

The Natural Child

Lara dashed into the living room. "I have great news, Fabio!" she exclaimed. "You're going to be a father!"

"A father?" Fabio repeated, wondering whether he'd understood correctly. "I thought we'd already had that discussion. We agreed that a child was financially out of reach for us."

The couple had downloaded various apps allowing prospective parents to design a custom baby. One app even showed a video of how the child would evolve from toddler to adult.

As the young couple didn't have the money to buy such a "designer" baby, Lara had persuaded Fabio to visit a showroom with "standard" babies on display.

Fabio had to use all his powers of persuasion to stop his girlfriend from taking a showroom model home. In the end, they'd returned with a kitten.

"I know a child is too expensive for us," Lara replied, "but we're not buying one; we're getting one, free of charge!"

Fabio was baffled. "A free baby? What did we do to deserve that?"

"Don't play dumb!" Lara teased, poking her boyfriend's chest with a strange stick. "Didn't you learn about the birds and the bees at school?"

Fabio shot her an irritated look. "Honestly, Lara, I don't understand what you're talking about. Stop joking around."

"I'm dead serious," Lara replied, waving the stick in front of his face. "Look: two lines!"

Fabio grabbed her wrist to inspect the odd object. "What's that?"

"A pregnancy test," Lara answered. "Two lines mean we're having a baby... a child of our own."

"Where did you get that test?" Fabio asked. "Those things aren't available anymore, are they?"

"I found a website selling vintage items," Lara said with a wink. "It was still in its original packaging."

"That thing is ancient," Fabio scoffed. "It can't be reliable."

"The expiration date was July 31, 2026," Lara admitted. "That's half a century ago, but I'm sure the result is correct. I'm pregnant. I can feel it!"

Fabio's jaw dropped. "But that's..."

"A miracle!" said Dr. Albright. "It's been thirty years since the last baby was born from a woman."

"How did this happen?" Fabio asked.

Dr. Albright gave Fabio a playful look. "Have you never heard of the birds and the bees, young man? Or did you sleep through history class?"

Fabio grew angry. "I'm not stupid! I know that humanity hasn't been able to reproduce naturally since 2040."

"Indeed," Dr. Albright said. "The odds of Lara getting pregnant were practically nonexistent, yet here we are."

"We're a medical wonder!" Lara beamed.

"You truly are," the doctor nodded. "Have you decided what to do?"

Lara threw a confused look at the doctor. "What to do?"

"Are you planning to keep the baby?"

Now it was Lara's turn to get angry. "Of course, I'll keep it!"

"I meant well," the doctor soothed. "During my medical studies, I took an elective class on the history of medical science. I recall that pregnancy was no walk in the park for the mother. If you buy a factory baby, you know it will be healthy and immune to all known diseases. You even get a warranty for accidents. All those benefits disappear if you choose to give birth to a child of your own."

"That's definitely something to think about," Fabio said, but Lara was no longer listening.

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The media discovered Lara as soon as her baby bump became visible. Journalists descended on the couple, clamoring for an interview.

Lara refused all microphones and cameras, but she couldn't avoid becoming a global news story.

Fabio was deeply annoyed, not by the attention they received as a couple, but by Lara's complete disinterest in commercial opportunities.

One day, he came home with a lawyer. "Lara, darling," he said. "Dozens of obscenely wealthy couples have been asking if our baby is for sale. They are offering a ton of money because a naturally conceived baby is so unique."

"So that's why strangers are mailing us expensive gifts for the unborn child," Lara replied. "I knew there was a catch."

"Since the arrival of baby factories, there's no law prohibiting the sale of babies anymore," the lawyer added. "Neither are there regulations on how much you can charge. The price is determined by the free market."

"That means we can sell our baby to the highest bidder," Fabio clarified.

"But I don't want to sell my baby!" Lara cried.

"It's my child too, Lara," Fabio argued, glancing at his lawyer. "Don't I get a say in this?"

"He's correct," the lawyer interjected. "If you want to keep the baby entirely for yourself, Mr. Fabio is willing to give up his claim to the child, but he expects half of whatever the highest bidder offers in compensation."

"What?" Lara raged. "How much money are we talking about?"

The lawyer wrote a figure on a piece of paper.

"Why are you doing this to me, Fabio?" Lara moaned.

"With that kind of money, we could pay off all our loans in one go," Fabio explained. "We'd still have enough left to buy ten kids."

Lara clenched her fists. "I don't want ten factory babies! I want to give birth and raise my own child."

"If you agree to sell your firstborn," the lawyer continued calmly, "Mr. Fabio is willing to sign a contract guaranteeing that you can raise the next baby he conceives with you."

"Consult with your lawyer," Fabio urged the young woman carrying his child.

"You heartless idiot!" Lara snapped. "You know damn well that I don't have a lawyer, nor the money to hire one."

"I'd strongly advise you to hire counsel," the lawyer said. "In your condition, taking up your own defense probably won't end well."

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It didn't end well. Lara's fight to prevent Fabio from selling the child failed.

The court ruled that a naturally conceived baby was legally indistinguishable from a factory-produced child and was therefore subject to the same property laws.

The couple became filthy rich overnight.

Fabio bought a luxurious penthouse, convinced Lara would eventually come around. But she moved into a small apartment, waiting for a second miracle that would never come. Fabio's suite echoed with silence, its nursery remained empty.