

# The Second Child

*Caroline Bond*



First published in trade paperback in Great Britain in 2018 by Corvus,  
an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is  
available from the British Library.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978 1 78649 335 4

E-Book ISBN: 978 1 78649 337 8

Printed in Great Britain

Corvus  
An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd  
Ormond House  
26–27 Boswell Street  
London  
WC1N 3JZ

[www.corvus-books.co.uk](http://www.corvus-books.co.uk)

*In memory of  
Frances Anne Bond  
who was a reader,  
a good writer  
and a very good mum.*



# 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.

# Like Normal

SARAH

AN HOUR and a half later we're home. It's like waking abruptly from a nightmare, disorientating and disconcerting. My body's still coursing with adrenaline, making me feel trapped and breathless, and yet we are resolutely back in the world of the mundane. Phil opens the porch door and moves aside to let me through, and for a split second I'm struck by the urge to step backwards, not forwards, but one of us has to break the seal on the house. We're being ridiculous. This is our home. It's the same, slightly over-stuffed mid-terrace with the chipped-paint front door that we stepped out of this morning. There's the same pile of shoes in the porch and the same tangle of jackets on the newel post. There's still only one slice of the bread left in the bread bin, the thick crusty end that no one will eat, not even as toast; and I still need to go shopping, take the washing out of the machine, change Lauren's bed and check my emails. But it's the very normality of it that's the problem. The house hasn't changed, but we have. Phil puts his hand to the small of my back and the contact propels me forward. We step inside. He pauses in the middle of the hallway, the keys in his hand.

'Tea?' I ask.

He looks at me, taking far too long to respond. 'No.'

'Okay.'

'What time is it?'

'Just after two p.m.' I know what he's asking. He's calculating how long we have until Lauren arrives home. It's not long. We have exactly two hours and fifteen minutes before our daughter – who they say is not our daughter – returns. I reach out and take the keys from him and dump them in the bowl on the side. We stand, stranded, in the hall.

'Sarah?' He reaches out and pulls me to him and we cling to each other, wordlessly, for a few seconds. It's me that breaks us apart.

'Come on.' He follows me through to the kitchen and waits while I unlock the back door. I shove it open with my hip, it always sticks, and we step out into the garden, leaving the pressure of the house behind.

It's a relief to be outside after the stale, closed-off atmosphere in the hospital. We sit on the bench and breathe fresh, soft air into our lungs. A cloud of midges swirls in the sunlight threading through the branches of the apple tree and somewhere, a few gardens over, a radio cuts the quiet. The burn in my throat eventually eases enough for me to speak. This isn't about me and Phil any more, we'll heal; this is about us, as a family. We have to start thinking about James and Lauren. 'I don't think we should say anything yet. Not until we've had time to... think.'

Phil nods, but after a second he says, 'But it's going to kick off. From what that woman said, an army of bloody professionals is going to descend on us, now that they've confirmed she's not ours.' He sees me flinch.

'She is ours.'

'I know, but... legally.'

‘Phil, don’t. I can’t bear to think like that. I know what the biology says, but that doesn’t change Lauren being our daughter.’

He shifts around to face me. ‘So what do we do? We can’t just pretend that everything is normal.’

‘Can’t we?’

We fall silent, thinking about the impossibility of the next few hours, the next few days, the rest of our lives. The pain returns and the fear, but not the panic, because I know we can survive this, navigate a way through it, as long as we’re together, counterbalancing each other, keeping each other in shape. We’ve had twenty years of this yin and yang: his pragmatism framing my emotion, his impulsiveness balanced by my caution... both of us always, ultimately, brought together by what’s best for the kids. And that’s precisely what I think we need to do now: what’s ‘best’ for them. We have to absorb the shock and dilute its power, before we unleash it inside our family. ‘Just for tonight. Please, Phil. Besides, what are we going to say?’

Phil leans back and tilts his face up to the sky. The radio contributes something loud, rappy and completely inappropriate to the moment as he thinks. ‘Okay... until we know how we’re going to handle it, we’ll say nothing, but tomorrow...’

‘I know.’ The enormity of it is overwhelming. It’s also hard to countenance sitting in our small, sheltered back garden.

