

## Chromosome Four

*Chris Drew*

The doctor said the baby would have Huntington's disease. Amy didn't understand what this meant, but she knew from his expressionless face that it was bad. She tried to speak, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, so Scott asked the questions. The doctor's words seemed to fall on the desktop between them. No symptoms until the mid-thirties. That made her feel better, until he explained what those symptoms would be. Involuntary muscle spasms, loss of language skills, eventual breakdown of the nervous system resulting in death. About ten years from start to finish. All for someone who didn't even have a gender yet.

They'd been trying for months to get pregnant. Ovulation calendars, vitamins, green tea, uterus tilting. When they found out it had worked, they'd rushed out and bought every book on the "Expectant Mothers" shelf at Barnes & Noble. They waited to tell everyone until after the first five weeks, just like the books recommended, and lingered secretly in the newborns aisle at Wal-Mart. Scott started grabbing all the overtime hours he could at the power plant, telling Amy that they would spare no expense. It had been the best five weeks of their marriage.

Now Scott sighed as the doctor spoke. She had quit listening, focusing instead on the dead hum of the room's fluorescent lighting, the assortment of knick-knacks on the doctor's desk. A mahogany-and-gold nameplate, an aloe plant, a miniature Evansville Aces basketball. After a moment, she noticed that no one was talking and she looked at Scott. He was ashen.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" she asked the doctor, a balding man with liver spots on his forehead. Behind him was a poster of a fetus taking a drag off a cigarette. *What brand does your baby smoke?* it read.

"I said that Huntington's disease is an inherited condition without a cure, passed through a dominant gene on the short arm of the fourth chromosome."

*Inherited?* The room warmed by degrees as she tried to breathe without hyperventilating. She was only three months along. The books said any bad news would come later.

"So what are you saying?" she asked.

He paused to adjust his glasses. "Either you or Mr. Baker must also have this disease, I'm afraid."

Her heart thrashed against her breastbone as remnants of morning sickness curdled her stomach. She looked at Scott and saw his eyes half-closed and his lips moving slowly, forming silent words as the clock ticked thunderously on the wall. When she first mentioned the appointment he'd asked if he had to dress up, but now he wore a stained work shirt because of an all-night shift at the plant.

"Do you understand the implications of this, Mr. and Mrs. Baker?" the doctor asked with clinical compassion.

*Implications?* The sterility of the word. The doctor's aftershave filled her nostrils as though he'd bathed in it, and she swallowed repeatedly to keep her breakfast down.

"One of us is sick, too," Scott said.

*No no no no no.* Her eyes lost focus. *This is just a checkup for Christ's sake. It doesn't go like this.*

"I'm afraid so," the doctor said, brushing his knuckles absently across the marble surface of his desk. "I realize how much of a shock this is, and I'm sorry to have to tell you this way. The truth is, medical science had no way of testing for this disease until about ten years ago. Before, we always relied on family history to chart the disease." He glanced down at the files on his desk. Amy hated them. "Now Mr. Baker, your medical records say that you were adopted, so genetically speaking your family tree is blank."

Scott nodded slightly. She wanted him to react. Raise his voice, throw a chair, hit this charlatan and draw blood. Something. The doctor turned his eyes toward Amy. They reminded her of the lamps that hung in interrogation rooms.

"Mrs. Baker, your records show that your mother is still living but your father is deceased. Could you tell me how he died?"

"It was a car accident," she said, thinking of the pressed flowers she kept at home in her dusty Bible.

"And his father?"

"Died in Korea," she whispered. "I never knew him." Such stupid convenience.

"Well, these circumstances are unique then," he sighed, pushing back from his desk a bit in his overstuffed chair. "Mrs. Baker, your mother could not have passed you the gene, but any of the three remaining biological parents could have." He glanced at his hands for a moment. "I don't want to pressure either of you, and there's absolutely no necessity for doing this, but you should be aware that a genetic test would identify which of you has the gene. If you decide you want to know." He sat watching them both for a moment and Amy looked to Scott, who was twisting his hands together. *He doesn't even know*

*he's doing that.* He still had clippings on his collar from a haircut he got on the way home from work that morning. She'd told him that she didn't want him looking scruffy for the appointment. As if impressing this man would somehow make their baby perfect.

