

The illness was popularly known as the Empty Nest Plague. A pandemic that spread throughout the country through a waterborne contagion and rapidly mutated, spreading throughout the population. If it was not caught in an early stage of infection, the sufferer was rendered infertile. There was no cure. By the time it was eradicated, an estimated 90% of the population was incapable of bearing children, and a major population crisis would soon follow.

But people are stubborn. They don't just lay down and die. People find solutions, and a solution was found. A small percentage of the population was discovered to be naturally immune, and to those people, an offer was made.

Despite adversity, great leaps and bounds had been made in the realm of fertility science. There was no cure for those affected by the illness, but there was always another way. Within a generation, every major city had a surrogacy center, where people capable of bearing children lived and worked, having babies for those that could not. Attended to by a staff of highly trained nurses and midwives, these surrogates lived and worked together so that nobody who desired a family would ever be left wanting.

Laurel read all of this in the pamphlet she had been given, which then went on to cover the numerous benefits that could be had in the surrogacy center. The young fox only took in every other word after that, her eyes glazing over somewhat. She knew that this was what she'd wanted to do; she'd known it all of her life.

Laurel was born in a center very much like this one, and like all children born these days, she'd been tested for immunity. She was one of the lucky few. She knew that only something like one out of every hundred or so babies born to an immune parent would be immune themselves. As one such lucky person, she was under no obligation to sign up to be a surrogate, but she wanted to. This was important, and she'd wanted to help. Not out of a sense of duty, like many felt, but out of a desire to experience what it was like to bear children first-hand. Ever since she was little, she'd been fascinated by the whole process of pregnancy; she'd thought that there

was nothing more beautiful in the world than a person in the process of creating a new life, in every stage.

It was not, perhaps, the most noble reason in the world, but nevertheless, she'd applied and here she was, in the waiting room of Juno's Cradle Surrogacy Center, the biggest and most prestigious such establishment in the tri-state area.

"Miss Laurel?"

She looked up from her pamphlet and saw the receptionist, an older racoon woman (who was pregnant herself) waving her in. "We've just about got your room ready if you'd like to head on back. The dorms are on the fourth floor, and you've got room eight."

"Thank you," said Laurel, righting herself as she made her way into the building proper, pressing a button on an elevator.

Surrogacy centers were one part clinic and one part dormitory, with a number of surrogates living on-site so that their condition could be monitored and they wouldn't have far to go if any medical assistance was required. They weren't hermits or anything. You tended to see them around in the surrounding cities, and they typically turned heads. But they lived together out of a sense of community, of being somewhere where your neighbors understood your struggles.

The elevator opened up onto a common area, and Laurel felt her heart skip a beat as she stepped out. There was a communal dining area, as well as a large sofa in front of a big-screen TV, a pool table, and a couple of other amenities. There were a dozen or so women milling about, doing various activities, all different species, and each and every one of them was in some stage of pregnancy. It was unbelievable.

"Oh, hey, you must be the new girl."

Laurel jumped and looked to the side, where an otter woman was standing, thrusting out a hand. “I’ve been waiting for you. My name’s Stella. I volunteered to show you around.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Stella,” said Laurel, taking her hand. “I’m Laurel, but you, er, probably know that.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t want to just say it,” said Stella. “That would probably weird. So yeah, welcome to the Bump Bunker!”

“The... what?” said Laurel, cocking her brow in confusion.

“It’s what we call the dorms,” said Stella, with a mischievous smirk. “When you’ve been here as long as we have, you develop an odd sense of humor. Here, I’ll show you to your room first.”

The dorms were small, but cozy. There was a big bed, a kitchenette, her own bathroom with a shower, and a spacious closet.

“There’s also some big tubs on the third floor if you really want to relax,” said Stella. “And some exercise equipment, too. It’s important to keep active, you know! Having babies can take a lot out of you.”

“You said you’ve been here for awhile?” asked Laurel. “And you’ve... had babies, before?” Stella’s stomach was flat, and aside from Laurel’s own, it appeared to be the only one of its kind.

“Oh, loads of them,” said Stella. “I just had number... fourteen, I think?”

