "Only four of them."

Henry bent to kiss her cheek before helping her down the last step. "Be careful," he said. "And sit whenever you can."

"I plan to," she said.

The bus ride into town was more difficult than Lila had expected. As it pulled up at the stop near the end of their road, she was already warm and uncomfortable from standing in the sun. Henry helped her up the first step, then let her take the rest slowly on her own, one hand on the rail and one braced beneath the weight of her stomach.

Every seat seemed taken, the aisle crowded with knees, baskets, bags, and people turned half sideways to make room for one another. The air inside felt close and stale after the open heat outside. Lila paused just past the driver, drew a careful breath, and started down between the rows of seats.

The aisle looked much narrower than she remembered.

Lila had to turn her body sideways, leading with her enormous belly as she began the slow, awkward waddle down the packed aisle. The tight yellow summer dress clung mercilessly to every curve, stretched so thin across her gigantic stomach that the fabric looked ready to split. Her breasts, swollen and heavy, were held very high and round by the straining bodice, the low neckline barely containing them; with each careful step they jiggled and threatened to spill completely out of the seam.

She moved with slow, careful steps, trying not to bump anyone, but the size of her belly made that nearly impossible.

No one offered her a seat. A few passengers looked up, then looked away again. Others kept their eyes fixed on the windows or their laps as she edged past them.

The first accident happened three rows in.

The bus jolted over a rut in the road just as Lila was trying to squeeze past a man leaning slightly into the aisle. Her massive belly swung forward with the sudden movement and her breasts, swollen and round, bumped firmly into the side of his face. The soft, heavy weight pressed against his cheek for a split second before she could pull back.

"Sorry," she said at once, cheeks burning as she caught herself against a seat back.

The man rubbed his face and muttered something under his breath, shifting his shoulders in clear annoyance but not moving his legs.

Lila kept going, mortified.

A few steps later, she tried to turn sideways past another row. The side of her belly clipped the hand of a woman holding her phone low over her lap. The device flew from her fingers, hit the floor with a sharp clatter, and slid beneath the seat in front.

“Oh no, I’m so sorry,” Lila said, stopping as best she could in the cramped space.

The woman gave an irritated sigh and bent awkwardly to reach for it. “It’s fine,” she said, though she clearly didn’t mean it.

Lila murmured another apology and kept moving, more slowly and carefully than before.

The movement was awkward and exhausting, made worse by the bags tucked beneath seats and the constant sway of the bus. Every lurch in the road made the heavy weight she carried shift uncomfortably, sending ripples across the taut surface of her belly and making her breasts bounce and strain dangerously against the tight dress.

Finally she reached the back of the bus, flushed, short of breath, and desperate to sit. A narrow space remained on the very last bench seat, squeezed between a large man on one side and a woman with shopping bags on the other. Lila lowered herself carefully into the gap.

The moment she sat, she was squashed tightly between the two passengers. Her belly was forced forward, protruding past her knees. At the same time, her breasts were compressed against the large man on her right and the woman’s arm on her left, the tight dress doing nothing to stop the soft, overflowing flesh from spilling over the strained neckline.

Feeling the large man’s eyes repeatedly dropping to her deep cleavage, Lila tried to discreetly tug the neckline of her dress upward with one hand to hide some of the exposed skin. The attempt only made things worse, the tight fabric refused to budge more than an inch, and the motion caused her heavy breasts to wobble and jiggle noticeably, bouncing against the man’s side and drawing his gaze even more directly. She quickly dropped her hand, cheeks burning hotter than ever.

In a desperate attempt to stop the constant jiggling, Lila crossed her arms in front of her, one arm cradling the massive underside of her belly to keep it steady, the other arm pressed across her chest to hold her heavy breasts in place. It helped a little, but the tight squeeze between the two passengers still caused everything to shift and press against them with every bump in the road.

An older woman seated near the window gave her a brief look of sympathy, then glanced toward the packed seats around them. “Rough day to be traveling,” she said.

“I didn’t realize it would be this full,” Lila replied, breathing carefully.

“Nobody ever does,” the woman said.

Lila stepped down from the bus with a quiet sigh of relief, one hand gripping the rail until both feet were firmly on the ground. The ride had left her flushed, sore, and more tired than she wanted to admit. For a moment she just stood there on the edge of the street, letting the air move around her and waiting for the dizziness to settle. The town felt busy and noisy after the relative quiet of the farm, carts rolling past, voices carrying from the storefronts, and the afternoon heat pressing down over everything.

She adjusted her hold on her bag and turned toward the grocer.

"Mrs. Carter."

The voice stopped her before she had taken more than three steps.

Mayor Roland Keene stood just outside the shop entrance, hat in hand, as neatly put together as ever. He gave her a measured smile, the kind that always felt polite on the surface and calculating underneath.

"Mayor," Lila said.

"I was just about to say the same thing to you," he replied. "You look as though that bus ride was not especially kind."

Lila gave a faint smile. "It got me here."

Keene glanced toward the store door, then back to her. "Still, I doubt you ought to be carrying supplies on your own in your condition."

"The farm still needs things," she said. "Henry's home with the children."

That seemed to interest him. "Ah. Then you are on your own today."

The way he said it made her straighten a little.

"Only for shopping," she said.

He nodded, as though filing that away with other information he had already collected. "Of course. Still, perhaps I can spare you some trouble. I was on my way to the hotel dining room. Join me for dinner this evening, you and Henry both. Consider it a neighborly gesture."

Lila blinked. "Dinner?"

"A simple meal," he said smoothly. "I've been meaning to speak with you both properly. Your farm has become something of a topic in town."

There it was. Not curiosity about her. Not kindness. The farm.

Lila kept her expression calm. "I'd have to ask Henry."

"Naturally." The mayor stepped aside to let a customer pass, then looked back at her. "Tell him I'd be very glad to host you. There are matters worth discussing before rumors grow into misunderstandings."

That line stayed with her.

She gave a small nod. "I'll tell him."

"Good." He tipped his hat. "Don't stay on your feet too long, Mrs. Carter."

Then he moved on down the boardwalk, leaving Lila standing in front of the grocer with a tighter feeling in her chest than before. She watched him go for a second, then looked toward the store entrance again.

She had only come for flour, salt, and a few simple things.

"Lila?"