"Well," Scott said, and cleared his throat. "I think that...I mean..." He glanced at Amy. She had never known him to stammer. "I think we'll need some time to think about all of this."

"Of course," the doctor said, then stood up to show them out.

As they walked through the waiting room, Amy looked at a half-dozen women in various stages of pregnancy. Some of them read *Cosmo* or *Good Housekeeping*. A few glanced at the toddlers playing at the far end of the room. None looked worried.

The power lines that ran along the interstate reflected on the dusty windshield and curved to infinity. They had sat silently in the truck since leaving Evansville. She glanced at him every so often, still half-hoping for some kind of outburst. He clenched his jaw, the muscles flexing and relaxing in rhythm, but remained still. Merle Haggard played on the radio.

She thought of her father. Like Scott, he had always driven. Amy couldn't remember her mother on the driver's side while he was alive, except for trips to the post office and grocery store. They had been happy together, at least in her cloudy memories. He would come into her bedroom at night—sometimes with coal dust still in the slight creases of his forehead—to check under the bed for monsters, and she wouldn't let him leave until he told her a story. Her favorite had been Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby. She couldn't guess how many times she'd made him tell it. *If'n you don't let me loose, I'm a-gonna haul off and hit you again*, Brer Rabbit would say, but Tar Baby would just sit there. She would lie with her eyes wide open as Brer Rabbit came unhinged, then cringe under her blankets as Brer Fox and Brer Bear hauled him off to be eaten. In the end, she would always howl along with her father, "Pleeease don't throw me in that briar patch!" and they would laugh until her mother stepped in and stole her father away to fix a leaky pipe or bring in some firewood.

In the second grade, she came home from school to find a strange car in the driveway, and two of her uncles in the living room. Something had happened. A coal truck on a wet mine road. It was February, and the day before the funeral she heard one of her relatives say the ground was frozen solid. She cried because she didn't think they would be able to bury him until spring.

Now she placed her hand discreetly on the small bulge at her waist without Scott noticing. There was no movement yet. Thirty-five years was a long time. But she was already twenty-eight. Scott would be thirty in a month.

I-164 narrowed into State Road 57, and the power lines were joined by oaks that towered over them, blocking out the sun as if they'd entered a tunnel. Scott was still silent across from her. Someone on the radio was shouting about Crazy Larry's Waterbed Superstore.

"I hope it's me," she said.

Scott's foot came down hard on the brake pedal, and he jerked the car onto the gravel curb, turning to her as the air conditioner pumped a faint whiff of burned rubber into the cab.

"What kind of shit is that to say?" he asked, his eyebrows digging downward.

"One of us had to say something."

"Why?" He looked at her as if he expected an answer, but she didn't speak. "Because that's what people do? Do you really think there's a routine for something like this?" He deepened his voice in mockery, maybe of Amy. "Oh, let's see. 'When you want to get pregnant, do jumping jacks every morning. If you want a healthy baby, take lots of Vitamin C. When you find out either you or your wife is dying, sit on the side of the road and talk about it until it goes away.' I wonder which one of those fucking books at home has a chapter on this annoying little goddamn predicament."

He hit the dashboard hard enough to knock the faceplate off the stereo. It clattered from the plastic cup holder to the coarse gray carpet at Amy's feet. It was the reaction she had been waiting for, and now she couldn't decide if it was better than the silence. Blood rushed through her ears, and the sound reminded her of the seashells her father held to the side of her head when she was small, telling her to listen for the ocean.

"We're not talking about this," he said. "Not now."