‘Are you okay?’ He takes my hand and holds it lightly. I can feel his pulse through his fingertips.

I nod; it’s an obvious but necessary lie. We both look back at our solid, slightly scruffy house. Everything appears so calm and ordinary. Eventually I say, ‘I need to get something in for tea.’ And with that, we pick up the worn-smooth threads of our daily routines.

We are both fully back in role by the time James thumps into the house after college. I’m prepping veg for our evening meal and

Phil's working on his laptop. James heads straight to the bread bin, now replenished with a toastie loaf and a pack of bagels. 'Can I have two?' He's already ripping open the packet. 'Oh, hi.' This to his dad, a rare sight this early in the day. 'Why are you here?'

'I live here, remember? Pay the bills, drive you to stuff, clean your footie boots.' James pulls his 'you're *so* not funny' face. 'I'm just working from home for a change. Stick one in for me, will you, mate?' We missed lunch and Phil, like James, can only last a couple of hours between feeds. 'College okay?'

'Uh-huh.' James isn't a fan of words when noises will do. Conversation disposed of, Phil goes back to his emails, James slathers butter on his bagels, and I slice peppers and mushrooms, and what looks like normality reigns as the clock ticks towards 4.15 p.m.

She's late back, only a few minutes, but it feels like longer. Phil and I go out to meet her from the bus. We watch silently as it reverses alongside the kerb. Graham, the driver, clambers out. He acknowledges our presence with his usual, slightly shy 'hello' and a hitch of his council regulation trousers. Phil and I stand side by side on the pavement like sentinels as Graham opens up the doors, clambers aboard and sets about undoing all the straps and buckles that secure Lauren's wheelchair. He chats to her as he kneels at her side, working free the anchors. I notice how careful he is as he lifts the last strap over her head, making sure it doesn't touch her face. 'There you go, sweetheart. You've got the full welcome committee today.' Graham always chats to Lauren, despite knowing full well that he will never get a reply. He reverses her chair onto the lift and lets Lauren push the down-button on the control panel, which is, as he's told me twenty times before, *strictly against council health-and-safety guidelines, but who's gonna tell 'em*. They ride down the four feet slowly and regally. My pulse races. 'There you go.' He eases her chair carefully up the kerb and Phil takes the handles. 'She's been good as gold, as always. See you in the morning.' One more

trouser hitch and Graham turns back towards the bus. He has three more kids to drop off before his shift is over for the day.

We take her inside and then...

Then it's just like normal. Lauren hands me her hat, I unbuckle her and she slides herself out of her wheelchair, then crawls to 'her spot' on the floor in the lounge and signs for her iPad, and for something to eat. Phil brings her the iPad, but I sign, as I always do, that she must wait for her tea. The room fills with the sound of her pre-school programmes. She is content to be home. Just like normal.

And so it's the routine that saves us, the necessary, boring, repetitive routine of family life. Phil and I steer clear of anything that touches on the future and stick to immediate concerns, the usual, pressing issues of whose turn it is to stack the dishwasher; how it's possible that I can hear the freezer door opening and ice cream being stealthily removed, despite being three rooms away; and why it's not a good idea to leave the back door wide open, as next door's cat will always end up on our kitchen counter, eating butter from the dish. The mundane rituals go some way to soothing the shock.

At 8.30 p.m. I take Lauren up to bed, leaving the boys free to switch the TV straight over to the football match that they're 'missing'. She's as compliant as ever, 'helping me' as much as she can. She knows the routine. As I pull her T-shirt over her head, I catch sight of the bruise in the soft, chubby crease of her arm where they drew the blood samples. Her skin bruises easily and deeply, and the area around the puncture wound is still a sickly yellowy-green. I whisper, 'Sorry' and stroke her arm, and for a second she studies me as if she's trying to fathom the connection between her skin and my words, but of course she can't. She settles into bed and I switch off the light, and in a heartbeat the momentum that's been keeping me going all day judders to a stop. I push aside a pile of clothes and sit on the chair in the corner of her room, feeling hollowed out. Lauren

wriggles around for a few moments getting herself comfortable, but soon settles, lying on her side, facing me. Her eyes blink open and shut. She's asleep within five minutes, tucked safely within the fold of our family, dreaming her untroubled dreams.