She turned at the sound of her name and found Anna Holt stepping toward her from the far side of the boardwalk, a woven basket hanging from one arm. Anna's expression brightened in recognition, then changed almost at once when she took in the full sight of Lila standing there in the afternoon heat.

"Oh my goodness," Anna said before she could stop herself.

Lila let out a tired little laugh. "That obvious, is it?"

Anna came closer, her eyes moving over Lila with open surprise and concern. "I knew you were expecting again, but I haven't seen you properly in a little while. You're enormous."

"I know," Lila said.

The answer came easily, almost too easily. She had heard some version of it so many times by now that there was no point pretending otherwise.

Anna shifted her basket to the other arm. "Are you alright? You look worn out."

"The bus was full, the aisle was too narrow, and I still need to shop," Lila replied. "So I've been better."

Anna's mouth tightened with sympathy. "Then you're not doing it alone. I'm headed in anyway. Let me help you."

Lila started to protest, but Anna had already reached for one of the bags.

"Anna."

"Don't be polite," Anna said gently. "Just let me carry something."

After a brief hesitation, Lila surrendered the heavier bag and followed her inside.

The supermarket felt cool after the brightness outside, and together they moved more slowly through the aisles.

"How far along are you now?" Anna asked quietly as they passed the flour and sugar.

"Almost nine months," Lila said.

Anna stopped short and turned toward her. "Nine?"

Lila nodded.

Anna's expression softened. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare."

"Everyone stares. At least you're kind about it."

They moved on to the next aisle. Anna picked out a sack of flour and tucked it into the basket before Lila could try to lift it herself.

"How are the twins?" Anna asked.

That, at least, gave Lila something easier to smile about. "Wild. Fast. Into everything. They look older every week."

Anna laughed softly. "That part I believe. Last time I saw them they were nearly up to my waist already."

"They're with Henry today. Him and Caleb together ought to keep the house standing."

"Ought to," Anna repeated with a grin.

For a little while they shopped in easier conversation. Soap, lamp oil, flour, salt. A bit of tea. More sunscreen. Anna reached for anything heavy and carried it without making a show of it, while Lila moved at the pace her body allowed, one hand often drifting down beneath the curve of her stomach when the weight pulled too sharply.

At one point they stopped near the produce bins so Lila could rest for a moment. Anna leaned her basket against the shelf and studied her with quiet concern.

"Does Henry know the mayor stopped you?" she asked.

Lila looked up. "I haven't even made it home yet."

Anna frowned. "He stopped you?"

"Outside," Lila said. "He invited us to dinner. Said he wants to talk about the farm."

Anna's face changed slightly at that, not fear exactly, but something close to unease.

"That man never says anything without meaning three things at once," she said.

Lila let out a breath through her nose. "That's exactly how it felt."

Chapter 4

A month after giving birth to the quadruplets, Lila already looked full term again.

At first neither she nor Henry could understand how that was possible. The quadruplets had only just been born, and already her body was changing at a pace that made no sense. The six children, twins and quads alike, were growing quickly too, filling the farmhouse and yard with noise as if the land was determined to push everything forward faster than it should.

When they finally learned she was carrying eight, the number was so absurd that for a moment it did not feel real.

At first they were frightened. Henry could barely speak after hearing it, and Lila sat in stunned silence trying to imagine what another pregnancy like this might do to her. After the twins and the quadruplets, both of them knew this was no longer normal. It was something the farm was doing, something neither of them understood.

But as the weeks passed, Lila handled the pregnancy better than either of them expected. She was careful, slower than before, and Henry watched her more closely than ever, but she remained steadier than the first fearful days had suggested upon hitting 4 months.

Each morning she still rose, still dressed, still tied back her hair, and still set about the business of keeping the house and farm in order. She did not do the hardest outdoor labor anymore, not with a stomach like that, but she still involved herself in nearly everything. She gathered eggs when she could manage the walk to the coop. She oversaw the washing. She folded linen, scrubbed tables, sorted stores, and kept an eye on the older children while directing the younger ones with a sharpness that pregnancy had not dulled in the slightest. Cooking and cleaning, especially, remained hers in her own mind. Even when Henry offered to take over more of it, Lila brushed him off and kept going.

The dress she wore now looked more like a tent than any proper garment. It was sewn wide and loose to spare her seams digging into her skin, but even that barely did the job. The fabric hung from her shoulders in a broad drape and only just managed to cover the immense forward swell of her stomach. When she stood side on, it looked as though the dress had been thrown over a piece of furniture rather than a person. The hem lifted strangely at the front because of the sheer size beneath it, and when the wind caught it in the yard Henry was seized more than once

by the fear that it might simply fail her altogether. Lila ignored the indignity of it. If that was what fit, then that was what she wore.

Inside the house, her size had already begun to interfere with simple things in ways that made her temper flash. One afternoon she was washing up after dinner, standing at the sink with her sleeves pushed high and soap cooling in the basin, when she found she could no longer lean in close enough to do the work properly. Her stomach met the edge of the counter first, huge and unyielding, keeping the rest of her at a frustrating distance. She tried to angle herself, tried turning sideways, even tried stretching her arms farther, but the awkward pull in her back and shoulders made the whole thing clumsy. Water splashed down the front of her dress. A plate nearly slipped from her hands. At last she stood there breathing hard and glaring at the sink as though it had personally insulted her.

Henry came in to find her still fixed in place, one wet hand braced on the counter and the other at the underside of her stomach.

"I cannot even reach my own sink," she said, furious in a low exhausted voice.

He crossed the room at once, but carefully, already learning that too much sympathy only made her bristle. "Leave it. I'll finish."

"I am not helpless."

"I didn't say you were."

Her jaw tightened, and for a moment he thought she might argue longer. Then she looked back at the basin, at the impossible angle of her own body against the counter, and let out a breath sharp with humiliation.

"I used to stand here for hours," she muttered.

Henry did not answer that. He only stepped in beside her, took the dishcloth from her hand, and touched her shoulder lightly as she moved away.

Another time it was a glass.

She was clearing the kitchen table after breakfast, moving slower than usual because the children kept circling her legs and the room felt too small around her. She turned at the counter without leaving herself enough space, and the side of her stomach knocked clean into a drinking glass set near the edge. It tipped at once, struck the floor, and shattered. The noise brought all the children to silence for one startled second.