Amy stared at the faceplate a moment, and then looked up. The skin on his knuckle was split, and dark blood pooled in the opening, swelling outward. She didn't want to provoke him anymore, so she watched him bleed, thinking of the million particles in that drop fluttering around like tiny ribbons. Were they defective, or were hers? Sitting in the Ford together, one of them was broken.

"Let's just go home," Scott said, and pulled the car back onto the highway as the swollen evening sun hung in dark reds over the horizon.

*This too shall pass.* Everyone has a favorite saying, and this was her mother's. She said it several times when Amy stopped by the following afternoon to deliver the news in person. When Amy tried to explain that no, actually nothing about this would pass, her mother pretended not to understand. "Maybe the doctor's wrong," she said more than once, and Amy didn't have the resolve

to try and explain how impossible that was. Her mom had been raised in the southern part of the county, as far from medicine as a person was likely to get in Indiana. To her, doctors were more or less useless. They had let her husband die, and now all they told her was to get out more and eat less. Of course, she comforted her daughter in the ways she knew—with assurances that she and Scott would be on the prayer chain that very night, and that she'd ask around at the next Ladies' Auxiliary meeting to see if any of her friends knew about such things. Then she fried some canned salmon cakes and Amy vomited quietly in the bathroom as the odor filled the house.

The next day, Amy took the day off from the bank without telling Scott and instead went to the library in Petersburg to search the shelves for information. She'd considered going to Evansville, where they had the Internet, but she wasn't ready for that. Being in the same city as the doctor and his marble desk made her too sad to think about anything else.

Amy had gone to school with the librarian, a woman wearing a Def Leppard T-shirt behind the circulation desk, and she made polite conversation, trying to avoid tears in front of a casual acquaintance. An old woman saved her with a question about a paperback that didn't seem to be on the shelf, and Amy slipped off to the card catalog. She had spent her afternoons here as a child when her mother had gone shopping, digging through the shelves for the next two weeks worth of books—often Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys, or pretty much anything else with the yellow “mystery” sticker on the spine. She wished her new search could be reduced to such a label.

Most of the cards in the “H” drawer were brown around the edges, and probably hadn't moved since being typed and placed there. The first few books on the subject had dates in the '50s and '60s, but then she found a crisp, white card that read *Chromosomal Abnormalities*. The publication date was '92. Three years ago. It was important to have up-to-date information, wasn't it? She didn't know what she expected to find that the doctor hadn't already told her, but she wrote down the call number and headed off, careful to take the long way around and avoid the front desk.

Above the title of the book was a logo that read “Science Facts,” as if it was part of some Time-Life series. In it, she found diagrams of chromosomes, cross sections of brains sliced like lunch meat, and some fake family trees, showing how the disease was passed between generations. The carriers' names appeared in bright purple, her favorite color. Was she really making these sorts of connections? She flipped to a random page in the center of the book to clear her mind, and a picture in the bottom corner caught her attention. In it, a chubby woman, maybe an Eskimo, was leaning over a man in a blue chair.

She had a pleasant smile on her face and a hand on his shoulder. She looked no older than fifty.

But it was the man that held her attention. He wore a red shirt with suspenders and had a long face, made longer by a scraggy beard. Glasses sat crooked on his nose. His eyes were focused on the camera, but his head was tilted back, causing him to look down his nose. His right arm was raised toward the woman at an odd angle, and he wasn't quite touching her. Loose skin hung pale on his body. In the frozen moment of the picture, he almost looked normal, but Amy could see the movement contained in the image: The struggle to tilt his head forward, the wild gestures with his arm. The woman holding him down, trying to calm him for the photograph. His smile reminded her of a running dog, lips peeled back on either side in a mix of happiness and disregard. Hot air balloons were painted on the wall behind them.