“Fourteen?” said Laurel, her head whipping around.

“Maybe fifteen?” said Stella, shrugging. “The latest in the line just popped out last Tuesday. Big boy, too!”

Laurel stood and gaped for a moment. It was currently Friday. Stella looked shockingly good for a woman who had given birth three days ago.

“My room’s right next door to yours,” said Stella, motioning for Laurel to follow before the fox could manage any follow-up questions. “Feel free to knock if you need anything. Groceries are delivered every other Thursday, ask Crystal - that’s the receptionist - if you have any requests. The doctors’ offices and birthing suites are on the second floor, and they’re always open to you. You’ve got free run of the place and you can come and go whenever you please, just don’t lose the key, but they prefer you to not go too far when you’re in your last month. And don’t hesitate to make friends, everyone’s really nice!”

Laurel’s head was spinning as she tried to take all of this in. Stella had led her back into the common room, where three four women - a skunk, a gecko, an ocelot, and a coyote - were seated on the sofa, playing some kind of multiplayer fighting game. Each of them had a late-stage baby bump.

“These are Lucy, Margo, Bina, and Chris,” said Stella, gesturing to each of them in turn.

“Pardon us if we don’t get up,” said Lucy, the skunk, giving a brief wave without looking away. “We just picked up *Ultra Fight Pals IV* and there’s a serious grudge match going on.”

“Yeah, what she said,” said Bina, the ocelot. “Come by later and we’ll be sure to-
urgh!”

Bina suddenly groaned, clutching her belly as one on-screen character slammed into hers.

“That was a big one,” she said, wincing. “I think this little runt’s just about ready to come out.”

“C-come out?” said Laurel, her heart racing. “Oh dear! D-do you need me to take you to a doctor?”

“Are you kidding me?” said Bina, who was now spreading her legs slightly. “I’m winning! Prepare to eat my- NNNGH!”

Even as she continued to play, Bina started to groan, her belly visibly tightening. Laurel was rooted to the spot until Stella dragged her off.

“Is she... is she really going to have her baby right there?” she said, unable to look away.

Stella let out a laugh. “Sorry, it’s been awhile since we’ve had a newbie,” she said. “You gotta understand, we’re pregnant pretty much all the time. After about two weeks of recovery, I’ll have another one put in me right quick. So will Bina, and all the others once they go pop. You get used to things. Yeah, we could go see a doctor if we need it, but most of us would just prefer to be comfortable, y’know?”

There was a collective cheer as Bina executed a masterful combo. Following this, she dropped her controller and stuck her hands between her legs, audibly grunting, and mere moments later, pulled them back, clutching a newborn.

“A woman just gave birth right in front of me,” said Laurel, a faraway look in her eyes as a tidal wave of feelings crashed over her.

“I’ll, um, give you a minute, okay?” said Stella, patting Laurel on the shoulder.

“Want some tea?”

“Tea would be nice, thank you.”

~*~

Ten minutes later, Laurel and Stella were seated together in Laurel's dorm, each clutching a mug of tea. Laurel sipped hers slowly.

"You okay?" said Stella.

"Yes, I'm alright," said Laurel. "I was just caught a bit off-guard is all."

"Take a moment if you need it."

The two sat in silence for some time, Laurel sipping her tea and composing herself while Stella fiddled with her phone.

"Is it like this for everyone?" asked Laurel.

"Not everyone," said Stella, with a little shrug. "I mean, we're still pushing an entire baby out of our delicate bits. Some use the suites, some go down to the baths, and some prefer just the comfort of their own beds. And then you get girls like Bina, who just... well, Bina's always been lazy, but you know what I mean."

Laurel said nothing. She took another sip of tea.

"Sorry," said Stella. "I guess you kind of got pushed into the deep end a bit, huh? We're all a little bit desensitized to it. Me a bit more so than the others, since I'm training to be a midwife, too."

"Really?" said Laurel, smiling. "That's nice."

"Yeah, we've got the process pretty streamlined, but sometimes it can still be kind of hairy," said Stella. "So it's good to have somebody on hand who knows what they're doing."

