

The Placebo Effect

by
Sarah Bartrum

Chapter 1

Sarah straightened her lab coat, took a breath and reached for the door. But her hand missed it completely as the door flew inwards and Tessa burst into the changing room.

“Sorry,” she muffled spraying scraps of croissant across the space between them.

“Tessa!” It was all very well trying to be the best professional she could be, but then you had colleagues like Tessa messing it up. Sarah brushed off the flaky crumbs and peered at herself in the mirror. There was even a damp bit in her hair.

“Bus didn’t come,” explained Tessa yanking at the sleeves of her coat.

“I could do without your second-hand breakfast,” Sarah retorted plucking the offending matter from her head and dropping it into the sink. Tessa gave her a crooked smile in the mirror and Sarah sighed shaking her head, “I’ll see you in there.” she walked through the door and entered the lab.

Raj was standing at his counter deeply engrossed in a document; Krystiana was already collecting petri dishes from the cooler. Sarah saw her glance up at the corporate clock on the wall by the window and then back to her dishes. It showed exactly eight thirty. Sarah grinned to herself.

“Hi Kristi. Are you doing batch thirty?”

“Yes of course. Yours is the next shelf down.”

“I know; I just wanted to check that you hadn’t been here since six o’clock and done mine as well.”

Kristi turned slightly and eyed Sarah up and down. “Is that English sarcasm.” Although it was a question, Kristi said it in a dead pan voice as if she didn’t expect an answer.

Raj spun around a cheeky grin on his face, “No. It’s the special Jonesy irony, a tradition in Sarah’s long and British history of one-up-man-ship.”

“Thanks Raj.” Sarah glared back but Kristi simply shrugged her shoulders and went back to her dishes. Sarah went to the cooler and removed her own shelf of petri dishes laying it carefully on the counter at her post. She removed some paperwork from the top of the sorter tray and switched on the computer terminal on the left of the counter. While she was checking the batch numbers against the paperwork, the door banged open behind her.

“Hey you lot. What’s for breakfast today?” Tessa declared.

“Protocol number 62894.” Raj waved the document he was reading. “I defy anyone to stomach this one.”

“Jelly and...” Sarah peered at the nearest petri dish which had a strange pink bloom on the right hand side, “something like raw sausage.”

She turned to see Tessa and Raj wrinkling their faces and then it was Kristi’s turn.

“Small pieces of organic liver.”

“Ooh yummy.” Sarah watched Tessa put her hands on her hips as if about to broadcast some news. The buttons on her lab coat were mismatched so that there was too much fabric near the collar and the bottom looked like it had been cut short on one side. Tessa suddenly lost enthusiasm, her arms dropped and she puffed out air like a shrinking balloon. “Actually I’ve got a bugger of a hangover.” She went to her counter next to Sarah and collapsed onto the stool.

“Alcohol you see; the devil’s drink.” Raj said. Sarah smiled to herself; Raj never missed an opportunity to extol the virtues of Muslim abstinence. The trouble was that Raj hadn’t been to a mosque in about ten years and could drink all of them under the table.

“You know, you might have a point there Raj,” Tessa nodded, “if only they labelled those damn bottles properly. Devil’s semen would put me off.”

“Tessa.” An awful image of James’ cum on a tissue that had been left on his bedside table made Sarah want to gag.

“Or, Devil’s sauce, hmm, actually I might be tempted to try that one.” Tessa tapped her fingers on the counter.

“The hot one,” offered Raj.

“Rubbish. I’d definitely drink that.”

“Satan’s spawn,” said Kristi from her work bench. Sarah exchanged looks with Raj and Tessa. There were a few seconds of silence and then Tessa picked up the thread again.

“I mean why would you call a drink Stowford Press, it sounds like something that would make you more intelligent.”

“Or the wholesomeness of the countryside with a farmer using one of those apple presses,” added Sarah.

“Or an aphrodisiac to get a gang of those Stowford wives,” said Raj.

“Stepford not Stowford.” Tessa and Sarah said together.

“Anyway, it certainly shouldn’t give you a thundering headache and leave a pile of vomit in your toilet bowl,” moaned Tessa.

“Gross.”

For a while the four of them worked without talking, Sarah had to concentrate as she used the pipette to put just one drop of the special compound into each dish. The pink sausage one would have to be removed. It was a rogue and she noted the details into the computer. She then took it over to the microscope and analysed it some more. Definitely contamination. For a moment she pondered how it had got there, could something have dropped off the bottom of Kristi’s shelf? But then her Polish colleague was incredibly diligent; mistakes were what other people did. Could one of her colleagues have deliberately contaminated her batch? Sarah tossed that thought out as well, their banter could be harsh but there was no malice. Basically, she had to admit, that it was probably her own fault, or maybe the equipment. She logged her findings and set the dishes ready to return to the cooler.