Lila froze.

Not because of the glass itself, but because she already knew before she even looked down that she would not be able to reach it. The shards had scattered across the boards beneath her,

glinting in the morning light, and with her stomach thrust so far in front of her there was no chance of bending enough to gather them safely. She tried once anyway, lowering herself only a little before the strain stopped her. She stopped there, one hand on the counter, breathing through the effort and the anger rising behind it.

Anna was the first to move. "Mama?"

"Stay back," Lila said quickly, sharper than she meant to. Then, more quietly, "There's glass."

Henry came from outside at the sound of it and took in the scene all at once. The shattered cup. The children hovering. Lila trapped in place by her own size, red with frustration.

"I had it," she said before he could speak.

He looked at the floor, then at her, and answered with the patience of a man choosing every word carefully. "I know."

He fetched the broom without another word. Lila stood there while he swept the shards together, one hand under the weight of her stomach, the other pressed flat to the counter, her face set hard with the effort of swallowing the humiliation. It was only a dropped glass. Only a sink. Only a dress that barely covered her. And yet each small thing made the same point. At four months, her body was already growing beyond the shape of ordinary life.

Going to town was made even worse. She still went, because there were things the farm needed and because Lila refused to become a ghost inside her own house. But every trip drew attention. People stared openly when she stepped down from the cart. Shopkeepers who had known her for years faltered in the middle of greeting her. Women glanced, looked away, then looked back again. Men tried for politeness and failed. Children were the worst for honesty, whispering or pointing until their mothers pulled their hands down. The tent-like dress only made her more noticeable, broad and swaying around a stomach so immense it seemed to arrive before the rest of her.

Lila held herself as straight as she could through all of it. She bought flour, salt, lamp oil, cloth, whatever was needed, speaking in her usual voice as if nothing about her appearance invited comment. Yet by the time she returned home she was always more tired than the journey alone could explain. Attention wore on her. Pity wore on her. Curiosity worst of all.

Still, the next time the farm needed something, she went again.

Lila stood for a long moment in front of the full-length mirror in the bedroom, the door half-closed behind her. She had only come upstairs to change into something cleaner, but the moment her reflection caught her eye she froze, unable to look away.

She turned slowly to the side, one hand resting lightly on the doorframe for balance. The crop-top blouse she wore had ridden up again, exposing the full, impossible expanse of her bare belly.

Her 7-month pregnant bump was enormous. Pale, tight, and round, stretching so far forward that it seemed to begin just beneath her breasts and end well past where her hips used to be. The skin was stretched so taut it gleamed faintly in the soft afternoon light, faint silvery stretch marks fanning out like delicate lightning across the lower curves. Her navel had long since popped outward into a firm, protruding knob at the very peak of the swell.

She lifted both hands and placed them on either side of the massive dome, gently pressing inward. The surface was rock-hard beneath her palms, almost drum-tight, as she could feel the shifts of the babies deep inside.

“God... look at you,” she whispered to her reflection, voice soft and stunned. “How is this even possible?”

Her breasts, as big as watermelons, sat high and full above the curve, straining hard against the too-small crop top. They had grown even larger in the last few weeks, round and firm, and she knew Henry couldn't keep his eyes or his hands off them lately. He loved how full and sensitive they had become. With a small, curious breath she cupped them both in her hands, lifting their considerable weight.

Turning slightly, she ran one hand over the side of her stomach, tracing the curve where it rounded out toward her hip. Everything about her body had been rearranged. Her waist was gone. Her hips had widened dramatically, flaring out into generous, womanly curves that helped balance the immense load in front. Below them her thighs had grown thick and soft, plush and strong at the same time, constantly working to support the impossible forward pull of her belly. The combination made her feel both powerful and insanely heavy.

She looked less like Lila and more like a fertile vessel, a living container for something far larger than herself.

A quiet fear flickered through her. Seven months. Eight babies. And she still had weeks left. How much bigger could she possibly get? Would she even be able to stand by the end? The thought made her breath catch. She imagined trying to walk through the house like this in another month, not able to see her own feet, every step a careful waddle, her belly leading the way like a ship's prow.

Yet beneath the fear, something else stirred. A strange, almost dizzying awe. This ridiculous, overwhelming, aching body, was still hers. Still waking up every morning. Still finding ways to fold laundry, still directing dinner from a chair, still laughing when the children climbed onto the bed and rested their heads against the warm curve of her stomach.

She wasn't defeated. Exhausted, yes. Uncomfortable, constantly. But not defeated.

Walking had become slow work. She could still move through the house, but every journey was measured. She could barely walk more than a few steps without pausing to catch her breath or steady herself against a wall. Crossing the kitchen left her flushed and winded..

So she spent most days in bed now. The king-size bed, which once seemed generously large, now looked barely sufficient. When she lay on her side, her immense belly took up the majority of the mattress, rising like a pale, rounded hill that left only narrow strips of space on either side for Henry or the occasional child who climbed up to visit. Pillows were wedged behind her back, beneath her knees, and along both sides to keep her comfortable. She usually ended up half-propped on one side, one arm draped over the top of her belly while the rest of the bed belonged to its sheer size.

By day the bed became a kind of worktable. Baskets of clean washing were brought upstairs, and Lila folded what she could from there. Shirts, stockings, aprons, dishcloths, and the children's little garments all passed through her hands in neat stacks. She made orderly piles across the coverlet and beside her hips. When space ran short, she balanced more folded things directly on the broad, firm shelf of her belly, the stacks resting steadily on the taut curve while she continued working. It had become one of the strangest but most ordinary sights in the house: Lila reclining in bed, calmly folding laundry with neat piles of clothes balanced on top of her gigantic stomach.

She still insisted on cooking when she had the strength. Nearly every meal, and never without help now, but enough that no one could say she had surrendered the kitchen entirely. A chair was kept near the stove so she could sit between tasks. Ingredients were set out within easy reach before she came down. Anna or Henry fetched pots, lifted heavier things, and carried dishes where they needed to go, but Lila still directed the work with the confidence of habit.

One afternoon, while Henry was out beyond the lower paddock and the older children were occupied with chores, the bell at the front door rang.