Laurel nodded again. She finished her tea. “I’m okay,” she said. “Really. I think I’m just still getting used to the idea. I’ve been preparing for this for over a year, and now that I’m actually here, in this place, it’s a little overwhelming.”

“I’ve got you,” she said. “I was a mess for my first pregnancy. When are they implanting you, do you know?”

“In a couple of weeks,” said Laurel.

“Maybe it’ll be the same time as my next,” said Stella, giving Laurel a big grin. “We can be belly bros!”

Laurel gave the otter an odd look. Stella blushed.

“That’s, um, that’s what we call it when we have synchronized pregnancies,” she said, sheepishly. “Like I said. Odd senses of humor.”

Laurel couldn’t help herself. She laughed. “Well, Stella,” she said. “Let me just say that it would be an honor and a pleasure to be your... ‘belly bro’.” The phrase was accompanied by air quotes. Stella let out a flurry of giggles.

“You’ll fit right in,” she said. “Want to go have lunch? It’s Taco Tuesday!”

“Isn’t it Friday?”

“Taco Tuesday is a state of mind around here.”

~*~

And two weeks later, with little fanfare, Laurel was pregnant. She was in her room afterwards, resting after the implantation, when there was a knock. Stella came in, holding a cupcake.

“I heard the good news,” she said, placing the cupcake on her nightstand. “How do you feel?”

“Tired, mostly,” said Laurel. “Is it always like this?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” said Stella. “Everyone’s kinda crummy for the first couple of days after implantation. But after that, things are pretty good. Just remember to take your anti-morning sickness meds and it’ll be a cakewalk. But, uh, this isn’t all I came in for.”

Laurel looked up in time to see Stella lifting up her shirt with one hand and grabbing her own hand with the other. She placed Laurel’s hand on her belly, grinning ear to ear.

“Belly bros!” she said. And Laurel smiled. She was never going to have to go through her ordeal alone. The other surrogates were friendly as could be, and wasted no time in welcoming her into the family. But something about the fact that Stella would be right alongside her while she was going through her first pregnancy gave her a little boost inside.

~*~

Laurel was now three months into her first pregnancy, and so far, things had been good. She was getting on well with the other surrogates, and they did their best to make her feel welcome. She had never been the most social person growing up, but living in such close proximity to so many meant that she’d had to get acclimated quickly.

One thing that took some getting used to was that the surrogates tended to be somewhat lax about the amount of clothing they wore in the common areas. Laurel had come out for breakfast one morning and nearly inhaled her orange juice when she discovered several of her fellows going about their business topless, or occasionally even bottomless. She had politely excused herself that day.

“Guess I should have warned you, huh,” Stella had said, looking embarrassed.
“Yeah, we’re not an especially modest bunch.”

Since then, Laurel had gotten used to it, though she opted to be fully clothed herself.

Currently, she was relaxing in her bed, reading a book. She looked up when she heard a knock on her door.

“Hey, it’s Stella.”

“Come in!”

Stella’s head poked in, and she gave Laurel a wave. “Hey,” she said. “There’s something I’d like to show you. Got a few?”

Laurel nodded, putting her book down and following Stella. She was lead down the halls, all the way back towards room number twelve, the last one in the line.

“This is where Adia lives,” said Stella. “You probably haven’t seen much of her, she likes to keep to herself, but... well, she’ll tell you herself.” Stella knocked again, and a deep voice replied, “Come in, please.”

They entered the dorm and made their way to the bed, where a hippo woman, perhaps a decade or so Laurel’s senior, was sitting up in a nest of pillows, rubbing her belly. She was quite large, not just in her belly, which was, of course, huge, but the rest of her body had a generally soft, thick, and curvy shape to it. She was also nude. She had her eyes closed and she was taking deep breaths.

“It’s good to see you, Stella,” said Adia, opening them as she approached. “And nice to meet you, Laurel.”

“Likewise,” said Laurel. “Is there something I can help you with?”

“No,” said Adia, shaking her head. “But I think that there is something I can help you with. I know you are still getting acclimated to being a surrogate. It is very rewarding, but we live somewhat unusual lives.” She paused to take a deep breath. “I asked you to come because I am about to give birth, and I wanted to ask if you would like to watch. I will take no offense if you do not.”