I study her face. It's a face that I've washed and dried all her life. I'm as familiar with her body as I am with my own. She needs me now as much as she did when she was a baby. But as I sit in her darkening bedroom, I know that I'm looking at her differently. In the arch of her eyebrows and in the deep cleft above her lips, in the colour of her hair – always a shade darker than Phil's or mine – and in the paleness of her skin, I'm searching for evidence of her otherness. It feels like madness.

When they said there was a problem with the initial blood test, I assumed the worst. Or I thought I did. I assumed it was another problem linked to her condition. I braced myself for a new curve ball, thrown hard and low at us by her faulty genes. Something degenerative? Her kidneys? Something they'd missed, despite all the years of medical prodding and probing? Then came Phil's unspoken doubts, his overplayed indifference, while the worm of distrust ate away at him from inside. But this new blow has nothing to do with Lauren's disability, or anything to do with Phil or me. It is bigger than her and us. Lauren is not ours.

She begins to snore softly and I struggle to comprehend the truth of it. This child, the child we've spent fourteen years loving and caring for, who has grown but will never grow up, this child is not our daughter. Somewhere out there she has another mother, oblivious as yet, living her life, assuming her reality is just that: real. And wherever that mother is, there is another child, my birth daughter.

I cry quietly so as not to wake her.



# Sleepless

PHIL

I DON'T remember going to sleep, but when I jerk awake it's dark, that middle-of-the-night silvery dark that confirms there's hours to go until dawn. I sense Sarah beside me silent and, I hope, asleep.

I go to the loo and piss noisily in the grey, moonlit bathroom. Lauren's snores are loud enough to be heard above the crash of my pee. Our house is small. There's no escaping each other, even if you want to. I can't face going back to bed, so I go in to check on her, like I have a thousand times before.

Her bedroom is stuffy. She's lying flat on her back with the duvet pulled up over her head. I ease it off her face gently so that she can breathe more easily, then I slide down and sit on the carpet, my back resting against the cold mirror on the wardrobe door. I'm aware of how stupid and melodramatic I'm being, prowling around the house in the early hours of the morning. I know I'm encouraging the anger that is churning in my gut, feeding it the oxygen that it needs to grow. But I can't be calm. I don't feel calm. All evening trying to pretend that everything is okay, when inside I'm raging. I'm furious with them – at the bloody hospital, at the whole sodding medical

profession – every contact we’ve ever had with them has been bad and now this. I can’t conceive of how it was possible that they gave us the wrong child. How?

And I’m mad at myself, because on one level this chaos is of my own making. If I hadn’t gone to the paediatric appointment in the first place, if I hadn’t been clueless about the details in Lauren’s file, if I hadn’t queried her blood group just to prove that I was interested and involved, I wouldn’t have stirred up this whole mess and this wouldn’t be happening. We would’ve walked out of that room none the wiser and life would’ve gone on as normal.

This is happening because I was trying to prove to Sarah, and to myself, that I am a good husband and a good dad. No irony there.

A month or so ago Sarah was pissed off with me. There’d been the usual accumulation of things that I’d missed, forgotten about or, the real killer, never realised needing doing, sorting, booking or cancelling in the first place. She’d been circling the growing pile of grievances all week, dive-bombing in on something different every morning, usually just as I was about to set off for work, but on that Friday evening, with James round at Harry’s, Lauren upstairs asleep and most of a bottle of red demolished, she swooped. ‘You have no idea, have you? Go on, which appointment is it on Thursday?’

I hit *mute* on the TV remote. Guess-or-confess time. ‘I’m sorry, I don’t know. She has a physio appointment coming up, but that’s not until the end of the month, is it?’ I heard the uncertainty in my voice.

‘That’s on the twenty-fifth.’

‘Sarah, please just tell me.’ Nothing. ‘I’m sorry, but Lauren has a lot of appointments. I can’t remember them all.’

She bashed down her glass. ‘Yes, she does. It must be nice *not* having to bother with the petty details of them.’ Her face was flushed, mottled pink by wine, anger and tiredness.

'I know it's been a bit full-on this past month or so.' This was obviously the wrong thing to say.