Amy's eyes began to warm, despite the air-conditioned chill of the room. She didn't want to be seen losing control, so she moved as quickly as she could without drawing attention. It didn't matter where, as long as it was away from the man and his dog-smile. After crossing through every door she could find, she stopped and began to sob as quietly as she could. The tears burned against her cold cheeks, and she crossed her arms to warm her aching breasts. Slowly she regained her composure, wiping her eyes as she looked around. The periodical room. There were copies of the *Press-Dispatch* hanging on wooden newspaper sticks all around her. She'd brought her mother to this room a few times to look up old issues, usually to settle arguments at Auxiliary meetings.

She sneezed at the dust she'd stirred up with her sudden entrance. Two monstrous microfilm machines dwarfed everything else in the room. A 1985 *Farmer's Almanac* sat open and face-down on top of one. With nothing better to do while her eyes dried, she began looking through the film cabinets. After a few minutes she found *February 1975*, pulled it out, and loaded it on the machine. Her own yellowed copy of the article was at home, folded in a drawer. She hadn't seen it in years, and the thought of looking at it here created immediacy, collapsing the decades. There were four or five pictures of the wreck on the front page—various angles of the coal truck and its cargo scattered across the road, a shot of the ambulance pulling away with the sheriff's deputies caught in mid-step—along with an article headlined “Wet Roads Lead to Fatality.” It was the picture in the bottom right that she always remembered, though, because whoever took it had started clicking away before the ambulance crew finished their job. Nothing could be seen through the windshield because the hood of the car was peeled back, but hanging out of the drivers' door, amid the hectic scramble, was a booted foot. In her own clippings, it had turned

brown over the years, but on the microfilm it was jet black, as she thought it had been in her childhood.

When Amy got home, Scott had dinner on the table. It wasn't unusual for him to cook, but there was something about the attention to detail that struck her. Folded napkins. Potholders. He came up from the basement as she was looking over the chicken on the stove.

"Hey," he said. "How was work?"

She'd read that pregnant women have some sort of sixth sense, and while she didn't really believe that, something told her that lying was not the right answer.

"I actually didn't go to work today," she said, watching him.

"Yeah, that's what they said when I called."

"Were you checking on me?"

"Not really. Just wanted you to pick up some barbecue sauce on the way home."

"Oh."

They sat down at the table and Scott talked about his day at work. One of the scrubbers had gone offline, and he'd had to climb the smokestack to help repair it. Amy pictured him tethered six hundred feet in the air, probably while she was nosing about in the library. His job at the plant was often boring, but sometimes frighteningly dangerous. More than once, men had fallen to their deaths.

"So are you going to ask where I went today?" she said. Her mouth watered at the aroma of the chicken. She had craved barbecue daily for the past few weeks.

"I thought you'd tell me if you wanted to."

"And if I don't want to?" she asked, trying to sound playful.

"Then I won't tell you the next time I'm hanging from a string over the plant." He winked and started stabbing up green beans.

"I guess I asked for that."

"Not really. Consider it a freebie." He popped the beans into his mouth. "Besides," he said as he chewed, "don't you think you'd be happier not knowing that I'm up there?"

"Probably." *Definitely* was closer to the truth.

They finished eating and then watched some TV, Scott in his chair and Amy on the couch. It was a medical drama—a doctor was trying to diagnose a fat man's illness before he slipped into a coma. Scott was interested, but Amy was only half-listening. The last couple of days ran together in her mind. Her own doctor, with his fake concern; the man in the red shirt and his tilted head; the face of the truck stereo knocking against her shoe; the booted foot on the

microfilm screen. She mixed them as she sat there, wondering what kind of shoes the man in the red shirt wore, and if her doctor ever got angry. Scott laughed at the witty surgeon on television and his sarcastic humor. Amy had gotten used to sitting on the couch and trying to feel movement in her belly, but tonight there was nothing. The remaining whiffs of barbecue had gone from tantalizing to nauseating. Outside, the sun had disappeared, giving way to insects crying in the night. Again, she imagined her husband dangling in the air, and she realized she had no idea what it would look like—if seeing it would make it seem safer or more terrifying. Surely they took the proper precautions. Weren't there rules about such things? Her mind raced until she needed words to clear it.