Laurel looked over to Stella, who was smiling at her. “Adia’s an old pro at this,” she said. “She’s been here longer than any of us.”

Laurel hesitated for a moment. There hadn’t been any incidents like the one with Bina on her first day. She’d seen a few surrogates clutch their bellies, groan, and politely excuse themselves, either to their dorm or to a suite, but that was all. She still felt somewhat uncertain about the situation here, but this was what she was going to be doing, not just once, but many times in the years to come. She nodded.

“I would love to,” said Laurel, pulling up a chair. “Thank you.”

Adia shook her head. “Not like that,” she said, patting the bed. “Come up here. I want you to see it up close.” With that, Adia shifted her position, spreading her legs apart. Laurel nodded, crawling up onto the bed and kneeling between Adia’s legs. She could clearly see the hippo’s vulva now, puffy and swollen and bulging out slightly. Adia groaned again, rubbing her belly.

“Not long now,” she said. “I can feel it starting to come out of my womb...”

“Do you need any help?” said Laurel, and Adia shook her head again.

“Just watch,” she said, hooking her hands under her knees and spreading her legs apart. With that, she took a deep breath and started to push, making no sound except for a quiet little grunt. It didn’t take long before something started to happen.

Right before Laurel's eyes, Adia's nether lips parted to slowly reveal something, a little at a time. She would stop to rest and breathe, it would retract for a moment, and then she would get back to pushing, and little by little, the baby's head continued to push out, until, mere minutes later, it was fully crowned, and Adia let out a big breath.

"Oh wow," said Laurel, hands over her mouth in amazement. "You're really doing it... does it hurt?"

"It always hurts," said Adia, giving her a smile. "But you grow accustomed to it. You learn to tune out the pain, and focus on the effort." With that, she took another breath and groaned as she started to push again, more and more of the head emerging, and Laurel couldn't pull her eyes away.

"You can touch if you'd like," said Adia, stealing a quick breath before she started to push again. Slowly, Laurel reached out, gently brushing a finger across the wet, wrinkly skin of the baby hippo. Shortly after, Adia pushed out the shoulders as well, and once that was done, the rest of the body slipped out with one more grunt, plopping down onto the bed below and starting to squirm. Adia let out a sigh of relief, picking it up and holding it to her chest.

"If you would be so good as to page a nurse when you leave," she said, "I would appreciate that."

Laurel nodded as she crawled back off of the bed. "Thank you," she said.

"It was nothing at all," said Adia. "You can come see me whenever you want if you need to talk. I know that your first time can be a bit nerve-wracking."

With that, Laurel and Stella made their departure, Stella taking a moment to send a message via her phone.

“Adia’s a big sweetie,” she said. “I’m glad that you- oof!” She was cut off as Laurel pulled her into a hug.

“That was beautiful,” she said softly.

Stella let out a laugh, patting Laurel on the shoulder. “For me, it never gets old,” she said. “Feel a little bit better now?”

“I do. Thank you.”

~*~

Laurel checked her calendar. Six months down as of today, and she was really starting to feel her pregnancy. Surrogates had access to all of the top-of-the-line medical technology they could ever need, but there was only so much that could be done. Pregnancy was rough on a body. It had been since time immemorial, and it would be for as long as people continued to reproduce. Little aches and pains were commonplace, and Laurel was feeling especially beat today. Which is why, when Stella and a bunch of the other girls said they were going to go out and catch a movie, Laurel politely declined. She had decided to take a day to just relax, read some books, maybe get a hot bath. But mostly, she just zoned out, catching up on her rest.

She was snapped out of her peaceful fugue when she heard someone cry out. Curious, Laurel pulled herself up and made her way out into the hall, only to find, to her surprise, that she wasn’t alone there. There was a light-furred border collie woman in the hall, dressed in a t-shirt and nothing else, leaning against the wall and panting. Laurel searched her mental database for a moment to try and come up with her name.

“Um, excuse me?” she said. “You’re Jess, right? Are you okay?”