“Or mineral water from the river Stow.” Kristi spoke suddenly.

Sarah paused with the shelf in her hand. What had she said? Sarah continued forwards neatly sliding the shelf into its slot. Mineral water from the river Stow? Now she got it, blimey, was there some kind of massive time delay in Kristi’s head? Tessa and Raj said nothing and Sarah wondered if they’d even heard Kristi.

“What did you do last night Kristi?” Tessa was obviously bored.

“I broke my boyfriend.”

“What?” Sarah tried to stifle a giggle. Raj didn’t even bother to hide his, he snorted at his computer terminal.

“OMG. Kristi’s a husband beater.” Tessa held up her arms as a sign of the cross at Kristi, who turned around at this statement to eye them all suspiciously. “How should I say it? He is not my boyfriend now.”

“Oh,” Sarah nodded. “You *broke up* with your boyfriend.”

“Yes, broke up.”

“Oh babe,” Raj went over and gave Kristi a half hug. “You know there’s always room in my bed.”

“I do not want to get into your bed,” said Kristi defiantly. “It will smell of curry like you.”

Sarah gasped, her mouth wide, she turned to Tessa who stared back gaping.

“You can’t say that.” Sarah was affronted.

“Actually, last night’s was a great success. A Vindaloo Raj special with extra cinnamon.” Raj put a finger and thumb to his mouth and kissed it like a TV chef. “Perfecto.” He didn’t appear to be upset by Kristi’s comment at all.

“Why I can’t say that?” Kristi looked confused.

“Well, it’s racist.” Sarah retorted.

“But, he smells of curry,” Kristi continued.

Tessa nodded.

“I do.” Raj agreed.

“Wait, I’m trying to defend you here, you can’t start agreeing with a racist comment.”

“And what is racism? You are white, I am brown. Kristi is even whiter still; maybe we should call her milky. You two stink of old cow’s milk,” Raj pointed at Tessa and Sarah. “But Kristi smells of pork I think, with perfume on the top.”

“What? How dare you say that we smell.” Sarah stuck her hands on her hips.

“But you do.” Raj nodded. “It is a fact of life that we smell of what we eat. I would rather smell of Raj’s Vindaloo special than mouldy yogurt.”

“Raj, you’re beginning to piss me off now.” Sarah could feel her face beginning to glow. Did she really smell of gone off yogurt?

“We are getting off the point.” Raj stated. “Kristi’s heart is broken.”

That stopped Sarah in her tracks, he was right, they should probably stop arguing about what they all smell like and give Kristi some sympathy. It was just that Kristi didn’t look like she needed any sympathy. Her face was impassive like always, no tears, no wobble in her voice.

“Why did you dump him?” Sarah asked.

“We were not compatible.”

“Ooh, that’s a great dumping line. I love good dumping lines. You know it’s always the ‘it’s not you it’s me’ line. But that’s much better.” Tessa shook her hair back and lifted her head in an air of sophistication. “Tom, my darling, I’m sorry we are not compatible.”

Sarah laughed.

“Why is this funny?” Kristi frowned.

“It’s not,” Sarah floundered wondering how to explain.

“Yes it is,” said Raj.

Even Tessa was sniggering so Sarah dug her in the ribs. This made Tessa cough and then she held up her head once more and said,

“What Sarah is trying to say, is that she’s sorry you broke up with your boyfriend. And if you’re not compatible then it’s probably for the best.” She had said the first sensible thing all morning. “And I think ladies and gent,” Tessa glanced at Sarah and then up at the clock, “it’s time for coffee, or in my case a bloody large bacon bap.” She clenched her hand on her stomach and pouted.

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“Oh my God.” It was Tessa staring at her work bench.

“What?” Sarah and Raj crowded round.

“Jesus, that’s nasty.” Tessa pointed at a shrivelled bit of skin tissue in one of her petri dishes. “Look watch this,” she hovered the pipette over the next dish and let one small drip squeeze out. Sarah stared transfixed as it hung for a moment swinging from the bottom of the glass tube and then it dropped onto the waiting tissue below. The reaction was immediate like a hand that had been outstretched and then as soon as the drop touched, clenching into a fist. It was probably the most dramatic result Sarah had ever witnessed in a petri dish. Almost as satisfying as the time when her older sister had showed her how to use a magnifying glass to make fire and she had practised on a wasp. One second the wasp was sitting fiddling with its antenna on the windowsill, the next it was sizzling with smoke.

“Let me have a go.” Sarah took the pipette from Tessa and held it over the next dish.

“You haven’t got your goggles on.” Kristi had appeared and was frowning.