'Full-on? You haven't a clue. Every damn appointment, all the phone calls, all the sorting out – it doesn't just happen, you know.'

'I do know. And I appreciate how much you do; you're brilliant at keeping on top of it all.' And she was, and I meant what I was saying.

'I don't want your appreciation.' Her irritation was fierce. 'I want you to be more involved. I want it to be *you* having to repeat, over and over again, her medical history, chase social workers, sit there while they mess with her, drive around panicking that you're going to be late, trying to find somewhere to park.' She was barely drawing breath. The escalation of this particular argument was familiar and the end result was the same. I ploughed on, trying to make amends, letting Sarah vent her frustrations until she finally ran out of steam and got upset. It was a rerun of a conversation we seemed to be having with worrying regularity.

In bed, an hour or so later, the tension slowly eased and she let me hug her. The dark, and our double bed, coming to our aid.

On the Monday evening I made sure to be home on time from work and, instead of bringing flowers, which I'd misjudged before and seen rammed into vases with as much force as the preceding argument, I told Sarah that I'd booked the following Thursday afternoon off, so that I could pick Lauren up from school and take her to the appointment with the paediatrician.

Which is what I did. I took my daughter to the most routine of her appointments for her general health check, to help share the burden with my wife.

And Sarah was right. The parking provision was crap. A delivery van and a taxi were hunkered in the two designated disabled spots, engines running, their drivers avoiding eye contact. There was nowhere close enough or big enough to park the van, so we ended

up on a meter, which gave us precisely seventy minutes to get in and out of the appointment. I was sweaty and in a mood by the time we crashed into the waiting room, fifteen minutes late. We needn't have bothered rushing. There were three other families already there, two of them, as it turned out, also booked to see Ms Langford. I tried to amuse Lauren by showing her the pictures in the magazines, but the reading material in the clinic seemed to consist of a series of specialist engineering mags, a few copies of *Reader's Digest* and three ripped-beyond-reading pop-up books. One of the other mums took pity on me and passed over a couple of her daughter's picture books. At least Lauren was quiet and relatively content, only registering her profound boredom by gently rocking her head, poking me in the arm every two minutes and signing for her tea.

One of the boys waiting with his parents had some form of autism. He bounced on his chair and flapped his hands hard against his ears, making a low keening sound that grew loud and then soft for no apparent reason. His parents tried unsuccessfully to distract him when the noise grew too insistent. I smiled each time the volume crept up, pretending it wasn't getting on my nerves and everybody else's. The other little boy looked 'normal', apart from being small and having a slightly misshapen head. The book-lending mum had a daughter in a wheelchair who looked very poorly indeed. A tube ran across her face and into her nose, and her frail legs were encased in some sort of metal frame. I went back to showing Lauren *The Three Little Pigs* and avoiding eye contact with any of the other parents. If Sarah had been there, it would've been different. Conversation would have sparked and flourished, running back and forth along that wavelength that most mothers seem to be on, especially the mothers of kids with a problem.

The wait dragged on, and Lauren's boredom thickened and made her restless. I remembered Ms Langford from the early days.

Experienced, kind, very thorough, which was great when you were in with her, but not while you were waiting. The small boy went in next, followed soon afterwards by the autistic lad. They must have been seeing another consultant. The mum with the poorly daughter also turned out to be before us, which confirmed in my mind that we were buggered, as there was no way *that* was going to be a short conversation. I could see the meter ticking over into penalty as we sat there, trapped. Sarah's desire to include me in the realities of Lauren's appointments was working.

By the time our turn ground around, Lauren was past it, banging her head in protest. She tried to jam her hands in the spokes of her wheelchair when she realised that we were heading *into* another room, not outside. Ms Langford stood up to greet us, shook my hand, then crouched down to say 'hi' to Lauren, who refused to respond. 'Sorry,' I said, 'she's a bit tired from school and all the waiting around.'