“Been better!” Jess panted, leaning in deeper against the wall. Laurel looked down, and saw that the collie had left a wet trail from the door to her dorm to her current spot.

“What happened?” said Laurel, approaching Jess and putting a hand on her shoulder.

“I was staying home and taking a nap, since I’m overdue,” panted Jess, “and I guess I must have gone into labor while I was sleeping, and I- NNGH!” Jess turned around, and now Laurel could see that there was a fully-crowned head emerging from her. “Catch it catch it CATCH IT PLEASE NNN!”

Laurel quickly dove down onto her knees, and moments later, the baby slipped out of Jess in a single push. Laurel blinked, surprised to suddenly be holding a baby.

“Um... congratulations?” she said.

“I’m not done yet,” said Jess, shaking her head as she accepted the baby from Laurel. “I’m, er, having triplets. Can you help me get to the birthing suites please?”

“Triplets?” said Laurel, straightening up and letting Jess lean on her as they carefully waddled to the elevator.

Jess blushed as they approached the elevator, quickly smacking the button.

“I’m really sorry about this,” said Jess. “I wanted to get to the suites nice and early, but then I fell asleep, and then- nnnngh, oh no!”

As the elevator started to descend, Jess cried out and put a hand between her legs. More fluids were trickling out of her.

“No, no, stay in, stay in!” she cried.

“I’m kind of new here, but I don’t think that usually works,” said Laurel, putting her hands down between Jess’s legs. Jess let out a grunt, crouched slightly, and almost immediately, a second baby slipped out of her like it had been greased. Jess’s blush intensified.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, sliding down to the floor as she held her second baby. “All the other girls always tease me about how fast my births go, but I can’t help it!”

“Hey now, it’s okay!” said Laurel, patting Jess on the knee. “We’ve all got to do things our own way, right? And at least they’re healthy?”

“Yeah, I know,” said Jess, nodding. “But I was just hoping that I’d get to show them this time- nnngh!” Her belly began to tighten again and she began to squirm. “Nnngh, no, my hands are full!” she groaned, as her nethers started to bulge open once again.

“It’s okay, I’m right here!” said Laurel. “Just push, it’ll be okay!”

And just as the elevator went “ding”, Laurel looked up again, holding the last of Jess’s litter, just in time to see a group of women standing outside of the door, Stella at the forefront. They had been making idle chitchat, but they all fell silent when they saw the scene inside the elevator.

“Again, Jess?” said Margo, the gecko, earning her an elbow in the ribs from Stella.

“You alright down there, Jess?” asked Stella. Jess just smiled and nodded.

“I’ll go call a nurse,” said somebody that Laurel couldn’t see.

“Thanks for walking me down,” murmured Jess, as the crowds dispersed to make way for the staff.

“It wasn’t any trouble,” said Laurel, and to her surprise, she meant it. She was acclimating to the unusual life of a surrogate much more quickly than she would have anticipated. She idly wondered if this meant that she would be ready when it was time for her to have her own baby.

She hoped so.

~*~

Laurel went into labor exactly on her due date.

She wasn’t sure if she was ready. She’d made a plan, of course. She’d was planning on going down to the suites when it was time, making sure that everything would go as smoothly as possible. But in the end, when those first pains hit her, she was less sure of herself. Could she really handle this? Everyone else made it look so easy...

She said in her bedroom, rubbing her straining belly. It would be some time before the real action started, and she didn’t know what she wanted to do. The suites were the safest option, but she knew that she’d be fussed over if she went there. The baths were nice as well, lots of the others told her that they’d had water births before and they were quite soothing, but the baths might be busy today, and she didn’t want to be around other people, but she also didn’t want to be left alone in case something happened, but what if she-

She was interrupted by a tapping on her door.

“I’m fine!” she squeaked, her voice cracking. The door opened up, and there was Stella, giving her a gentle smile.

“Hey,” she said. “I started having contractions a few hours ago, and I just started thinking that, y’know, since we’re belly bros and all, that I should check on you. Of course, if you’d rather be left alone, I fully underst- oof!”

Stella was cut off as Laurel darted forward and pulled her into a tight hug.