Lila had been in the laundry room washing clothes when the bell rang. She was wearing only a tight white boob-tube crop top and a pair of short knit drawers. The stretchy tube top clung desperately to her massively swollen breasts, leaving plenty of soft underboob, deep cleavage, and the vast majority of her enormous, bare belly completely exposed to the air.

She pressed a hand to the small of her back and moved as quickly as she could manage through the house, irritated already by how long even a simple answer at the door now took her. By the time she reached the front hall she was flushed from the effort and suddenly very aware of how exposed she must look.

When she opened the door, it was Wade.

For a moment neither of them spoke. Lila felt his eyes drop immediately to her exposed belly, then linger on the generous underboob and cleavage spilling over the tight boob tube.

“Henry’s out,” she said at once, crossing one arm over her chest.

Wade recovered with a slow smile. “I know. I saw him down by the lower paddock earlier.” He let his gaze drift downward again, openly appreciative. “Damn... you’re really something right now. That belly is huge, and those t— Henry’s a lucky man, can’t blame him for staring.”

Lila’s cheeks burned. She felt threatened by the heat in his voice. “What do you want, Wade?”

He raised his hands in a placating gesture. “I came to see how you were getting on. And to offer some help around the farm if you need it. Henry can’t do everything himself, and with you like this...” His eyes flicked to her belly again. “I thought maybe I could lend a hand. Fix things, carry heavy loads, whatever you need.”

Lila hesitated, still wary, but too tired and too curious about his real intentions to send him away immediately. After a long pause, she reluctantly stepped back just enough to let him in. “Fine. Come in for a minute. But make it quick.”

Wade entered with a care that seemed almost studied. Lila shut the door and turned slowly to face him, one hand resting protectively on the side of her huge bare belly.

“I mean it,” he said, voice lower now. “Anything you need. Just say the word.” He paused, eyes drifting over her exposed stomach once more. “And... if it’s not too forward... I’ve been wondering what it feels like. Would you mind if I felt your belly? Just for a second? It looks so full.”

Lila’s heart beat faster. She knew she should refuse, but after a moment’s hesitation she gave a small, reluctant nod. “Only for a second.”

Wade stepped closer and gently placed both palms on the sides of her enormous bare belly. His hands were warm. He rubbed slow, careful circles over the taut skin, thumbs brushing lightly near her popped navel. “God... it’s so hard. So warm. You’re carrying so much in there. Feels like it could burst any day.”

Lila stayed still, breathing shallowly, allowing the touch but growing increasingly uncomfortable as his hands lingered.

Then his hands began to drift. One slid higher, brushing the underside of her heavy breasts where they spilled over the edge of the boob tube. The other moved lower, fingertips tracing toward the waistband of her short drawers and the sensitive skin just above her hips.

That was too far.

“Enough,” Lila said sharply, stepping back as much as her belly would allow. Her voice turned cold and shaky. “Take your hands off me. Now.”

Wade froze, eyes widening.

“Get out,” she ordered, pointing toward the door. She could feel tears welling in her eyes “Right now, Wade. Don’t make me say it twice.”

He pulled his hands away quickly, looking startled and a little guilty. “Lila, I didn’t mean-”

“Out.”

He backed toward the door, hat still in his hands, muttering another weak apology before slipping outside. Lila shut the door firmly behind him and leaned against it, heart hammering, one hand protectively over her belly.

She stayed there for a long minute, breathing through the mix of anger, embarrassment, and lingering unease.

When Henry returned later, she told him only that Wade had stopped by. She left out the rest.

Another afternoon she stood carefully at the counter in her too-small crop top, belly fully exposed, slowly stirring a large pot of stew. Every movement made her heavy belly sway gently, the tight blouse riding higher with each shift of her arms. She seasoned the soup with the same steady hand as ever, occasionally resting one palm on the underside of her stomach as if to steady both herself and the babies inside.

While waiting for water to boil and with no one else in the room but the children at the far table, she looked down at herself, then at the stack of lightweight plastic cups drying beside the basin, and a rare streak of mischief passed across her face.

“What are you doing?” Anna asked, turning from the pantry.

“An experiment,” Lila said.

She set one empty cup on the firm shelf made by the front of her exposed belly, just below where the crop top ended. Then another atop it. Then another. By the time Anna reached her, Lila was trying not to laugh while balancing four plastic cups in a surprisingly steady tower on the rounded curve of her stomach.

“Mama can carry them without her hands!” one of the twins whispered, amazed.

“Only for a moment,” Lila said, smiling despite herself.

The fourth cup tipped and sent the whole little tower sliding harmlessly into Anna’s arms.

“That is enough of that,” Anna said, though she was laughing too.

Lila shook her head, still amused, and reached for the spoon again. “Then we may conclude the shelf is not fit for storage.”

Small moments like that helped. They did not lessen the strain of the days, but they gave the household something besides worry to hold onto.

Even so, most of her time was spent back in bed. When she grew too tired to stay downstairs, Henry would help her climb the stairs again. Once settled, she would lie back with a long sigh, her enormous belly spreading across the majority of the mattress while she rested one hand on its warm, taut surface. The children sometimes climbed up carefully to sit beside the great curve, resting their heads against it or telling her about their day while she listened with tired but affectionate eyes.

Still, by seven months, everyone could see how much harder ordinary life had become. Lila's world had narrowed to a few rooms, a careful path between bed and kitchen, and the steady work of enduring what her body demanded of her. The farm went on outside the windows, children still racing through the yard, hens scratching in the dust, carts coming and going, but inside the house time had begun to move to the slower rhythm of her steps, her rests, and the long patient effort of getting through each day.

Nearly full term and at nine months, Lila's world had narrowed almost entirely to the bed. Her whole life had contracted to the dimensions of the upstairs room and, more narrowly still, to the king sized bed that barely held her.

Pain was present when she woke, present when she tried to rest, present in every shift of muscle and every attempt to move. Even stillness did not spare her. If she remained too long in one position, the strain in her back and hips deepened until it became unbearable. If she tried to adjust herself, she quickly discovered how little of that work she could do alone.

She could not roll over without help. That humiliating fact governed more of the household than Lila liked to admit. When one side of her body began to ache too sharply, or when the pressure in her back built to the point that she could no longer bear it, she had to call for someone. Most often it was Henry. Sometimes Anna.