To her credit, Ms Langford smiled ruefully. 'Yes, I'm sorry you've had such a long wait. Sometimes there are some complex issues.' We both paused and I thought about the frail blonde child with her attentive, resolute mother. 'Please, take a seat.' Lauren, as if suddenly completely *au fait* with what was about to occur, flicked off her wheelchair brakes, spun her chair around and wheeled herself a couple of feet away from us, back turned, as good an impression of a teenage strop as you were ever going to get. Ms Langford laughed. 'Good to see she has a mind of her own. What is Lauren now – fourteen?'

'Very nearly fifteen.'

'And well, I see?'

'Yes, apart from the usual stuff.'

'But her glaucoma is under control, and I gather there are no immediate plans regarding further leg surgery?' She started looking through the notes on the top layer of Lauren's huge file, nodding as

if in approval, which somehow irritated me. It was as if there was a league table for problems and, in that context, Lauren had got off lightly.

‘Well, the surgery was hardly a success; we’re not putting her through anything like that ever again,’ I bit back.

Ms Langford read on, telling me about the events of the past year – our year – then asked about Lauren’s eating and her weight. By the time we were onto the questions about her school and her social life, both she and I knew we were going through the motions, heading into the home straight. A loud snore from Lauren startled us both. Her head lolled at an uncomfortable angle. She was obviously fast asleep, her back still turned.

‘Does she do that often? Sleep during the day?’

I was past politeness. ‘Only when she’s bored.’

Ms Langford, the consummate professional, didn’t take the bait. She continued rifling through Lauren’s file. ‘Oh, I see you had a couple of appointments with Mr Belmont?’ She peered at me over her reading glasses, waiting.

‘We did?’ It was a question that could’ve meant anything, including ‘Did we?’ I had no recollection of a Mr Belmont. I had no idea what she was talking about.

‘Her sleep apnoea?’ Ms Langford was quizzing me, but I was still coming up short. Sarah, of course, would’ve known immediately what the appointments were for. Ms Langford skim-read more of the notes and I sat there like a chump, listening to Lauren’s snoring. ‘I see you did an oxygen saturation trace, and they took bloods to check for anaemia and to look at her thyroid function.’ She read on: the results presumably.

‘And the results were?’ I had to ask, whatever my ignorance would seem to indicate about my involvement with Lauren and the state of my relationship with my wife.

‘Reasonable on her oxygen levels and’ – she flipped over to the

next sheet – ‘her blood work showed a slightly lower-than-average white blood-cell count, but nothing to indicate a need for treatment. Would you like to see the test results?’

To which, though I was tired, Lauren was fast asleep and the van was no doubt ticketed, I of course said, ‘Yes.’

She slid the sheets of paper across the desk and I glanced down at them. Ms Langford explained, to my idiot eyes, the peaks and troughs of the trace. ‘It’s like a polygraph, only measuring oxygen levels rather than body temperature. But there seems to have been no real cause for concern and, as you’ll see overleaf, the blood tests didn’t indicate a problem, either, which is why I’m a little puzzled about her nodding off. Is she doing it a lot?’

At this, she turned to look at Lauren. I forced myself to skim-read the information; after all this was about my daughter’s health, not about Sarah and me bickering. At the top of the page I noticed that it gave Lauren’s blood group, then a series of figures with percentages.

‘Is she doing it a lot?’

‘No, not a lot.’ I didn’t look up from the page. ‘I think it’s just been a long week at school.’

‘Well, let’s just keep an eye on it for the time being.’

Blood group: A Positive.

Ms Langford started to wrap it up. ‘I suggest we see you again in twelve months’ time. Obviously, if there’s anything that troubles you or your wife in the interim, you’ve got my number; you can always call and we can get you in to see me more quickly.’ I kept staring at the sheet of paper. ‘Mr Rudak, was there something else?’

I nearly left it. I very nearly left it alone and took Lauren home. ‘Yes, could I just ask... we’ve never been told Lauren’s blood group before. It says here that she’s A positive.’

‘Yes?’

‘Well, when we met with the genetics team, when Lauren was a

baby, when she was first diagnosed, they said that RTS isn't inherited, that it was just a glitch, not from either of us? They tested us both for some kind of chromosome markers, but there was nothing.'

'Yes. I know families can find it hard to accept, but many conditions, including Rubinstein-Taybi, are naturally occurring.' She was looking at me, waiting for an actual question.

'But Lauren would inherit her blood type from us?'