“I was just about to,” Sarah felt indignant, and pulled the goggles from the top of her head over her eyes. They all waited, their breaths held as another silent insignificant drip fell. The tissue curled and twisted and they all winced.

“Are you sure you’re not testing pure acid?” Raj commented.

“Whatever it is, it’s evil.”

Sarah looked at the batch label which simply read ‘Compound XB3290’.

“My turn.” Raj was at the front now and Sarah noticed Kristi shake her head and turn back to her own work. Staring down; now half of the petri dishes contained damaged tissue; not just damaged, but almost annihilated, definitely well past a normal existence. Again the tissue reacted instantly.

“Alright off,” Tessa muscled her way back in and took the pipette from Raj. “This is my potion my pretties,” she said in a mock witch’s voice.

“Hey careful with that.” The pipette swung wildly and a drip launched into the air, Sarah held her breath as it sailed over the lab and disappeared somewhere near Kristi. The three of them stared and Sarah was about to shrug and return to her bench when Tessa dug her in the ribs pointing. Sarah followed her finger to the middle of Kristi’s back. The tiniest line of smoke drifted upwards and a hole, the size of a thumbnail, appeared in her lab coat. Kristi turned around and Raj, Tessa and Sarah all stood silently, staring.

“What is it now?” Kristi enquired.

“Ummm,” Tessa faltered.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” Sarah took charge. “Tessa, be very careful with that compound, I hope you have the re-agent to hand just in case.”

“Err, yes, here.” Tessa held up the brown bottle. Her eyes were searching and Sarah knew she was silently asking her if she should confess or keep shtum. It wouldn’t do any good to admit to the splash, it would probably get all three of them in trouble. Besides it was only a lab coat.

“Fine. Well keep it handy, let’s get back to work.”

Tessa breathed a sigh of relief and the three of them returned to their work benches. Kristi shrugged and turned around again.

Sarah prepared two more trays that afternoon and reviewed two others from the day before. The compound that Kristi and she were testing was nothing as dramatic as compound XB3290. In fact oddly it seemed to have no effect at all on her samples except for that pink contamination one. Whatever it was, it appeared completely innocuous. She wondered what it was supposed to be a treatment for. She added in the last set of batch numbers into the terminal and decided to do a search on the compound. There were some notes which indicated it might be used as a cancer treatment, and a password protected file from the computer bio-analytical team. Sarah paused, why would they have it password protected? She tried a couple of guesses which didn’t work, and realised she probably shouldn’t try again or her failed attempt would get noticed in the system. She glanced up at the clock, it was almost five thirty and she’d promised to meet up with James. Tessa and Raj had already left and Kristi was tidying up her work station.

“You’re staying late today Kristi.” Sarah said as she put the last of her equipment away and wiped the surface of the workbench.

“Well, I have no one to be with tonight.”

“Oh.” Sarah swallowed feeling bad that she had forgotten about Kristi’s news that morning. Of course she had broken up her boyfriend. Sarah couldn’t help grinning to herself at the miss-use of English. “How long had you been together?”

“Seven months.” Kristi opened the door and Sarah followed her out towards the changing rooms and their lockers.

“That’s quite a while.”

“Yes. It is long enough to learn about someone.”

Sarah thought about her and James, did she know James? Had they been together long enough for her to ‘learn about him’? It had been almost six months. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out. Maybe you’ll meet someone nicer. James says they’re getting six new Polish people next month in the animal house.”

“Polish people are not very interesting.” Kristi said. Sarah paused, one arm inside her coat. How was she supposed to respond to that one? Was Kristi insinuating that she, too, was boring, which she most definitely was, or only *other* Polish people?

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.” Sarah cast a smile at Kristi in the mirror, who stared blankly back. Sarah gave an involuntary shiver as she stepped outside into the rain. The animal house was the third building along so she held her coat tight around her and hurried along the wet path.

