

## GOOD GENES

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When Alden was six weeks old, the doctor called them into his office. Ro didn't want to go. She had a feeling that something was wrong. None of her friends had ever been called to a doctor's office, especially when there had been no check-up previously, no tests, nothing that would seem out of the ordinary.

Ro's husband, Gil, reassured her, but he didn't sound sincere. He didn't meet her eyes any more, and his ruddy face looked even more flushed than usual. He too knew that things were wrong. They bundled up the baby, whom Ro privately thought too small to be named after his famous great-grandfather, and went to the scheduled appointment.

The doctor's office was a different place than the waiting room. Ro had been comfortable with the waiting room. It was designed for pregnant women: large, comfortable chairs with good back support, footstools, and a gas fireplace that was in constant use in the winter. A computer in the corner constantly played information about women's health and reproductive news, and from any of the tables, waiting patients could easily access sites that pertained to childbirth and childrearing.

But the office was around the back of the clinic—actually in a different building altogether—and the waiting area felt like the waiting area of a lawyer or accountant. There was one large window with a spectacular view of the parking lot, and a less spectacular view of the lake across the street and the mountains beyond. The chairs were straight-backed with no armrests, and weren't wide enough for Alden's carrier. With some hesitation, Ro put the sleeping baby on the floor.

She leaned over and played with his curly black hair. His tiny fists were curled against his sleeper, the soft blue blanket her parents had given him tucked beneath his chin. She had no idea how this beautiful boy with his dark brown eyes, chocolate skin, and delicate features could be ill. He was developing the way he was supposed to, he ate well, although he still did not sleep through the night.

Gil paced, and somehow that reassured her: if Gil was nervous, then she had a right to be nervous too. Only she didn't tell him—couldn't tell him—one of the sources of her nervousness. She didn't want to be the mother of a sickly child. She had seen those mothers, with their vaguely frantic air despite their protestations that everything was fine and under control. She had seen the despair in their eyes, the way they clung to their babies as if determination alone could prevent whatever tragedy was ahead.

She had clung to Alden that way on the drive over, and had been ashamed of herself. She didn't even know what the doctor was going to say.

Finally, the androgynous automated voice announced that the doctor was ready to see them. The door to his office swung open, and she grabbed Alden's carrier, wishing once again that she was in the waiting room at the clinic, where real people called her name and opened the door, and gave her a reassuring smile as they led her into an unfamiliar room.

The doctor's office smelled faintly of roses. Several tiny hybrids lined a wall just inside. Books—old, dusty, and obviously just for show—lined another wall. The carpet was plush, the desk was messy, and the view here, through the window behind the desk, was of a small fenced-in garden, well tended. She had always known that Dr. Wyatt was a nurturer. It was nice to have that sense confirmed.

He looked as if he belonged behind that desk. He wore a brown sweater with a cream-colored turtleneck beneath it, setting off his mahogany skin. His shaved head shone, and the single diamond he wore in his left ear looked even more prominent than usual. As Ro and Gil entered, he stood and took

the carrier from them, smiling down at the sleeping baby.

He ran a finger along Alden's porcelain cheek. "Ironic," he murmured so softly that Ro knew he was speaking only to the baby. She shuddered, thinking that a confirmation of all she had feared. Then he smiled at her. "Please sit."

She waited until he placed the carrier on his desk, on the only bare spot left by the piles of paper. The carrier was turned so that they all could see the boy. He hadn't moved, but his blanket had. His soft breath made a corner of it flutter ever so slightly.

"What's wrong with him?" Ro asked, unable to wait.

Gil took her hand in his warm, strong one. She could feel tension in both of their fingers as they braced themselves.

"Nothing," Dr. Wyatt said.

"Nothing?" And in Gil's surprised growl, she heard the beginnings of anger. She squeezed his hand, warning him to wait.

"That's what so wonderful," Dr. Wyatt said, leaning forward. "We did the standard genetic testing on your son."