Once, when Henry was in the yard and Anna had gone to the cellar, one of the twins had to be sent running for them because Lila had tried to shift herself, unable from the great weight of her womb. Turning her had become a practiced task. Pillows had to be moved first. Blankets folded away. Then careful hands at her shoulder, her hip, her belly, the edge of the mattress, and patient instruction spoken in calm voices while they worked together to ease her onto her other side. Every time it left her breathless. Every time it reminded her how far she had fallen from the woman who once rose before dawn and crossed the whole farm without a thought.

Standing was scarcely better. With help, she could sometimes be brought upright, but only just. Henry had to brace her firmly and guide her weight with slow care, and even when she made it to her feet she could barely support herself there. Her legs trembled. Her breath shortened. Her hands clutched for whatever was nearest, bedpost, chair back, Henry's sleeve, because the effort of simply remaining upright seemed to drain her all at once. There was no question now of

walking any real distance or of doing anything useful while standing. Those moments on her feet were not life returning. They were proof only of how hard her body was being made to work for the smallest act.

The bed had become a place of arrangement rather than rest, rarely comfortable. Her body seemed always too warm, too tight with strain, too burdened to settle into ease.

Her gigantic belly was a true monstrosity now, a heavy, boulder-like dome so enormous it dominated the entire king-sized mattress, rising high and round like a taut, red-hued mountain. Deep, angry stretch marks crisscrossed the shiny, overstretched skin in dark lightning patterns. The surface was drum-tight, burning hot to the touch, and throbbed with every heartbeat.

Above it sat her swollen and full tits. So round and so heavy like bowling balls, they rested on the upper curve of her belly, nipples thick and sensitive.

Mornings were often the most bitter part of the day. When Anna or Henry came upstairs, the day began with the same humiliating necessities. Water to drink. Pillows adjusted. A cloth to her face and neck. Questions about whether she could manage to sit more upright. Whether she wanted broth. Whether she needed turning already. Some mornings she answered sharply and hated herself for it at once. Other mornings she had no sharpness left and only lay there with her eyes closed while they tended to her.

Helpless was what she had become in so many ways.

One night, after a day worse than most, he found her tense and wakeful long after the candle should have been put out. Her face looked drawn with fatigue. The room was warm. Without a word Henry fetched the small bottle of sweet almond oil they kept by the bed. He warmed some between his palms, then gently pulled the sheet down, fully exposing her gigantic belly dome.

“Let me take care of you,” he murmured, voice low and rough with desire.

He started at the very top of her belly, just beneath her swollen breasts, spreading the warm oil in slow, reverent circles. His hands glided over the hot, taut, skin, tracing every deep stretch mark with his thumbs as if worshipping them. The huge mound was so tight and hard it barely yielded under his palms, yet he massaged deeply, working the oil into every inch of the overstretched surface. Lila let out a shaky moan as the warmth eased some of the constant ache.

Henry's touch grew slower, more sensual. Pouring more oil on the topside of her womb, he rubbed upward, his palms sliding over the curve until they brushed the undersides of her massive tits. He cupped the heavy underside of one of her breasts with both hands, lifting its immense weight slightly to relieve the pull on her back, then let it settle again while his fingers stroked the sensitive skin beneath.

Lila's breath hitched, a soft whimper escaping her lips. "Henry..."

He leaned down and kissed the tight, oily skin of her belly, then higher, pressing open-mouthed kisses along the deep stretch marks while his hands continued their slow, slick massage. One palm stayed on her belly, rubbing in wide, possessive circles; the other kneaded her heavy breast, squeezing the soft, overflowing flesh with clear hunger.

"You're so fucking beautiful like this," he whispered against her skin. "So big... so tight... I can't stop touching you."

For a long while he simply worshiped her, oil-slick hands gliding over her shiny belly and her eye catching tits, rubbing, stroking, lifting, soothing. The pain eased under his touch, replaced by slow-building heat. Lila's fingers tangled weakly in his hair as she arched as much as her immense belly would allow, lost in the rare pleasure of being touched so intimately while feeling so helplessly huge.

Eventually the oil and his steady hands worked their magic. Some of the rigid tension left her body. Her breathing deepened. Henry stayed curled behind her as best he could, one arm draped over the vast, glistening curve of her belly, his palm still gently rubbing slow circles even after she finally drifted into exhausted sleep.

Henry waited until her breathing had become slow and even. Carefully, so as not to wake her, he eased himself out from behind her and stood beside the bed. The sight that greeted him was breathtaking. Lila now lay on her side, completely exposed, her colossal belly so enormous it actually hung slightly off the edge of the bed, the heavy underside curving downward under its own immense weight. Her engorged breasts pushed up to her neck, rising and falling with each breath. She looked like a fertility goddess carved from warm, living flesh. Round, helpless, overwhelming, and beautiful.

He couldn't resist one last touch. Leaning over her, Henry ran both hands slowly over the vast, oily curve of her belly, feeling its heat and unbelievable tautness. He cupped as much of the hanging underside as he could reach, gently lifting and stroking the heavy globe before letting it settle again. Then he slid his palms up to her massive tits, comparing them to his (much smaller) head, and giving them a slow, appreciative squeeze.

With a soft sigh he climbed back onto the bed. He tried to spoon her from behind, but her gigantic belly made it nearly impossible, he could barely reach more than half of it with his arm. He settled for pressing himself against her back and side as closely as the huge dome would allow, one arm draped over the top of her belly while the other rested on her swollen breast. Even then, most of her enormous belly remained untouched, curving away from him like a warm, living wall.

Henry kissed the back of her neck and whispered against her skin, "I've got you. Rest now."

So nine months settled over the house as a season of endurance. Life had not stopped, but it had bent itself around Lila's room, her bed, her pain, and the constant work of carrying her through each day.

The next morning marked the start of a change for Lila. Anna came up carrying a necklace wrapped in a scrap of cloth.

"Doris brought this over," she said as she crossed to the bedside. "She says it belongs to you."

Lila, who had spent most of the morning drifting in and out of a shallow miserable half rest, turned her head only slightly. Even that small motion seemed to cost her. Her whole body ached with the same heavy persistence as the day before. The bed was too warm. The pillows were wrong again. She had already needed help shifting twice since dawn, and the hours ahead felt endless.

"My necklace?" she said faintly.

Anna unwrapped it and held it up.