"We should get tested," she said. It barely overcame the clever TV doctor.

Scott glanced over at her, unblinking, but didn't say anything. Instead, he rose, walked to her, and placed the remote on her leg. The look on his face was rigid and undecipherable. He kissed her on the cheek, then walked to their bedroom and closed the door behind him as the television droned on unwatched. The entire time they had known each other he had never hit her or threatened to, but she wondered if a closed fist would be preferable to this. At least when he had gotten angry in the truck, she had known his feelings.

The pale light of the screen cast long shadows on the wall beside her. She wanted to follow him, try again, but she sat instead, feeling as lonely as she could ever remember, thinking of her father and his bedtime stories. She'd laughed as a child when Brer Rabbit had gotten tangled irretrievably in the Tar Baby, his struggles only further entangling him, but it didn't seem funny now. She missed her father, and imagined the child inside of her doing the same. Or maybe its mother. She felt lost. Responsible. What was the consequence of bringing a child into the world to watch a parent die slowly and then await the same death? Was thirty years atonement enough? Could she look into the eyes of a withered child and admit that she knew it would happen and did nothing? Could Scott? She despised the thought of him struggling to do this alone.

Clicking off the television, she walked to the bedroom door and opened it quietly. There was a thin strip of light under the bathroom door. The shower was running. She tried the knob, but it was locked. As she loosened her grip, a faint sound mingled with the water. She lowered herself to the floor and put her ear to the crack. At first she couldn't make it out, and then she found a pattern. He was crying.

When he came out of the bathroom, she was already in bed. He eased his back against her and she felt her breath hot against the nape of his neck. She wanted to let him sleep without saying anything but he spoke instead.

“Can we not stick this thing on one of us yet?” he said. “Maybe we can just live until something stops us. That’s what most people do.”

“And the baby?” she asked. Firm against his body, she felt the child between them. She wanted it to grow. Play Little League. Puzzle over algebra. Eat barbecue. It would be worth what came after.

“We can deal with that, too,” he said. “Besides, at least one of us will get out of dealing with a teenager.” He rolled over and kissed her neck. She brushed her fingertips through the coarse hairs on his chest. He liked when she did that, but she wondered if the man in the red shirt had ever felt such things.

Two weeks later, she walked into the doctor’s office alone, staring again at the balding man across the wide expanse of his marble desk.

“Are you certain your husband can’t be here, too, Mrs. Baker?” he asked. “It seems like the sort of situation you should both be present for.”

She could see he thought it was wrong, but his opinion didn’t matter to her.

“No. I’m sorry. He can’t.” She didn’t want to draw it out. “I’d like to know.”

“All right.” He took the miniature basketball off its stand and palmed it for a moment, then rested it on his desk calendar. “You tested negative for the genetic markers that correspond with Huntington’s.”

Amy gave a slight reflexive lurch forward in her chair, then settled back. She was motionless for a few seconds, then stood with effort and extended her hand.

“Thank you,” she said. It felt like cheating now that it was done, but she forced herself to look in his eyes. “I have to ask you to keep this between the two of us. I’m sorry.” She waited for a response.

“As am I,” the doctor said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” He walked past her without a second look. Already Amy was unsure. There was no unknowing. She told herself that it was necessary, that she couldn’t have been blind to it all those years. This familiar thought calmed her, and she walked out of the office and down the hall toward the parking garage.

As she drove home, she weighed the bitter new knowledge in her mind. What did she really have? A well-meaning mother, a dead father, a half-formed family that would fail, an unborn child with an expiration date. She thought of her dad now, and for the first time wondered if he hadn’t gotten out at the right time, missed so much of the hurt that came after. There were plenty of fat oaks along her side of the road, and she imagined the headlights wrapping around the tree, staring at each other; the sick, popping light bulb sound of the impact. Then she thought of Scott, hanging from a thread in the sky, and continued home, oblivious to the passing world. ☪