Ro remembered. Genetic testing was required in Oregon, in all but a handful of states now, and the results were supposed to be kept private. In fact, parents could opt not to know what dangers lurked in their child's genes. Ro and Gil had taken a moderate approach: if the problem was going to be incapacitating or life-threatening they wanted to know. Otherwise, they chose to let the information come to Alden on his eighteenth birthday—a Pandora's box he could choose to open or not, all on his own.

Gil had stiffened beside her. She knew what he was thinking: incapacitating or fatal. How could Dr. Wyatt call that nothing?

"And we discovered that Alden is only infant we have seen in this clinic, indeed in this part of the state, who had a perfect set of genes."

"P-perfect?" Ro repeated. She had been so expecting the other, the bad, the horrible news, that the good news was hard to absorb.

"Perfect. No missing genes, no malfunctioning genes, no hereditary diseases. In fact, he is quite the survivor, with some extra genes that have been determined to fight certain viruses. Unless your son has an accident, he will live a long and healthy life."

Ro frowned. Perfect.

"We used to think," Dr. Wyatt was saying, "that perfect human beings could be engineered. What we didn't know until just recently was that perfect human beings already existed. They could be born into a family like yours."

Gil cleared his throat, and slipped his fingers from Ro's. He recovered quicker—or at least his brain did. It always had.

"We signed the waiver," he said. "We weren't supposed to find out anything like this about Alden."

"You signed the waiver, yes," Dr. Wyatt said, "but did you read it?"

Ro glanced at Gil. She had been in labor when they remembered the consent. He had been the one to handle the business details of Alden's birth. He shrugged. "I scanned it."

"Then you might have missed one of the clauses in the middle. It addressed this very issue."

"What issue?" Ro asked.

Dr. Wyatt smiled at her; then he leaned forward, folding his hands on the desk. She recognized the posture. It was his sincere-explanation posture. Once, another expectant mother had described it to her as his attempt not to patronize his patients.

"We have the capability of growing new organs from various cells. We do a lot of microsurgery, a lot of repair work on the cellular level before we can use some of these organs." He glanced at Alden, who was still sleeping. "Sometimes we repair genetic defects in the womb. We also do a lot of work with the new techniques, ones that involve injecting new genetic material into old cells, revitalizing them. Some of these procedures are old, some are new, but they all involve the basic building blocks of a human being."

Ro felt her breath catch. Dr. Wyatt was speaking slowly, giving them a chance to ask questions. Apparently Gil had none. She had a thousand, but didn't know where to begin asking.

"Private bio-technology companies pay a lot of money to keep cells from people like Alden on file. We have hopes that their perfect DNA will make them useful in all areas of biological and medical sciences. There is already a use for them now."

"This is about money?" Gil asked.

"It's about healing," Dr. Wyatt said. Then he sighed. "There is more."

"More?" Ro asked.

"If you choose to have more children, any one of these companies will be willing to finance your pregnancies and the first five years of your children's lives. You have created one genetically perfect child. The chances are you will create another." His smile was apologetic. "If you don't want to do that, if you only want one child, then they would pay you quite well for fertilized embryos. In fact, you could do both—"

"Is this a joke?" Gil asked.

"No." Dr. Wyatt spoke solemnly, reassuringly. "A handful of other couples all over the country have done this already, but cases like this are very rare."

Alden stirred. His small fist grabbed the fluttering edge of the blue blanket, and he pulled it toward his mouth, uncovering his tiny feet, encased in delicate white socks. Ro grabbed the blanket and pulled it down, covering him again.

"What does the clinic get out of this?" Gil asked.

Dr. Wyatt shrugged. "A percentage. Small, actually. It amounts to one percent of the total fees paid your family."

"Plus all the payments for the additional medical care," Gil said. His anger was becoming plain. His voice was rising.

"What—?" Ro asked, loudly enough to cover him. He shot her a warning look which she ignored. "What

does this mean for Alden?"

"Financially?" Dr. Wyatt said. "It means that he'll—"

"No," she said. "What will happen to my baby? Are there tests? Will he have to leave us?"

