

# The Results

SARAH

OUR DESTINATION is a nondescript waiting room located in the far corner of the hospital. A cul-de-sac tucked far away from the normal, noisy traffic of the wards and clinics. It's an appropriate location. The genetics department rarely sees patients; for us they've made an exception.

There's no one around to welcome us, just a series of blank doors facing onto a small waiting area. There are windows, but they're too high up to see out of. Two flickery fluorescent tubes make up for the lack of natural daylight. There's a water dispenser and a single row of grubby, wipe-clean vinyl chairs. They're empty. No one else is in our predicament.

We're early for our appointment, desperate for an end to the hiatus of the past ten days, but now we're here I'm gripped by the desire to run away. I can't settle. I pace. Nine steps to the wall and turn. Nine steps and turn.

Phil is immobile. He sits, hunched forward, staring at his shoes, utterly still and unreachable. It's his way of coping. He's trying to protect himself from what's happening, but he can't. He hasn't

looked me squarely in the face for days, but I've caught his oblique glances when I've been busy doing something or when he thought I was reading or sleeping. I've seen his confusion and hurt and, beneath that, his doubts – doubts that I've been unable to assuage. How can I explain the inexplicable? How can I defend myself against an accusation that he can't bring himself to level against me? Instead of talking things through, sharing our fears, we've retreated into our respective corners and waited for today, and for the results.

Nine steps and turn.

Phil keeps his head bowed as if he's praying, but I know he's not; the only faith he has is 'us' and that's been called into question. Besides, it's not prayer that's going to save our marriage, it's science.

The scuffed door with the black name-plaque, outside which we wait, is closed. On the other side of the door is *Mr Stephen Berill, PhD, CSU Lead Clinician, Department of Clinical Genetics*. Mr Berill knows our future because he has looked into our past. He knows and we do not. So we must wait. We must bear the corrosive ignorance for a few minutes more.

Nine steps and turn.

The distant sounds of the hospital leak around the corner.

Phil does not look up.

Nine steps and turn.

At last the door opens and a smart woman in her fifties emerges. Her voice booms around the spartan waiting room. 'Good morning. Maria Tharby. We spoke on the phone.' She extends her hand, first to me, then to Phil. Brisk, smiling. 'Please, come through.' Like obedient children we follow her into the room. 'Stephen. Mr and Mrs Rudak are here.' A tall man steps out from behind his desk. His hand is papery-dry in mine. He says 'hello' in a soft Scottish voice, then falls silent, letting the woman do all the talking, and she is still talking. 'I know this must seem unnecessarily pedantic, but could I just check: you have brought the documents with you, haven't you?'

I nod. For a second her sparkly tone falters. 'I'm sorry, but may I see them.'

'Yes, sorry, of course.' I fumble the envelope out of my bag and pass it to her.

'Please, take a seat.' We do as instructed and she talks some more. 'As I explained on the phone, I'm afraid I have to repeat the identity checks again today. Overkill, I know, but the data-protection guidelines – as you can imagine... in the circumstances...' She flutters her hand through the air as if to sum up the complexity of it all, but when her eyes meet the blankness of mine she subsides back to her task. She pulls our documents out of the envelope and begins to go through them. 'Passports *and* birth certificates, excellent. If you can bear with me, just a moment, while I take down the details, then I promise we'll get under way.'

Phil and I have no choice but to sit there while she laboriously records whatever it is she needs to record onto her set of official forms. She starts with Lauren's passport, cracking open the cover and turning to the photo pages at the back. Lauren, at ten, round-faced and unsmiling. The main colour image is as clear as my memory, the duplicate image, on the facing page, faded and recessive, like a child from the past. I hold myself still as the silty anxiety in my stomach churns.

'You'll be needing a new one for her soon.' Ms Tharby chatters away as she transcribes the dates and serial numbers. 'And her birth certificate... Ah, here it is. Oh...' She separates the sheets of paper with a moistened fingertip. 'You seem to have brought your son's along as well. I've no need for his, thank you.' She hands it back to me. 'Now, just yourself and Philip's details, and we'll be finished.' Phil stares at her, in disbelief. I stare past her, at Mr Berill. He has gone back to work, immune to Ms Tharby's brittle prattle and to our presence: glasses on, head down, his attention totally focused on the lab report on the desk in front of him. In his hands Mr Berill

holds the fragile skeins that bind our family together. I watch him, unable to discern our fate.