It was old, darker in color than most jewelry Lila owned, with a pendant that looked heavier than something so delicate ought to be. Lila frowned at it without recognition. She could not remember it at all. But pain had a way of scattering memory and patience alike, and she was too tired to puzzle over one more strange little thing.

"That's what she said," Anna answered. "Perhaps you forgot it years ago."

"Perhaps."

Lila let the matter go almost at once. She was distracted by the now familiar effort of simply existing within her own body. Anna, thinking nothing of it beyond a misplaced trinket finally returned, fastened the necklace gently around her throat.

"There," she said. "No sense losing it again."

Lila gave the pendant one absent touch, then let her hand fall back to the coverlet.

The day passed much as the others had.

She remained in bed. She endured. Henry and Anna helped turn her when the strain became too much on one side, and each time the work of moving her left her pale and silent for several minutes afterward. Meals came and went in small portions. The children were sent up in turns to say hello, then sent away again before their noise became too much. Afternoon thickened into evening. Evening gave way to another long difficult night.

If anything seemed different, Lila was too distracted to name it.

She did not notice whether she slept a little more deeply after midnight. She did not notice whether waking required a fraction less effort. She did not notice the necklace resting cool against her skin while the house darkened around her and Henry, exhausted, finally drifted into sleep in the narrow portion of the bed still left to him.

It was Henry who noticed first. He woke before sunrise to an unfamiliar absence.

For one panicked instant he thought the bed beside him was empty in the way that meant disaster. He came fully awake at once, heart thudding, and pushed himself upright too quickly. The room was dim with first light. Pillows were shifted. Blankets disturbed. But Lila was not there.

Then he heard movement below. He was halfway down the stairs before he had properly thought what he was doing. Lila was standing at the stove, and for a moment Henry could do nothing but stare.

She was still unmistakably burdened by her size, still moving with care and slowness, still carrying herself like someone conscious of weight and limitation with every step. But she was on her feet. More than that, she was working. Bread had already been set out. A pan warmed on the stove.

She wore a long skirt that still fit around her widened hips, but her top was a loose old shirt that used to fit her entire torso comfortably. Now it only just covered her massive tits, the fabric stretched tight and riding high, leaving the entire gleaming bare expanse of her belly completely exposed and hanging heavily over the waistband of her skirt.

Her hand rested briefly on the table for balance before she crossed the short distance to the hearth again with careful determination. She turned at the sound of him and looked almost guilty to have been caught.

"I meant to let you sleep," she said.

Henry looked at her as though he were not certain she was real. "What are you doing?"

"Breakfast, plainly." There was a little of her old impatience in the answer, though the effort of speaking and moving at once still showed in her breathing. "The children will be up soon."

He crossed to her at once, not trusting what he was seeing. "You should not be standing."

"I can stand."

He stopped close enough now to see more than the shock of movement. Her skin had changed. The angry overstrained look that had troubled him for weeks was gone. The marks and irritation that had made her seem worn raw by the effort of carrying so much had faded from sight. Her whole body looked less inflamed, less embattled, though no less heavily burdened. She still

moved slowly. She still leaned on the table now and then for support. But the visible strain that had clung to her the night before had eased so suddenly it made his stomach turn cold.

Henry's eyes dropped, almost without thinking, to the necklace at her throat.

Lila followed his glance. "Anna brought it yesterday. Doris said it was mine."

"Yours?"

"So she claims." Lila gave a small shrug, then winced because even that was not entirely easy. "I don't remember it."

Henry said nothing for a moment. He only looked at the pendant, then back at Lila, then at the breakfast half assembled around her as though the whole room had become strange while he slept.

"How long have you been up?" he asked.

"Only a little while."

"And you came down alone?"

She nodded once. "Slowly." A faint, almost disbelieving note entered her own voice then. "But yes."

He should have told her to sit immediately. He should have sent her back upstairs and demanded an explanation from anyone who might provide one. Instead he stood there caught between relief and unease so sharp they were nearly the same feeling.

Lila, for her part, seemed less frightened than he was. Tired still, certainly. Overencumbered in every obvious way. But alive with a steadier strength than she had possessed in weeks. She shifted a bowl nearer, reached for the spoon, and though the movement remained slow, it was no longer the movement of a woman who could barely bear her own weight.

"I am not cured of anything," she said, as though reading his face. "I am only better this morning."

Henry let out a breath he had not realized he was holding. "That would be enough to astonish any man."

A tiny flicker of dry humor touched her mouth. "Then be astonished and hand me the salt."

At last, when she paused with one hand braced at the table and let out a careful breath, he stepped in beside her.

"That is enough for a moment," he said quietly.

She looked as though she might argue, then instead let the spoon rest against the rim of the pan. Henry took it from her hand and set it aside. Very gently, as though afraid sudden movement might break whatever strange mercy had found them, he moved to stand directly in front of her.

Because of the sheer size of her gigantic belly, he couldn't reach her shoulders or arms. Instead, he placed both hands on the sides of the massive abdomen between them, and slowly pulled her toward him by her belly. The enormous swell pressed heavily against his torso as he drew her in, the taut, gleaming skin molding warmly into his body. He had to widen his stance to accommodate the overhanging weight, feeling the full, throbbing heat of her pregnancy globe compress between them.

Lila leaned into the embrace at once, slowly because there was no other way as Henry's arms wrapped as far around the sides of her belly as they could reach, cradling the immense weight.

"God, Lila..." he whispered hoarsely, voice thick with awe and desire. His palms rubbed slow, possessive circles over the vast expanse of her bare belly, feeling its impossible tightness and radiant heat.

Lila had not realized until that moment how badly she wanted to be held while standing on her own feet. She closed her eyes, letting the warmth of him and the solid press of her own gigantic belly between them ground her.

After a long moment, Henry shifted to stand beside her, careful not to jostle her fertile form. He slid one arm around her back as far as it would go and cupped the other hand gently over the top of her belly. Lila turned her face toward him. Their eyes met and then he kissed her.

The kiss was passionate, slow, and hungry. Henry's mouth moved against hers with quiet intensity while both of them rested their hands on the top of her bare belly, his palm spread wide with hers resting beside it. They could feel the subtle shifts and rolls of the babies beneath their joined hands as they kissed, the enormous red-hued dome serving as both barrier and intimate connection between them.