'Well, yes, after a fashion.'

'How do you mean... after a fashion?'

Ms Langford returned to her desk. 'It's somewhat complicated by factors called antigens and antibodies, the Rh factor that you might have heard people mention?' I neither nodded nor said no. 'A child is a blend of its biological parents, when it comes to their blood.'

'So you can say what a child's blood group will be, if you know the parents?'

'You really need the grandparents as well, but I can assure you, an individual's blood group isn't relevant to RTS. Mr Rudak?' Lauren, as if sensing the tension in the room, stirred and shifted position with a deep, noisy breath. We both watched, waiting to see if she would wake or settle. Sleep claimed her again.

And that's when I could've just left it, should've just left it. But I didn't. 'So how come, if I'm O and Sarah is O negative, Lauren is A positive?'

Lauren catches her breath, rolls over and the snoring stops. I clamber to my feet, feeling the stiffness in my joints like an old man. It's still dark, hours to go until dawn. If I'd just left it, we could've carried on as normal, but if I had, we'd never have known about our other daughter.



# Disclosure

SARAH

ON FRIDAY morning Lauren sets off for school, Phil for work and James for college. All as normal. The house is empty by quarter past eight.

The first phone call comes at 9.05 a.m. There are six others before lunchtime.

By the second call I'm prepared. I'm armed with a notepad and a pen, and an alertness that is purely defensive. I make notes, check the correct spelling of everyone's names and the precise format of their email addresses. I'm calm and cooperative and organised. I aim for, and assume I'm making, the correct impression. I'm fully aware that these people have power over what happens next.

The callers are all, initially, hesitant and very courteous. They introduce themselves and their official roles in our 'case'. They each explain the different processes they have been tasked to initiate. I agree to all their requests for information, confirm that we will participate in something called 'full disclosure', though I have no idea what this entails, and agree dates for various meetings with various people. Everyone who disturbs my morning, and my peace, is professional and considerate and implacable. One of the last people to

get in touch is a woman called Mrs Winter; she's from the social-care team. Mrs Winter is the most hesitant, the most polite and the most worrying of them all. I have to strain to hear her, as she quietly explains the situation in terms of our new status as Lauren's 'recognised guardians'; we are no longer legally her parents. Mrs Winter is at pains to stress how central our relationship with Lauren is, and will be, *in any, and all, decisions, now and in the future*; the parentheses do little to reassure me. She whispers on in my ear about 'the process' and the need to ensure that everything possible is done to protect and promote Lauren's well-being, and that of the other child. She also explains that she has been tasked with preparing information for the 'birth family'. It takes me a moment to grasp what she means by this. She ends the call by quietly insisting on a home visit at the earliest possible date. I politely tell her that the earliest we can do is a week on Wednesday, as we already have appointments booked with the enquiry team and a legal advocate. She sighs, as if deeply disturbed by how long she must wait to meet us. 'Well, if that's the earliest you can manage, it'll have to be Wednesday.' She wishes me a good day, without any sense of irony.

The insidious creep of strangers into the security and sanctity of our family has begun.

I'm still sitting blankly with the phone in my hand when it rings again, making my heart thud. 'Hi.' The informality throws me. 'Hi? Sarah?' I don't respond. 'It's Ali.'

'Hi.'

'I was just checking you're still okay for the weekend.'

'Right.'

'So? Are we still on?' I can't think about moving furniture for my sister in the middle of all this. 'Look, if it's a problem, just say.' The spikiness in her voice is ill-disguised. Coming on top of the litany of calls I've received this morning, it punctures my already-frayed patience.

'It's not that.'

But Ali has already stopped listening. 'Look, I'm at work. I'll text you.' And she hangs up.

The rest of the afternoon is a write-off. I can't settle to anything and, though I try numerous times, I can't reach Phil. In desperation I call his office, but they say he's on a site visit out in the middle of nowhere. 'Somewhere up beyond Halifax, with the sheep and the hunchbacks,' Matt unhelpfully and unfunnily adds. So I roam around the house, moving from room to room in a restless, pointless dance while I shift silently through some of the small, simple, devastating phrases that I plan to use when we speak to James.

