

## Chapter 1: Karla

The storm during the night had been loud and fierce, with thunder and lightning followed by a cloud burst. The rain had cleared the air and brought some relief from the muggy August heat in the south of Switzerland. Now, it was early morning and the sun was just about to rise. The mountains in the east stood dark against the sky, but the ridge was bathed in a halo of golden-white light.

Karla sat at the kitchen table, her hands around a cup of weak hot tea. She took an occasional sip while staring absentmindedly out the window. A few small branches from the chestnut tree lay scattered on the ground and a carpet of purple and pink blossoms of the azalea bushes covered the patio in front of their cottage.

Aside from that, there wasn't any visible damage from the storm. But the beauty of nature was the last thing on Karla's mind at the moment.

*Please, God, this can't be true.*

It was the second day in a row she had woken up sick to her stomach. The day before, she had attributed it to the rather rich dinner she and Andreas had enjoyed at their favorite restaurant in Locarno or to the summer flu going around. In the course of the day, the nauseous feeling had disappeared. Now, however, she felt sick again. This wasn't the flu or food poisoning.

Counting the days to her last cycle, she realized with dismay that she hadn't had a period since returning from Venice six weeks before, where she and Andreas had celebrated their twentieth wedding anniversary. There was no doubt, she was overdue. She was approaching menopause and her cycles were becoming irregular. That was natural. However, skipping a period combined with feeling sick to her stomach in the morning didn't bode well.

*I can't be pregnant.*

Karla stepped outside and glanced at the stone cottage next door, a second *rustico*, a former stable made of natural stones with a granite roof. She and her husband had bought it years before and converted it into two bedrooms for Laura and Tonio when the children got older and the main cottage wasn't large enough anymore. She didn't see any damage from the storm there either.

It was still pleasantly cool. Karla inhaled deeply, trying to calm her stomach, then held her breath. She wrinkled her nose at the overpowering scent of the honeysuckle nearby. It was another ominous sign. During her former pregnancies, she had had an acute sense of smell and she hadn't been able to tolerate any kind of heavy perfume.

*But I'm not pregnant. I don't want to be pregnant.*

Surely she was too old for another child. She was almost forty-five. If she was pregnant, she would become a mother again at the age of forty-six. Laura was nineteen and Tonio almost seventeen.

Having another baby would mean nine months of pregnancy and another sixteen years or so of raising a child. And the risk of complications and possible health problems for the child was much greater at her age. Karla sighed and shook her head. And the time it would take away from her painting.

Both Karla and Andreas had successful careers as artists, Karla as painter and Andreas as sculptor. They took part in exhibitions and were able to sell their work. To supplement their income, Andreas had his stonemason business and Karla worked at a friend's art gallery a few days a week.

*It just can't be.*

Karla went back inside and sat down. Her head ached and she felt sick again. She forced herself to breathe deeply and evenly and took little sips of tea.

The sound of running water came from the bathroom. A little while later, her tall, muscular husband stepped into the kitchen, yawning and brushing his disheveled dark hair out of his face. Andreas poured water into the espresso machine and pressed the button. Seeing Karla sitting at the table with her cup of tea, he gave her a probing look. “Why are you up so early? You’re feeling sick again?”

Karla wanted to deny it at first, but then nodded. “Andreas, I’m afraid.”

“Why?” He placed a cup underneath the spout of the espresso maker and watched as the fragrant dark liquid filled the cup, then sat down across from her. “What’s the matter with you?” He touched her cheek; his hand felt warm against her face.

Karla’s eyes misted over. “I think I might be pregnant.” She leaned her head into her hands, then looked up again. She watched Andreas’s face, the face she knew so well—his verdigris-green eyes, the slightly aquiline nose, his unshaven cheeks and square chin—as different emotions flashed across it: surprise, doubt, joy. Yes, joy.

Karla had known from the moment she suspected being pregnant that Andreas would love to have another child. She also knew he wouldn’t understand why she herself was less than enthusiastic about it. For him it was a great adventure. He loved children, always had. He was the perfect father and had done more than his share of changing diapers and feeding and burping their babies.

“Are you sure?” Andreas put his hand on hers.

“No, of course not, but it just feels like it. This is like the morning sickness I’ve had before and I haven’t had a period since Venice, so I’m off. I was probably off in Venice without knowing it, and you know we weren’t very careful. Oh God, Andreas, I don’t want to be pregnant.”

Andreas laughed. He got up and sat down next to her. “You’re getting ahead of yourself. You don’t even know if you’re pregnant. Don’t you have a doctor’s appointment in a couple of weeks, anyway?”

“Yes, we were supposed to talk about a new kind of birth control. Oh God, how ironic. Andreas, if I am pregnant, we’d have to start all over again. We’ll be in our sixties or seventies by the time the child is grown.”

“Well, what’s so bad about that? Lots of people have children in their forties.”

“Yes, but . . .” Karla didn’t know an answer to that. She put her head on her arms and moaned. “I don’t want to have any more kids.”

“Think how happy you were with Laura and Tonio.” Andreas hugged her.

“That was twenty years ago. Of course I was happy. I love my children, but now . . . we’re almost ready for grandchildren. Besides, I want to focus on my painting more again and . . . oh, I don’t know. I’m so confused.”

“Honey, you’re blowing this out of proportion. Besides, well, to be honest, I’d rather be a father once more than a grandfather. That sounds so old. But why don’t you call your doctor and tell him you need to come in right away. Then, we at least know for sure, instead of guessing.”

Karla nodded. “I’ll get a pregnancy test at the pharmacy first.” She didn’t want to call the doctor yet, still hoping it was false alarm. She got up and pressed the button on their coffee machine.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t drink coffee, just in case you—”

“Andreas, stop right now.” Karla turned around and glared at him. “I’m going to have coffee. Don’t start, please.”

“Okay, okay.” Andreas raised his arms in defeat and beamed.

Andreas’s cheerfulness upset Karla even more. It was just unfair that she might have to carry the major burden of an unwanted pregnancy and her husband seemed so damn happy about it.

“What if the baby is born with Down syndrome?” She hated herself for trying to make him feel bad. She set the coffee cup on the table with too much force, almost spilling its content. She sat down and put her head on her arms.

“Please, calm down.” Andreas gently brushed through her hair. “Come on, look at me.” Karla raised her head and wiped the tears from her cheek. Andreas took her face between his hands and kissed her. “You’re not alone. This is—or would be—*our* baby and I would do whatever I can to help. Besides, we’re talking about a baby that we don’t even know exists.”

Karla took a sip of coffee and grimaced. “Yuck, this tastes awful. What’s wrong with it? Oh God, I know I’m pregnant. If coffee doesn’t taste good . . .”

The doctor confirmed what Karla by then knew was true. She was pregnant. “I hope congratulations are in order,” her gynecologist said with a wide smile.

“Not exactly, but . . .” Karla sighed.

Andreas tried not to show too much exuberance, knowing Karla’s ambivalent feelings. Karla was torn between joy and despair. They hadn’t told the children yet. Andreas suggested they wait until they were home. Laura was at a sculpting workshop and Tonio was on vacation with a friend of his.