When they finally parted, both were breathing harder. Lila's cheeks were flushed, and Henry's forehead rested lightly against hers.

"I thought I'd lost you to that room," Henry said at last, very low.

Lila's fingers tightened against the top of her own belly. "Not so easily."

He gave a breath that was almost a laugh and not at all a laugh. "I do not know what this is."

"Nor do I."

"But I am grateful for it."

Then the floorboards overhead creaked. The children began to descend, their footsteps loud on the stairs.

Once the first shock wore off, the younger ones crowded around Lila with wide-eyed fascination. They pressed small hands against her gleaming bare belly, giggling and laughing at how funny and warm it felt “It’s like a big drum!” one exclaimed, while another poked gently and squealed when the surface rippled under their fingers. Lila smiled tiredly and let them explore, guiding their hands to where the babies were most active.

Soon after, Lila was back outside for the first time in weeks.

She moved in slow, careful waddles across the yard, one hand always braced beneath the immense underside of her bare belly. No shirt or dress in the house could cover it for months.

Still wildly overencumbered, she could not bend at the waist at all. When she reached the chicken coop she had to spread her legs wide, lower herself in a cautious squat, and reach blindly beneath the hens with one arm while the other cradled the heavy overhang of her belly. The eggs she collected she placed carefully into a shallow basket balanced on the broad shelf of her stomach.

From there she waddled to the small orchard at the edge of the yard. Standing on tiptoe was impossible, so she used a long stick to knock the lower apples free, catching them against her bare belly or letting them roll into the basket. Each movement was slow as her boulder-like belly swayed heavily with every step as the eight babies inside rolled and pressed outward.

Henry watched her from the porch for a long while, a quiet smile on his face. When she finally turned back toward the house he met her halfway, taking the basket from her without a word.

“You’re really doing it,” he said softly, eyes tracing the impossible curve of her exposed belly.

“I am,” Lila replied, breathing a little harder than she would have liked. “Slowly. But I’m doing it.”

“Let’s go into town today,” he said. “ You’ve earned a day away from these four walls.”

Lila’s face softened. “You think I can manage the trip?”

“You managed eggs and apples this morning. I think you can manage a ride into town.” He smiled.

She laughed quietly, one hand resting atop her belly where his had been. “Then we’d better figure out what I’m wearing. Nothing covers this.”

In the end they gave up on modesty. Lila wore the longest skirt she owned and the cropped shirt that now functioned more like a bandeau, stretched tight across her enormous breasts, one again with plenty of cleavage and underboob showing. There was simply no way around it.

They took the old van. The front seats were impossible for her now, so Henry cleared the open space in the back. Lila lowered herself carefully onto a pile of blankets and pillows, her massive belly spreading out in front of her like a living hill.

The main street was busy with midday foot traffic. When they parked and Lila eased herself out of the back, several heads turned. She moved in her slow, wide waddle, one hand always supporting the underside of her belly, the other resting on top. People stared openly at the sheer size of her but Lila kept her chin up and walked on.

First they stopped at the bakery. The smell of fresh bread and cinnamon rolls drifted out onto the street. Henry helped Lila through the doorway sideways, her belly brushing the frame. Next they tried the florist. Lila wanted to see the late-summer flowers. But when she reached the shop door she stopped. Her wide, heavy form simply would not fit. The gigantic overhanging belly and the breadth of her hips made passage impossible no matter how she turned. She stood there for a moment, flushed with a mix of amusement and embarrassment, while Henry and the shopkeeper tried to rearrange displays inside to give her more room.

In the end she waited on the sidewalk, gently rubbing slow circles over the sides of her belly, while Henry brought out armfuls of bright daisies for her to smell. After the florist they strolled slowly through the small town park. Lila moved at her own careful pace, waddling along the shaded path with Henry beside her. She could not sit on the normal benches, her belly was simply too large, so Henry spread a blanket on the grass beneath a big oak tree. Lila lowered herself down with his help, ending up half-reclining against the tree trunk with her belly resting heavily in front of her like a living altar.

Lila tilted her head back against the trunk and closed her eyes for a moment. "I'd forgotten how good it feels just to be out."

Henry looked at her, at the fatigue still written clearly across her face despite the small triumph of the day. "You did well."

"That sounds suspiciously like something you say to a horse after a difficult pull."

"It was meant kindly."

"I know."

He smiled a little at that, then let the quiet return. The wind moved gently through the branches overhead. Somewhere nearby a dog barked twice and was hushed. After a while Henry's hand shifted slightly, tracing a slow absent circle where it rested.

"You're nearly there now," he said softly.

Lila opened her eyes and glanced down at herself, then back at him. "I know. Though some mornings it feels less like being nearly there and more like I've already been this size for half my life."

Henry huffed a faint laugh. "With eight."

"With eight," she agreed.

He was quiet for a beat, then said, "And every time it has doubled."

That made her turn her head fully toward him.

Henry went on more cautiously now, as though he was not certain whether he meant to say it aloud after all. "Two became four. Four became eight."

Lila looked out across the grass for a moment. "And if there were a next time..."

"Sixteen," Henry said.

The word sat between them for a moment, absurd enough that it almost did not sound real.

Lila let out a slow breath. "Sixteen."

Henry's face had gone thoughtful in that worried way she knew well. "I should not even joke about it. Not with you sitting here like this."

"No," Lila said, though there was the edge of a smile at her mouth. "But you are thinking it anyway."

"I am." He looked at her then, plainly concerned. "And I am thinking whether you would be all right. Whether any woman could be."

That softened her. She turned her hand beneath his so their fingers threaded together more fully.

"I don't know," she said honestly. "I am not entirely certain I am all right now."

Henry's thumb brushed against her knuckles. "That is not what I meant."

"I know." She looked down again at the impossible burden of her present state, then gave a small crooked smile. "If there were sixteen, I think I should have to be rolled about the farm like a wheelbarrow."

That caught him off guard badly enough that he laughed.

"A wheelbarrow?"

"Well, what else? You'd need a team of men and a pair of sturdy boards just to turn me toward the sun."

Henry shook his head, smiling despite himself now. "No. At sixteen you'd be larger than the front room."

“Larger than the house, perhaps.”

“That too.”