'There's nothing wrong with Lauren.' That's our opening gambit. James looks from me to Phil, clearly confused as to why he's been summoned downstairs for 'a talk'. It's Friday evening; he should be lying on his bed playing *FIFA* or faffing with his hair. I plough on. 'What I mean is, Dad and I had an appointment at the hospital yesterday, about Lauren. That's why Dad was at home when you got back. It's thrown up something we weren't expecting.' How's that for an understatement. 'It's not to do with her health, not this time.'

'Okay.'

I look at James's half-man/half-boy face and it strikes me how much he's grown up while we've been looking the other way. At seventeen, he can't remember a time without Lauren, his life has been dominated by her and her needs, yet here I am about to smash the simple but fundamental basis of his relationship with his sister... that she *is* his sister.

'The appointment was with the genetics team.' I can hear the waver in my voice.

He still isn't really paying attention. I can see his eyes flicking to his phone. He's so used to us having appointments with one specialist or another that he isn't expecting this to be any different. 'Okay.'

'They needed to look into a result they got back on a blood test they did.' Once I say it I, can never unsay it. 'It...' I dry.

James pushes himself upright, his nonchalance finally replaced by attentiveness. 'And?' He may be used to stuff happening with his sister, but he's not used to hearing fear and uncertainty from us.

'It's okay. Well, it isn't. It's a shock... what they've found. But we'll be okay. I promise we'll be okay. We'll work it out.'

'Sarah, just tell him,' Phil prompts.

'The blood test showed that Lauren isn't ours. Not biologically.' There, it's said and it can't be unsaid.

James blinks, twice, and pushes his fringe out of his eyes 'What?'

Phil steps in. 'Somehow there was a mix-up at the hospital when she was born. They think it happened when she was in the nursery. We were given the wrong baby to bring home. They're starting an investigation.'

'Fuck!' James immediately looks at me. 'Sorry.' He knows I hate him swearing.

Phil responds. 'Yeah. To be honest, "Fuck" just about sums it up.' He smiles at our son and I feel a tug of grief that I can't communicate with him as naturally as Phil does. I love James ferociously, he is my piece of joy in the world and I would do anything to protect him, but I don't always know how to talk to him.

'It sounds like something out of a film.' James looks puzzled more than anything else.

Phil takes over from me. 'I know. But I'm afraid it's not. We're telling you because you have a right to know and, well, there's going to be quite a lot of people who are going to have to get involved. Social workers' – his face betrays his feelings about more social workers poking into our lives – 'and the court and the hospital. They're obviously trying to track down the other family. The other baby. Your biological sister.' I admire Phil's clarity, his commitment to punching home the truth of the situation, leaving

no doubt about the implications. James shuffles about on his chair.

I leap in. 'It's okay to not know what to say. We don't, really.'

James's first question, when it comes, surprises me. Of all the things he could be worried about or not understand or say, he asks, 'Does Auntie Ali know?'

'Ali? No, not yet. We've not told anyone yet, apart from you.'

Then he surprises me again. 'I think we should tell her.' It's not like James to have a firm opinion about anything, never mind express it so forcefully.

'Yes, we will.'

'When?'

'This weekend.' I don't understand why my sister is his priority in all this.

'Can I tell her?' He actually reaches for his phone as if contemplating the call there and then.

'No, I will, when she comes over tomorrow. I'll speak to her then. Okay?' He nods, but seems disappointed. We gabble on, offering him reassurances that I'm not sure we'll be able to deliver on. 'We promise to tell you everything. Let you know what's going on. Nothing will happen immediately; well, nothing that should impact directly on you or Lauren.' God knows what may happen in the future. 'You can talk to us – ask us anything. You know that, don't you?'

'Yeah.' But he doesn't ask anything else. He shuffles about some more in his seat, stretching his legs out and flexing his huge feet. There's a hole in one of his socks and his big toe is poking through the shredded cotton. He studies his feet, and Phil and I study him, trying to gauge his reaction. 'So, is it still okay for me to go round to Ryan's, like I was gonna?'

'Course.' Phil hands him his 'Get Out of Jail pass'. 'Back by ten-thirty p.m., though.'

'Kay.' And James slides out of his seat and away from our scrutiny.