“Stay with me, please?” said Laurel.

“Of course,” said Stella, patting her on the back. “Let’s get comfortable, hmm?”

With that, the two of them shed several layers of clothing and got comfortable in Laurel’s bed, Stella idly rubbing her belly.

“You’re gonna be okay,” said Stella. “I promise.”

Neither of them said much as the hours went by. Periodically, they would groan out a particularly rough contraction, and would pace around the room or exchange massages, but for the most part, they just labored together in relative silence. Not much happened until Laurel’s water broke some time later.

“Oh no, oh no,” she groaned, as a particularly intense contraction hit her. “I can feel it coming, but I’m not ready, I’m not ready for this, I’m not- *nnnngh, it hurts, it hurts!*”

Stella gave Laurel’s hand a squeeze. “I know,” she said. “Do you want me to get somebody?”

“No, please,” she said. “I mean... nnggh, I don’t know, I don’t know what to do!”

“Maybe I can help a little,” said Stella. “This might feel a little weird at first, but...”

“Do whatever you want,” said Laurel, panting. “Just, please, help me...”

Stella nodded. She started to rub Laurel's belly again, but soon, her hand began to trail downwards, over Laurel's mound, down to her groin, and then Laurel let out a surprised gasp as she felt fingers on her nether lips.

"Let me know if you want me to stop," said Stella. "But it can really help."

Laurel took a deep breath, then opened up her legs to give Stella better access. Stella smiled, shifting up her angle a bit to gently stroke Laurel's pearl. Laurel closed her eyes and let out a low moan, focusing on the pleasure rather than the pain. She could feel the contractions getting stronger, feel the primal urges starting to build up, but she focused on the pleasure as best she could. And then, when the time was right, she gripped Stella's hand, took a deep breath, and started to push.

The results were immediate. She could feel the baby start to shift, emerging from her womb and beginning its descent.

"I can feel it," she said, opening her eyes. "It's happening, I can- huh?"

She turned her head and saw Stella grimacing slightly, her own legs spread apart, and realized that she was sitting in a wet patch on the bed. "Stella, are you-"

"Don't worry about what I'm doing," she said, as she continued to rub Laurel. "This is all about you. Just relax and do what feels right."

Laurel smiled. Knowing that she and Stella were going through the same thing together gave her strength. Gripping the otter's hand tightly, she started to bear down again, and it wasn't long before Stella's fingers brushed up against a head.

"It's coming," panted Laurel. She scooted back a bit to reposition herself.

"You're doing so good," said Stella. "Come on, girl, you've got this! Just keep - nnggh - pushing!"

Leaning into Stella, Laurel continued to push. Her vulva burned as she felt more and more of the baby's head stretching it apart, but it hardly seemed worth doing now. She was here now, she wasn't alone, and this is what she was meant to do. She didn't feel scared anymore. She felt strong. Gritted her teeth, she gave a good, hard push, moaning as she felt the head fully slip out of her.

"We're doing it!" said Stella, who was grinning ear to ear as her hands darted between her legs to support her own emerging baby. "We've got this! We're a couple of birthing badasses!"

Laurel wasn't quite able to muster up the strength to respond, so engrossed in the act of birth-giving. She could feel more and more of the baby slip out of her, painfully slowly, but she wasn't stopping. Nothing could stop her. This was happening. She was going to do this. She felt a shoulder slip free, then another, and with one last triumphant moan, she pushed her baby out into her own waiting hands and pulled it up to her chest.

She looked over to Stella, who had scooted up into a sort of half-kneel, face screwed up in the midst of a big push herself, until finally, her baby dropped down onto the bed and she fell back, panting heavily.

"Guess... you beat me," said Stella, wiping her brow with an arm. "Guess lunch... is on me then?"

Laurel let out a laugh as she looked down at her baby, the little life that she brought into the world. She imagined the family that would go to, the one that would have never had the chance to experience this if not for the aid of her or one of her fellow surrogates, and she felt her heart swell with joy.

And Laurel knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she had made the right choice.

Two weeks, give or take, Stella had said? Right now, that felt like far too long. She couldn't wait to go through all of this again and again.