She adjusted herself slightly against the tree and lifted her brows at him. “You’d have to build a second house around me and just leave me in the middle of it.”

Henry looked at her, really looked, and let the conversation follow her into foolishness rather than fear. “We’d put windows in so you could still direct everyone.”

“Of course I would direct everyone. What else should I do while being larger than the house?”

He smiled more fully now. “Complain, probably.”

“I would not complain.”

“You are complaining already.”

“I am making practical observations.”

That won another laugh from him, easier this time. Lila smiled too, and some of the heaviness that had settled over the earlier part of the conversation lifted away.

“Sixteen,” she said again, but now the number sounded ridiculous rather than dreadful. “No dresses at all then. Not even shawls. I’d have to go about draped in curtains.”

Henry pretended to consider it seriously. “We could use the green ones from the parlor.”

“They’d never survive the strain.”

“No,” he admitted. “You would tear through them and then where would we be?”

“Bankrupt in cloth and lumber.”

“And trying to explain to the neighbors why my wife has outgrown the property.”

At that Lila laughed properly, the sound surprised out of her before she could stop it. She pressed a hand to herself at once afterward, breathless from the effort, but still smiling.

Henry’s expression softened again as he looked at her. “There you are.”

“Where?”

“That laugh. I’ve missed it.”

The warmth in his voice gentled her at once. She leaned slightly against his shoulder, careful and tired but content enough for the moment.

“Well,” she said, “if I ever do become bigger than the house, I expect you to tell me kindly.”

“I’ll tell you after I’ve started building the extension.”

“That is acceptable.”

They sat together a while longer after that, their hands still joined, the conversation having turned from worry to silliness and settled somewhere gentler in between. Around them the park went on in its ordinary afternoon peace, and for the moment that was enough.

Henry’s sleep that night, had him slip into a dream so vivid it felt like a memory.

In the dream Lila stood in the middle of the sunlit kitchen, but she was no longer the woman who had walked through the park that afternoon. She was far beyond that.

She was pregnant with sixteen babies. The amulet still hung around her throat, the dark pendant resting in the deep valley between her colossal tits.

Everything part of her body had doubled, magnified, pushed to an insane extreme.

Her belly was a monstrous, overhanging planet of flesh. The pale dome was so enormous it reached past her knees and forced her legs permanently apart in a wide, helpless stance. The taut, glossy skin was stretched paper-thin with the weight of it pulled her forward so severely that her back was arched dramatically. Her massive breasts had also doubled, resting directly on the upper slope of the belly like two overstuffed pillows.

She was more belly than human.

Lila could barely move. Every breath made the colossal globe quiver and shift. The skin was burning hot and drum-tight; Henry could see the faint outline of tiny hands and feet pressing outward from within, distorting the surface in slow, powerful waves. She stood barefoot in the kitchen, one hand braced on the counter because she could no longer reach it without leaning her entire upper body forward over the impossible swell.

Henry stepped toward her in the dream, heart hammering with a mixture of awe and raw lust.

“Lila...” he breathed.

She turned her head toward him, cheeks flushed, eyes glassy with exhaustion and something darker — overwhelming, helpless arousal. “Henry... I can’t... it’s too much...” Her voice was a low, shaky whimper. “Sixteen... they just keep growing... I’m so full...”

He reached her and immediately sank to his knees in front of the towering belly. His armspan couldn’t span even half of it. He pressed both palms against the hot, red surface and felt the insane tightness, the throbbing heat, the constant rolling and kicking of sixteen babies fighting

for space inside her. The belly was so heavy it actually rested on the tops of her thighs and hung slightly forward, forcing her to keep her legs spread wide just to stay upright.

“Touch me...” she gasped. “Please... I’m so tight it hurts... Even with the necklace”

He poured cream into his hands, and began rubbing it into the monstrous belly in long, worshipful strokes. The belly was so big that when he hugged it, his face was buried completely between her cleavage and the upper curve of the dome at the same time. He squeezed, lifted, kneaded the impossible weight, feeling the skin stretch even tighter under his palms as the sixteen babies kicked hard in response.

Lila cried out, thighs trembling. “Henry... I’m going to burst... they’re so big... I’m more belly than anything else now...”

He stood up, or tried to. The belly was so enormous it pressed him back, forcing him to stay half-crouched, his erection trapped against the hot, slick underside. He rocked his hips forward, grinding slowly against the hanging curve while his hands roamed higher, cupping and squeezing her massive, milk-heavy tits. Thick drops of milk beaded at her dark nipples; he leaned in and sucked one into his mouth, drinking greedily while Lila moaned and shuddered, her gigantic belly quivering between them.

In the dream he took her right there against the kitchen counter. He couldn’t get behind her, the belly was too big, so he lifted her heavy breasts with great trouble, and slid between them, thrusting against the upper slope of the colossal dome while Lila clung to his shoulders and whimpered. Every thrust made the entire belly shake and bounce. The skin was so tight and glossy it reflected the kitchen light like polished marble. Henry’s hands never stopped moving, rubbing, stroking, squeezing, feeling sixteen lives moving frantically inside her.

“You’re so fucking full,” he groaned against her neck. “Sixteen babies... you’re not even human anymore... just this huge, perfect belly...”

Lila came with a broken cry, her entire body convulsing, the gigantic belly contracting visibly around the babies as waves of pleasure rolled through her. Milk leaked down her tits. The amulet glowed faintly against her skin.

Henry couldn’t hold back any longer. With a deep, guttural groan he slammed his hips forward one final time, burying himself as deep as the massive belly would allow, and came hard inside her. Pulse after pulse of hot seed flooded her, his cock throbbing against the tight, overstretched walls.

Lila’s eyes flew open, wide with sudden panic and desperate need. Even as her orgasm was still rippling through her, she grabbed her boobs with both hands, nails digging in.

“Henry... please...” she begged, voice raw and trembling. “Your seed... it’s doing it again... I can feel it... it’s going to double them... help me... I can’t... I can’t take thirty-two...”

Henry froze, still buried deep inside her, his hands pressed to the drum-tight surface of her colossal belly.

His mind reeled. Sixteen was already pushing the limits of what her body could possibly contain.

Thirty-two... The realization hit him like ice water even as pleasure still pulsed through his veins.

And his dream hung there, suspended on the edge of something catastrophic.

End