Chapter 2

Sarah walked along the corridor staring into the labs as she passed. Several of them were dark, the dim outline of cages, tables and equipment dully visible from the light in the corridor. Then she saw James, through a window, his messy hair and height unmistakable. He was holding a rat with one gloved hand and in the other he held a syringe. Carefully, using his thumb, he pushed the fur to one side near the base of the rat's tail and injected the rodent swiftly. Once the needle was removed, James rubbed the spot and then began to stroke the rat's head. Sarah hammered on the double glazing. He looked up startled. She pointed at her watch. James had a simple mask across his mouth and nose, but Sarah could still tell he was grinning at her. He gave the rat a cuddle against his lab coat and then placed it back into its cage. He held up two fingers to her indicating he had two more doses to complete. She nodded back and retreated along the corridor. There was a refreshment area at the end where she could sit. There was a hot drinks appliance and a snacks vending machine next to a small counter with a sink and a kettle. Sarah toyed with the idea of getting a hot chocolate. It would be a while before James appeared. He would have to scrub and shower before leaving the secure animal labs in his everyday clothes. Sarah picked up a journal from the table; it wasn't one she'd seen before. Institute for Laboratory Animal Research she read on the cover and began flicking through it. There was an interesting article on some current research into bowel cancer in dogs. Sarah read avidly. Cancer was her thing, ever since University when she had discovered what a simple and yet devastating illness it could be. Of course there were many types of cancer but fundamentally they were all alike. When she got to the end of the article she gazed at the pale blue wall opposite, it was still her dream to uncover a miracle cure. Maybe a new drug or a new organic cell that could be injected to counterattack the invasive cells. Imagine the news, the media, the fame. Sarah closed her eyes, standing in front of the camera, wearing a smart suit outside a grand building talking to the journalists.

"Yes, this is the biggest medical breakthrough since Penicillin. It is truly groundbreaking and will change the society we live in."

The journalists crowded around, their excited faces hovering over microphones and notepads, all chattering at once asking questions. Sarah smiled at them feeling like a queen. The saviour of millions.

"Hi."

Sarah's eyelids flew open. It was Greg.

"Oh hey."

"He won't be long; he's already in the shower." She could see he was trying to hide a smirk.

Sarah nodded, feeling a little embarrassed that Greg had caught her with her eyes shut dreaming of stardom.

"Long day?"

"Err, something like that yes."

"Well, I'll see you later." Greg pushed the doors open and disappeared into the cold darkness outside. Judging by the spatters on the glass doors, it was still raining. Sarah checked her watch, if James pulled his finger out, they might still make the 6:08 bus.

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The rain was falling harder now as Sarah and James chased along the streets. The bus was coming up the hill, its huge windscreen wipers swishing away the rain, its lights beaming at the wet road. Fortunately there were some other people waiting in the bus stop causing the bus to slow and hiss to a standstill just as Sarah and James panted into the bus shelter.

"Big Issue mate?" A dark man in a hoodie thrust a magazine at James. Always the soft touch, James pulled out some change from his pocket and handed it over. Sarah rolled

her eyes, didn't he realise that this youth would probably spend the profits on alcohol and drugs? James stepped onto the bus. Sarah followed turning her face away from the beggar.

"Your magazine sir," the youth brushed Sarah's arm and she flinched. James looked behind him at the youth and shook his head. "Thanks sir."

"I'll take it." Sarah snatched the magazine. Behind her she could feel the youth's eyes. Well what had he expected? James had paid for it after all. The bus driver was staring at her with a bored expression, his finger tapping on the tiny shelf. Sarah fumbled for her pass and flashed it at him before retreating into the bus glancing back to see the youth still watching her with dark eyes. Ignoring him she scanned the seats and realised James must have disappeared upstairs.

On the top deck it didn't take her a moment to spot him; he sat at least half a head taller than everyone else. His dark hair was now flattened and wet; his blue eyes twinkled as he raised an arm. Sarah couldn't help smiling. He looked kind of cute in a damp doggy kind of way. Then she frowned thinking about poor Molly, James' dog, out in this weather.

"Was Chan going to be around today? I hope he let Molly in."

"Err, yeah, I can't remember what he said. Besides she's got her new kennel."

"Oh yes", Sarah felt reassured, James had bought one at the weekend although she hadn't seen it installed in the garden as yet. Satisfied that Molly wouldn't look as damp as her owner, Sarah's mind turned to the next most important item of the evening ahead.

"So who's cooking tonight? I'm starving."

"I dunno," James shrugged.

"It better not be you." Sarah groaned staring past him at the rain slashing against the window.

"What's wrong with my cooking?"

"Nothing, it's just I can't be bothered to help you make it."

"Thanks a lot. I'm not sure Matt and Chan will appreciate that." James scowled looking at his hands.

"What? Have they said something?"

"It doesn't matter."

Sarah nibbled at the inside of her cheek wondering which of James' housemates would have said something.

"I bet it was Matt."

"Look it doesn't matter."

"Yes it does. What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"James."

"Well," James studied his hands for a moment. "Matt asked when you were going to pay your share of the food bill."

"What?" Sarah turned away, her cheeks suddenly feeling warm. "That's so unfair. You stay at mine just as often as I stay at yours. So that makes it even. It's not like I eat as much as you lot anyway."

"It doesn't matter. I don't think he meant it."

"Of course he did. It's just the sort of thing Matt would say."

"Did you buy one too?" He nodded at the rolled-up magazine in her hand.

"No, it's yours." She thumped it onto his lap.