"No," Dr. Wyatt said. "At his checkups, we'll take an extra vial of blood, and send it to whichever lab ends up with his case. He won't notice a thing."

"Those are his genes, right?" Gil asked. "Do we have to give consent every time they're used?"

Dr. Wyatt looked at his long, manicured hands. "If you do this," he said, "Alden's genes will no longer be his. They will belong to the firm that buys them."

"Meaning they could do anything they want with his genes?" Ro asked.

"Yes," Dr. Wyatt said.

"Will he be prevented from using his genes?" Gil asked.

"They have a waiver for reproduction," Dr. Wyatt said. "But if he wanted to donate sperm or give blood, he would need permission. And he would need their permission if he wanted donate an organ or grow one for a family member who couldn't for some reason."

Ro shuddered. Such a decision. She had expected to make one today, but not like this.

"Would they clone him?" she asked.

"Cloning is illegal throughout the world," Dr. Wyatt said.

"But we've heard rumors—"

"No reputable company would clone anyone," Dr. Wyatt said, "although they might use a section of his DNA as a template for some infant's flawed DNA."

"How much would we get paid?" Gil asked.

"For Alden?" Dr. Wyatt shrugged. "The usual bid starts at two million dollars. It can rise from there."

"And how long would they control his genes?"

Dr. Wyatt's mouth formed a thin line. "For life," he said.

They did not have to make a decision right away. All they did was ask Dr. Wyatt to wait before informing any of the companies about Alden. Dr. Wyatt agreed. They were to see him again in two weeks.

During that time, they spoke to everyone they knew. Their friends had split opinions: some felt that Alden's gift should be used for the greater good; others believed that to give Alden's DNA away would be to tamper with God's plan. Their more sophisticated friends worried about the legalities. Their families worried about the restrictions.

Gil hired a lawyer who specialized in medical contracts. The lawyer believed she could negotiate a more favorable document that gave less power to the biotech company and more money to the family. She would take the case on a contingency, agreeing to work for a percentage of the final take. Gil had been

satisfied with her, but Ro hadn't. When they had gone to the lawyer's office, she hadn't done more than give Alden a cursory glance. No questions about him, no gentle touches, and when he woke grumpy after a long nap, she requested that he either get quiet or be taken to the daycare center thoughtfully provided by the legal firm.

It was starting to become about money. Two million dollars would pay off all their debts, including their tiny one-story home in a distant suburb. It would pay for Alden's college, his graduate work, and, if they invested wisely, give him a nest egg, an investment that might help him as he grew older.

Ro walked through her tiny house with its unwieldy '90s kitchen with the island that always got in her way and the hooks for the cooper pots that no one had anymore, and imagined it updated, with modern appliances. She fed Alden in the living room, always chilly because of its cathedral ceiling, and wished that she could carve the space into two rooms—one of them a playroom for her beautiful son. Gil mentioned in passing, as he always did with things that were important to him, that perhaps they could consider buying a bigger house with a real yard, close to schools and public transportation. They allowed themselves to contemplate a different life.

And through it all, they fed Alden, changed him, played with him, and held him. They carried him from room to room as they dreamed their small dreams. Sometimes he giggled. Often he slept. And sometimes he cried so hard that Ro thought his heart was breaking. During those times, she couldn't understand what he needed, and she wished, oh how she wished, she could ask him what he wanted.

Because their decision would affect him in a thousand ways. It would affect everything about him, from simple acts of charity such as donating blood to large things such as his financial future. Ro did not even think about the added offer, the way that the companies would pay for more children, the way that all of this would affect their lives.

She studied everything she could find, became familiar with genes and DNA and experiment processes. She learned that Alden was one of a select group. Less than point one-one hundredth of all the children born since the human genome project had been finished were categorized as medically perfect. Of that small percentage, only a few were born in the United States each year. There was no information on families who had chosen the options she and Gil had been offered, except short mentions in various papers that people had taken those offers. Nothing about the parents, about how they made the decisions, about how they felt later.

