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A Stitch in Time

Written by Amanda James

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A Stitch in Time

Amanda James

Extract



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Chapter One

The number 37 bus hurtled down the narrow street, its engine growling like an angry thunder god. Sarah froze rabbit-like and did a quick but futile calculation in her head. The distance to the safety of the café entrance, compared to the puddle (masquerading as Lake Windermere), which was about to disappear under huge rubber tyres = not a chance in hell.

'Oh no … don't you dare! Can't you see me walking here, you—' The wind snatched her curse and tossed it up to the rain-soaked heavens.

In a desperate attempt at damage limitation, Sarah turned away from the road and flattened herself against the café window. Cupping both hands around her face, she closed her eyes, and set her back against the deluge. A second later, a muddy wave of what felt like the Arctic Ocean drenched almost every available inch of her from head to toe. Water trickled into her ears, under her collar, down her neck, into her boots, soaked through her coat, black velvet leggings, and worst of all, her new 'I cost an arm and a leg' red cashmere sweater dress.

A moan escaped from her lips as she realised that as well as the damage done to her clothes, a whole morning spent in the hairdressers had been undone in just a few seconds. Raising her hand to her head she could feel the lovely bounce of recently blow-dried hair at the front, and plastered rat's tails hanging at the back. She must look like someone had hit her on the back of the head with a water mallet.

Sarah blew heavily down her nose and tried to calm her rage. That bus driver had done this deliberately. He could have slowed down, moved out a little to avoid the puddle, but no. That bastard had been out to get her, and boy, did he get her. She swallowed the lump of humiliation forming in her throat. *Open your eyes,*

Sarah, before people inside the café notice. On doing so, Sarah realised the 'before people notice' ship had well and truly sailed.

Through the clear spaces in the steamy window of the café, she could see customers reacting in a variety of ways to the bedraggled scarecrow of a woman peering in at them from the street. Some were nudging each other and laughing openly, others were more politely stifling giggles behind hands and one or two frowned and shook their heads in sympathy.

One customer, her best friend Karen, sat open-mouthed and then set down her coffee cup, pushed back her chair and hurried out into the rain.

'Oh my God, Sarah, come inside, let's try and get you dry somehow,' she said, grabbing Sarah's soggy arm and pulling her inside the door.

Sarah shook her arm free and looked around the pin-drop silent café. 'I'm not going in there now,' she hissed. 'I'm completely soaked and humiliated; I'll just go home instead.'

'Don't be daft, at least it's warm in here. By the time you get home you'll catch your death. I'm sure we could borrow a towel and there are hand dryers in the loo.'

Sarah glanced back outside at the torrential rain and then into the café where normal conversation had started up again. It *would* be daft to struggle home half-drenched in this downpour and the delicious waft of coffee and cinnamon rolls finally convinced her of Karen's argument.

At last, with the help of two towels and fifteen minutes with the hand dryer, Sarah could just about sit down at a table without squelching. The walk from the loo to the table had been less than silent however. Her boots had expelled damp air, making little farting noises each time her foot met the floor.

The café owner had been really lovely and insisted on giving Sarah coffee and freshly made carrot cake on the house. She'd

also taken Sarah's coat and put it on the radiator through the back of the shop. The nasty 'laugh out loud' customers had left shortly after Sarah had walked in, and most people had smiled kindly or ignored her predicament.

Wrapping her hands around the big mug of coffee, Sarah relished the heat seeping into her chilled fingers. She sipped it as quickly as the scalding liquid would allow, feeling it melt a warm, comforting path to her tummy.

'Feeling better now, hon?' Karen asked, her head tilted to one side.

'Getting there, ta.' Sarah looked across the table at Karen. Immaculate as usual. Even though it was the middle of December and pissing down with rain, Karen always looked absolutely stunning. A cross between Angelina Jolie and Julia Roberts was how Sarah's neighbour had described her recently when she'd seen Karen giving Sarah a lift home. Sarah reckoned that she herself was average to fair on a good day, but right now people would describe her as a cross between Vicky Pollard and a loo brush.

They'd known each other since school and met once a month on a Saturday afternoon, regular as clockwork. Today, mindful of the fact she was the wrong side of thirty and feeling a bit dowdy, Sarah had bought new clothes and had her mousy blonde hair highlighted and restyled. Just this once, Sarah had wanted to feel attractive and make an impression when she met up with the glamorous Karen. Well, she'd certainly made an impression, hadn't she? Yep, an impression that she'd been hit with an ugly stick.

'I can't believe this awful weather lately,' Karen frowned. 'I think we'll need to build an ark soon.'