"I didn't want it."

"Then why did you buy it?" Sarah couldn't help feeling exasperated.

"I just gave him some money that's all."

"He was selling the Big Issue so this is what you get," Sarah complained.

James looked at her with an odd expression.

“What? I don’t know why you gave him money anyway. He looked perfectly capable of getting a job. Why do I have to work hard all day just to spend money on dropouts who can’t be bothered?” Sarah took a breath which turned to a wince as James slapped the magazine back onto her lap.

“It’s not like you’re even going to read it,” said James.

Sarah felt like yelling but they were on the bus. She picked up the magazine and shook it open angrily to page three and stared blankly at the words. It wasn’t that she was uncharitable, far from it; in fact she had a standing order set up for ten pounds a month to cancer research. People who were ill and couldn’t work needed help, not people like that youth who were simply a waste of space. Sarah glanced sideways at James but he was staring through the dark glass at the lighted shops on the street. They’d had this argument before. But she didn’t believe that the dark young man had some ‘hidden’ problem as James termed it. He certainly didn’t look or act like he was suffering from mental illness. She studied the back of James’s head where the rain had made it look darker and a curl sat just above the collar of his T-shirt. Maybe she shouldn’t be so hard on James, after all, she knew very little about his background growing up on the edge of Glasgow with an alcoholic father. Sarah sighed wishing they weren’t on a bus so she could kiss that curl, and his neck. Maybe he was right; perhaps that youth did deserve their charity. Maybe he had an abusive past, maybe even an abusive present. It was just that it was so much easier to give to charities like Marie Curie or those hospices for sick children. Charities that you knew helped terribly ill people. It seemed a more tangible need than that youth in his hoodie selling dumb magazines like this one. Sarah turned the page.

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The house was dark when they arrived. Sarah felt her insides deflate, on the one hand that was good, she wouldn’t have to face Matt and feel guilty about eating at their house again. On the other hand it meant nobody was cooking anything yummy in the kitchen. It was one of the things she liked about coming home with James; quite often they would arrive to a lighted house with wonderful smells emanating from the kitchen. It felt like coming home, what with the big heavy yellow front door into the comfortable house. A million times different to her cold single flat on the other side of the city. There were never lights on there, it was one of the down-sides of living on her own, and yet she wouldn’t trade it in. She liked her personal space; it was all hers and always looked exactly the same as she’d left it. Nobody’s dirty shoes in the hall or leaking mouldy food in the fridge. Communal living at University had put her off house sharing and having her own place had been high on the list when she started work. OK, it was only rented but still, she could call it her own. Now standing in the rain waiting for James to unlock the door, she wished they’d gone back to hers instead.

Just before James swung the door wide, he whistled his customary two-tone melody. It was only five notes long, but long enough to be unique and significant. The returning short, sharp barks confirmed Molly’s presence still in the garden at the back of the house.

Sarah turned all the lights on as they walked down the hall and into the kitchen. She unlocked the back door and in leapt Molly. She whooshed straight past Sarah and barrelled around James’ legs.

“Well thanks Sarah for letting me in.” Sarah said caustically.

When Molly had finished licking, rubbing and generally making a huge fuss of James, she came over to Sarah, her tail wagging and slapping at Sarah’s legs.

“She’s soaking.” Sarah realised. Wet, muddy paw marks peppered the kitchen floor and her legs were cold and wet where Molly had rubbed. “Molly!”

“Come here girl.” James had grabbed the grotty towel from the back of the kitchen door and Molly happily went back to her master for a full rub-down. She had thick mottled

fur that hung down in wisps under her belly. Her tail was long and when held high, had fur that acted like a flag waving to and fro. Sarah watched it now as it hit James in the face while he rubbed the towel along Molly's sides and over her head. She wriggled and then grabbed the towel with her teeth, pulling and snarling.

"Molly, not now, you daft girl." James affectionately ruffled her ears. "Drop it."

Molly obediently let go of the towel and stood panting waiting for the rubbing to finish.

"What happened to the kennel?" Sarah asked poking at the damp spot on her leg.

"Dunno. Maybe she doesn't like it."

"Really? She seemed to like it enough in the shop."

"True. Maybe I just need to socialise her into it."

"What?" Sarah laughed. "You mean like, hey Molly this is Kennel say hello. Now kennel this is your new dog, say hello back."

"No," James shook his head looking annoyed at her, "sometimes animals aren't sure about new objects in their habitats. You have to help them get to know them, show them it's a good object, nothing to be frightened of, that sort of thing."

"But she went in and out of it in the pet shop."

Molly was now sitting down, her tail still swishing, smearing the muddy footprints she had left on the floor. She looked from James to Sarah and back again.