Two nights before she and Gil were to talk again with Dr. Wyatt, she sat in Alden's room. The room smelled of talcum and baby, and was silent, except for Alden's even breathing.

They had remodeled the walk-in closet beside the master bedroom as the nursery, thinking that later they would give Alden a room farther from theirs. The nursery was small but bright, with a balloon mural on the wall that Gil had painted and matching pillows all over the floor, sewn by her mother. White baby furniture completed the look. They had modern smarthouse equipment in here and in the master bedroom, an expense that Ro had insisted on when she became pregnant. No old-fashioned baby monitors for her. She wanted the very walls to listen to her child, to make sure he was all right every moment of every day.

Still, she sat often in the rocker her grandmother had given her and watched Alden sleep. Ro did her best thinking when Alden slept. She remembered her fear of becoming one of those mothers, with a diseased child, a woman who clung to her baby hoping to give it life.

Alden had life. He had more than life. He had, genetically speaking, a life that would be healthy and full. He was the opposite of those children.

Something in that thought held her. She had come to it over and over again in the last ten days. She was approaching her child because of what he had instead of who he was, and she had always thought that wrong.

Alden was a joyful baby. Everyone said that. And they said how lucky she was. He could have been naturally cranky or energetic or listless. He could have been so many things, but he was not. He was born with a mind and a personality all his own. It was up to her—her and Gil—to help him develop those things.

She stood slowly, then walked to the crib, bent over, and kissed her sleeping child. He stirred slightly, confident in her touch. Knowing it was a light touch, a secure touch, a loving touch. He trusted her, especially now, when he could not do anything for himself. He trusted her to do the best thing for them all.

Dr. Wyatt's office door was open, and he was waiting for them. He bent over one of his tea roses, his long fingers working a particularly delicate trim. Ro watched him, seeing the gentleness, now knowing that was only a part of him.

Gil held Alden's carrier. They agreed that Ro would do most of the talking. It had been her idea, after all.

Dr. Wyatt smiled when he saw them and took Alden's carrier as he had done before. They took their places in front of the desk.

"Well?" Dr. Wyatt asked as if he already knew the answer.

"We have decided," Ro looked at Gil, who nodded at her to continue. "To let Alden make this decision when he turns eighteen. We agree with the waiver we signed. This is not a decision we should make for our child."

Dr. Wyatt frowned. "It would be better not to wait."

"Better for whom?" Ro asked. "The companies? Yes, it would. And perhaps for a few patients, too. But we are locking my son into an agreement for life, which is something medieval. We don't believe in such things, Dr. Wyatt."

"I'm sure some clauses can be waived. Perhaps you could even get a temporary agreement, something that would be nonbinding on him when he became an adult."

Ro shook her head. "This is not an emergency, Doctor. We are willing to be contacted on a case-by-case basis in the event of an emergency, when someone actually needs Alden's help. What we are refusing is a business arrangement. We want our son to be a child first, and a commodity only if he chooses to be."

"He wouldn't be a commodity," Dr. Wyatt said.

She stared at him for a long time. "Maybe not to you," she said. "But the biotech company who bought his genes wouldn't know him. To them, he would be something that would enable them to make a profit. To other patients, he would be another tool. To us, he is a person already. And people make their own choices, and their own commitments. We're sorry, doctor."

She stood. So did Gil. Finally Dr. Wyatt did as well. He ran a hand along Alden's small face. "He is a perfect child."

"No," Ro said. "He's not. He's got good genes. That's all."

“That’s plenty,” Dr. Wyatt said. “Promise me you’ll tell him of this opportunity when he’s grown.”

“You will,” Gil said. “Or someone in your clinic will. We will stipulate that. We have an attorney who can draw up a document.”

“It was kind of you,” Ro added, “not to mention the money.”

Dr. Wyatt took Alden’s tiny hand in his own. “You realize how rare and precious he is.”

Ro smiled. “Yes,” she said softly. “We do.”