## PHIL

The administrator woman seems incapable of shutting up. On and on she rambles. I stare at her and concentrate on thinking... nothing. It's more difficult than it sounds. It's been a struggle to keep control of the tight coil of possibilities that has been wedged in my gut for the past ten days, but somehow I've managed it. The alternative is unbearable. Sarah and I do not lie to each other, we have never lied to each other; she would not lie to me, not about this. So that's what I've chosen to think – nothing, because nothing is far less frightening than the alternative. I resolutely refuse to start chasing nightmares until we know, for definite, what the tests say. It's hard work. I focus on the pressure in my spine and wait for the bloody woman to shut up.

'All done,' she eventually trills, gathering together her forms with officious zeal. She glances at the consultant, transferring the power to him, then withdraws to a chair at the back of the room. Her job done. We turn our attention to Mr Berill. He removes his glasses and composes himself. When he finally speaks his voice is low and calm. 'First of all, I want to apologise for the length of time this has taken, it must have been very difficult for you. It was a consequence of the initial problems in obtaining your daughter's samples and the resultant delay in them coming through to the lab. Our sincere apologies for that. Thank you for your patience. We also wanted to be absolutely confident in our reading of the results.'

'And are you?' Sarah asks.

'Yes.' He slides his finger under the top cover of the file and

flips it open. “The results have been checked, very thoroughly, and we’ve run a number of extra screens, above the usual PCR and RFLP approaches, due to the result.” Sarah edges forward on her seat. I stare at his downturned face, wanting to shake the answer out of him. “We were obviously tasked to establish Lauren’s paternity, but I’m afraid we were unable to do that.” Sarah makes an inarticulate noise. I taste ash in my mouth. “What we’ve found is very unexpected.” He hesitates and picks up his glasses again, twisting the frame between his fingers. “The tests... all the tests we ran... confirm, unequivocally, that Lauren is not your biological child.”

“That can’t be!” Defiance from Sarah, absolute defiance.

The nightmares I’ve kept buried scream free. Sarah lied.

“Please, Mrs Rudak, you must hear me out.” Mr Berill has to raise his voice to overcome Sarah’s furious denials.

“But it’s not true. I—”

He cuts her off. “Mrs Rudak! Please! It’s very important that you *both* hear me out.” He waits for silence, and in the gap I start to mourn. He begins speaking again, insistent, slow, clear words. “What I mean is: she is neither your child, Phil, nor is she yours, Sarah. Lauren shares no DNA with *either* of you.” One beat, two beats. The blood still flows through my heart, oxygen must still be reaching my brain, for his soft, educated, authoritative voice still gets through. “You both scored zero per cent on “probability of parentage”.” He waits, letting what he’s just said seep in. “We’ve already looked into a possible chimera situation, but we’ve discounted that.” I concentrate very hard on listening to one word after another. “I’m sorry, but to clarify: the test results categorically confirm that Lauren is not your biological daughter.” He looks from me to Sarah. “I’m so very sorry. I can only try to imagine the shock you must be feeling.”

It feels like a car crash. I ricochet from one soul-jarring impact headlong into another, leaving me stupid with shock. “What’re you talking about? How can she not be ours? I don’t get it.”

The woman lamely chips in, 'We appreciate that this must be a dreadful shock.'

'No, I don't get it. How is that possible?' My voice is shaking.

Mr Berill draws a deep breath. 'That I don't know; all I can do today is go through the results with you.' He gestures at the papers in the file. 'I can explain the processes we've used, but I'm afraid the conclusive finding is that Lauren is not your biological child.' The sound of Sarah's chair being pushed back draws our attention. She curls forward in her seat and wraps her arms around her knees, a tight curve of misery. 'Mrs Rudak, are you all right?' Mr Berill makes a move to come out from behind his desk, but I stop him.

Sarah is my wife. Sarah did not lie. Sarah has never lied to me. I kneel down beside her and tentatively place my hand on her back. 'Sarah?' I need her to come back to me. I need to tell her that I'm so sorry I ever doubted her. I need to get through to her, to comfort her. I need her. But she doesn't unlock. I keep my hand there, touching her, pressing my fingers gently into the soft fabric of her jumper, trying to reach her. Eventually I feel her lean her weight back into me as she unfurls upright to face him and, in a voice that sounds unnaturally normal, she says, 'Are you telling me we have another daughter out there somewhere?'

And we crash and ricochet again.