"It's not the same as having a strange wooden object stuck in your personal garden."

"Oh." Sarah didn't know what to say to this, James was the animal expert, not her. He'd studied zoology and part of a veterinarian course before running out of money and starting work instead. Sarah went to the fridge and poked her nose into it. There were various things, some chicken, a box of leftovers, milk, cheese, eggs. Nothing that looked like a reasonable meal though.

"Matt left a note." James held up a piece of paper. "He says there's left over bolognaise in the freezer."

"Oh good." Sarah crouched down and searched through the freezer drawers. The only thing that even looked remotely like bolognaise was a small white plastic box with something red inside. She prised the lid off. James peered over her shoulder.

"That looks like it."

"Hmm, not exactly for two though."

James peered again into the pot. "We could have extra spaghetti with it."

"I suppose," Sarah sighed, she bet Matt had done that deliberately, leaving only enough for one measly portion.

"You warm it up, and I'll take Molly out." James sounded enthusiastic.

"But you've only just dried her."

"I know but if I don't take her out now, I'll have to do it after dinner."

Sarah looked down at Molly, who sat staring upwards, cocking her head to one side, the lead held gently in her jaws.

"Oh alright then, rather you than me in that rain."

"Exactly what I was thinking."

"Can you get some wine on your way, something red to drink with this?"

"OK." James slipped his coat back on and walked down the hallway to the front door. Sarah stood staring at the frozen edges of the bolognaise as the door slammed shut. How was it, she ended up cooking when it wasn't even her house and not even James' turn to cook anyway? She sighed and popped open the microwave. She searched the dry goods cupboard and found the packet of spaghetti. Taking a generous amount she put the long sticks into a pan and covered them with boiling water. Next she took out a large scoop of Molly's dog biscuits and refilled her water dish. It wasn't long before Sarah was feeling both warmer and

happier next to the stove with the smell of bolognaise and the steam from the spaghetti filling the air. It was almost ready, she hoped James wouldn't be long, she hated overdone pasta.

The door banged, 'at last,' she thought and immediately began to drain the spaghetti.

"Hurry up it's going squidgy," she called out from amidst the steam blooming from the sink.

"Hi Sarah."

She twisted her head sharply around; that was not the voice she had expected. Matt was walking into the kitchen; his grey suit looking slightly creased but his blond hair still neatly swept back. He came right up to the sink to see what she was doing, a brief waft of aftershave catching up a second later.

"You found the bolognaise then?"

"Err yes. I'm just doing this for James. I'm not eating. I mean, I've already eaten."

"That's a lot of pasta for one."

"Yes," Sarah laughed nervously. "James said he was hungry."

"Oh well, I'm sure Molly would eat any he couldn't manage."

"Err yes, I guess so." Sarah glanced at the counter and noticed the two plates she had out ready and waiting. Matt had moved across to the glass cupboard. Sarah turned her back to him but with the pan and sieve in her hands, she couldn't do anything about the spare plate. Instead she used the pan to push one of the plates a little further away.

"Where are they?"

"Out for a walk. He'll be back with Molly any second."

"Oh right." Matt went to the sink while Sarah tried to stop the spaghetti from cascading all over the counter, there was really way too much for one plate. Still she did her best. Matt had filled his glass with water and was stood watching her. She paused for a moment wondering what to do next, the pasta pan in one hand and the sieve in the other.

"Err excuse me." She motioned towards the sink.

"Oh sorry. There you go." Matt moved back allowing her just enough space to dump the pan and sieve.

"Two plates," said Matt, taking a sip from his glass.

Sarah could feel the heat in her cheeks; she removed the plastic pot from the microwave and went to the second, currently empty plate.

"Yes," Sarah carefully spooned the bolognaise into the middle of the empty plate.

"James doesn't like to mix them, really odd I know, but what can you do?"

Matt let out a little snort, which Sarah wasn't sure whether he was just breathing hard through his nose or trying not to laugh.

"Wish I had a feminine cutie that served to my every whim." Startled, Sarah looked up and caught his gaze, he winked then waltzed out of the kitchen, water glass still in hand. Only seconds behind him Molly and James arrived.

"What's this?" James indicated the two plates, one filled to overflowing with spaghetti, and the other looking bare, with a small lump of bolognaise sitting in the middle.

"Don't ask." Sarah rolled her eyes and sat down at the table. At first she didn't eat anything, and shrugging his shoulders James dug in. But then she heard a thump from upstairs and realised Matt must be in his bedroom. She grabbed a fork and dove in.

"Crikey, what's got into you?"

"Nothing." Sarah muffled through a mouthful of food.

Molly started whining at their legs.

"Oh sorry girl." James reached his hand down palm up. "Paw." Molly duly lifted her paw and James shook it, then she shot across the kitchen to where her food was waiting. Sarah realised that she and Molly had something in common just now as they both wolfed their food in giant gulps.

Chapter 3

“Ah, there you are Sarah,” the voice made her jump. She hadn’t heard the lab door open but there stood Dr Nisha Bhattachanya talking as if she’d been looking all over for Sarah. Of course she was here in the lab. Where else would she be at ten in the morning?

“Hi,” Sarah moved her goggles onto the top of her head.

“I wonder if you could come into my office when you’ve finished that batch?”

“Sure, OK.” Sarah bit the inside of her cheek.

“Tessa,” Dr Nisha continued, “I’ve signed off your holiday request, that’s fine.”

“Great, thanks.”

“And Kristi, you were quite right to query those results; they’re sending a courier this afternoon with a new batch of the compound.”

Kristi merely smiled, obviously something she had been expecting judging by that assured nod she gave Dr Nisha.

After she closed the door, Tessa said. “Ooh, what have you been up to? Sounds like a call to the headmistress’ office.”

“No it’s not. I haven’t done anything.” But Sarah was worried. It wasn’t often any of them were called to speak to Dr Nisha in her office, that normally meant it was the mandatory yearly review, or something worse.

“Tut, tut,” added Raj.

“Cut it out, and anyway, what’s this about a holiday?” Sarah tried to deflect the attention.

“Oh that. Just a couple of days to go and see my granny in Yorkshire.”

“How’s she doing?” Sarah asked; kicking herself for forgetting about Tessa’s ailing grandparent.

Tessa shrugged and concentrated on the computer screen.

“Tess?” Sarah went a little closer but Tessa shook her head. Obviously not good then and this probably wasn’t the right time to probe any further. She had that stubborn but fragile look about her.

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Sarah studied the blank door; unfortunately it was one of those solid wooden ones with no window, just a plaque that read ‘Dr Nisha Bhattachanya Director of Pharmacology’. For a moment Sarah wondered if she would ever have her own solid door displaying her name and job title. Somehow Dr Sarah Jones didn’t have the same academic ring about it. It sounded more like a doctor of psychology, or worse sociology. Not that she even had a PHD so in fact it would only say ‘Sarah Jones’. More like a social worker, Sarah sighed and rapped on the door.

“Enter.” A voice clipped from within.

Sarah opened the door to the ordered office. There were shelves on two sides with neatly arranged books, journals and papers. Opposite the door was the desk which faced a large window onto the front car park and the road junction beyond.

“Take a seat Sarah.” Dr Nisha closed the file she had been reading and moved it to one side; pulling open a drawer in her desk she removed a foolscap folder. Sarah sat on the other chair in the room, it was against the side wall and felt a little too far from the desk to be friendly. She swallowed waiting for what was about to come next.

“Hmm,” Dr Nisha tapped the file, “before we discuss this, I wanted to ask you something.” She stood up and went to a yellow plastic bag near Sarah’s feet. It was the kind of bag the company laundry service used for all the protective clothing. Dr Nisha took it back to her seat and placed it on her lap; she opened the top drawer of her desk and removed a fresh pair of latex gloves. Expertly she pulled on the gloves then proceeded to open the bag.

Out she pulled a white lab coat; she twisted it around for a minute finding the shoulders so she could hold it up properly. Sarah could feel her heart beating extra fast. What was this about?

“Do you see it?”

“Oh!” Sarah gasped. “Yes.” On the back of the lab coat was a large fist sized hole.

“I see you are as surprised as I was when the laundry service reported this.”

“I um, yes.”

“I believe it is from compound XB3290. It is a particularly toxic compound which I expect will be destroyed after our testing is complete, it has failed all batches so far.”

“Yes, but I haven’t been doing those batches, it wasn’t me.” Sarah knew she was speaking too rapidly. She tried to calm herself down; after all, it hadn’t been her that had made that drip fly across the room. But how had the hole grown so large? It had only been tiny.

“I know that Sarah which is why I thought you might know what had happened.” She re-folded the lab coat carefully and replaced it into the bag. “A spill of that nature would require a report and there are no reports from the lab for yesterday at least none about spillages.” She peeled off the gloves and put them into the same bag as the lab coat and then tied it with a knot and placed it near the door. “What I don’t understand,” she continued now standing and facing her desk, “if I am here doing my batches,” she mimicked picking up a petri dish and an implement. “How could I spill something on the back of my lab coat?” She turned still holding her imaginary equipment, “unless I turned perhaps and went across to see someone else.” She mimed moving closer to Sarah and then seeming to trip. Sarah held out her hands expecting Dr Nisha to fall on top of her, but she was still miming. “Perhaps something like that?” She sat back down.

“Umm, I,” Sarah struggled with what to say. She couldn’t drop Tessa, her dear friend into it could she? But then her and Raj had been there using the dropper and if Dr Nisha found out they’d been handling the compound without reading the protocols and taking turns with the petri dishes, they’d all be in trouble. Sarah’s mind whirred double time.

“Well, it was,” Sarah paused suddenly wondering if maybe Dr Nisha had already spoken to Kristi earlier that morning, before she’d arrived. She definitely hadn’t spoken to Tessa or Raj, because they would have said something to her for sure. “Erm, have you spoken to Kristi lately?”

“No. Is she the one I need to speak to?” she frowned at Sarah.

“No, no,” Sarah took a breath. “You see Kristi’s kind of upset.”

Dr Nisha raised her eyebrows.

Sarah forged on, “She split up with her boyfriend, and to put it mildly, she’s heart broken.” Sarah could see Dr Nisha’s face soften, “She’s been crying and well you know, kind of cut up about it all, they’d been going out for ages.”

Dr Nisha nodded, a sympathetic look on her face.

“Well Tessa was working on compound XB3290 at the work bench and Kristi was pulling out her tray from the cooler and she kind of bumped into Tessa and that jogged her arm.”

Sarah could see Dr Nisha processing this; she even moved her head as if she was playing out the scene in the lab.

“I mean, I didn’t actually see it happen, but I think that’s what happened, Tessa gave a cry and I heard Kristi apologise and then I saw a tiny hole on the back of Kristi’s lab coat.”

“But why didn’t Tessa create a spillage report?”

Sarah was in her stride now, she had a believable scenario, she just needed to wrap it up. “Kristi, begged her not to, she was worried it would get her into trouble and she’s been so

down lately, she said she couldn't cope with any more bad things. She thought if Tessa made the report, she would lose her job."

"We don't sack people for spillage reports Sarah. You know that." Now Dr Nisha was looking rather indignant.

"I know, I know, I tried to explain it to them, but Kristi was so upset and Tessa is such a kind person, she just didn't want to cause Kristi any more trouble. And the hole on the back was tiny I swear." Sarah held up her hand demonstrating the size of a thumbnail, at least that bit was true.

"I see." Dr Nisha folded her hands on her lap. "So I have two concerns with this."

Sarah gulped; damn maybe she was going to be in trouble anyway.

"Number one, do you think this kind of accident could happen again in terms of the cooler being too close to Tessa's workstation? And number two; is Kristi in a state of mind that could jeopardise the accuracy of our work?"

Sarah took a breath and tried to sit up a little taller copying her boss and the professional and intelligent air that she had. "I think it very unlikely that this would happen again. We've been using that cooler for I think 4 months now and it hasn't been a problem before. And as for Kristi, I think she'll be fine," Sarah wondered if one more white lie would help seal the deal. "I've actually been checking her work, kind of keeping her under my wing just in case, and everything has been fine. Her work has been perfect."

"Hm." Dr Nisha nodded thoughtfully. "You would make a good team leader Sarah. However, I will not condone the lack of reporting. I understand what you were trying to do, helping your colleagues is admirable, but next time I expect a spillage report no matter what the circumstances."

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now, to the real reason I called you in here for."

Sarah felt her stomach tighten once again, good grief, hadn't this gone on long enough, she was desperate to be released from this room. What had originally felt like an airy well-ordered office now felt like an oppressive cell.

"Let's see," she opened the file. "I believe you have been doing the samples for Compound W620?"

For a moment Sarah felt unsure of herself, she had been expecting something different, something about her job or behaviour not anything about their routine work. Compound W620, yes of course, the innocuous one and then Sarah remembered trying to get into the password protected file. Had the system declared her failure even before the third try?

"Umm, yes." Sarah swallowed.

"And Kristi too I believe?"

"Yes." Sarah nodded.

"I would like the remaining batches to be done by you and only you." Dr Nisha stared at Sarah for a moment. "This is unrelated to our previous conversation in any way. I have received instructions to keep the number of laboratory personnel used for this compound to a minimum. An unusual request I know, but then this is an unusual compound wouldn't you say?"

"Um, it seems kind of innocuous."

Dr Nisha smiled broadly for the first time since Sarah had entered her office. She wondered if she'd accidentally made a joke.

"Innocuous. Yes, a fitting description I think. Good."

There was silence, Dr Nisha seemed to be thinking about something, and Sarah wasn't sure if she was supposed to say anything else. The results they'd gathered so far for

compoundW620 had been logged into the system so Dr Nisha could check herself if she wanted any details.

“Good,” Dr Nisha repeated. Sarah let her body relax.