'We do live in Sheffield, Karen, and it *is* December; what do you expect?'

'OK, no need to get stroppy. It's not my fault you got drenched,

is it?'

'No, sorry, I'll be alright when I've had a sugar fix.' Sarah sighed and dug her fork into the cake. She couldn't help noticing that all the male customers, while ostensibly chatting to their wives or girlfriends, kept sliding little surreptitious glances at Karen. Their eyes seemed to be attached by invisible threads to Karen's eyes, mouth, breasts and legs, though not necessarily in that order. Karen appeared oblivious to their worship, banging on about work and who said what to whom. But Sarah noticed Karen tossing her hair once or twice and licking cappuccino traces from her lips with a slow tongue.

Never mind, Sarah told herself; at least she had a husband who loved her. Poor Karen had a series of broken relationships as long as your arm. Even though she was such a lovely person, for some reason men didn't stay around. Perhaps they couldn't hack the constant predatory threat of other roaming males.

Sarah had once moaned to Neil that she always felt self-conscious when she met up with Karen. Neil had said all the right things: 'That's rubbish! Yes, I guess she's pretty, but she's not my type. I have the perfect woman right here.'

Sarah was not naive enough to believe she was the perfect woman, but it helped to know that he thought she was.

'This carrot cake is delicious, in fact I might get another piece, want some?' Karen asked, pushing her plate away.

Sarah shook her head and pulled a face. 'Another piece; you're throwing caution to the wind, aren't you?' She laughed. Karen watched her calorie intake very carefully as a rule, hence the svelte figure.

'You only live once.' Karen stood, inched her way between the table and chairs and walked to the counter.

Sarah nearly choked on her coffee; she couldn't believe it. She'd been too preoccupied getting dry to notice anything before,

but she could swear she'd seen a roll of fat when Karen's tummy had been at eye level. *And* she was getting more cake? There is a god!

Swivelling in her chair to get a better look at her friend's apparent weight gain, Sarah was afforded a profile view. Yes, definitely a paunch … round, quite neat … Sarah felt her own stomach lurch and her mouth fall open. *God, she's not getting fat you daft mare, she's … no, that's crazy*. *Karen's always said that's the last thing …*

'What are you gawping at?' Karen squeezed past again and settled back at the table, already sticking her fork into the generous slab of carrot cake.

'Err … nothing, just not used to you eating cake like it's the new get-slim-quick fix.' *Go careful, Sarah. If she wants to tell you her secret then she will …*

'What are you, the cake police? It's nice to have a little bit of what you fancy now and again. Aren't you always telling me that women are under pressure to conform to the stick-thin super model brigade and that we should fight against it?' Karen's brown eyes flashed and she rammed a huge forkful of cake into her mouth.

Sarah raised her eyebrows and held up her hands. 'Sorr-ee!' *Mood swings, weight gain …*

Karen slammed her fork down and avoided Sarah's eyes. 'Look, I'm sorry, I'm a little emotional at the moment. I didn't mean to snap.' She looked back at Sarah, her eyes awash with sudden tears. 'You're the last person I wanted to get angry with …'

'Hey, don't be silly, what's up?' Sarah reached for Karen's hand across the table. Karen snatched it away. 'No, don't be nice to me or I'll bawl my eyes out.'

'I think I can guess what's up. I hope I'm right or I'm probably going to get a slap … it's not too many cakes that's caused your

pancake washboard to bulge a bit, is it?' Sarah sat back in her seat, just in case.

Karen flushed and shook her head, no.

'Who's the daddy?'

'It's a mess; I don't want to talk about it.' Karen folded her arms and looked out of the window.

A mess? Sarah would give everything to be in Karen's platform boots. 'Was it a one-night stand, or …'

'What don't you understand about the words "I don't want to talk about it"?' Karen cursed under her breath and shrugged into her coat. 'Look, I'm not in the mood for a heart to heart. I'm sorry, it's not you.' She picked up her bag and stepped into the aisle. 'I'll ring you, OK?' Karen briefly touched Sarah's shoulder and then rushed out into the rain.

The handbag was hurled with such ferocity that it scattered the carefully placed tower of exercise books across the back seat. Loose pages and colourful diagrams of the Dunkirk retreat plopped on to the floor and disappeared under the passenger seat. Yeah, that'd be right, not only did she have to mark them all, she now had to scrabble around with her arse in the air trying to retrieve the bits that had fallen out. *Serves you right, Sarah. You should try and calm your bloody temper*.

She slid behind the wheel and slammed the door on yet another miserable day. Three in a row – a hat trick. Saturday had seen the ruin of her new hairdo and clothes (the cashmere sweater dress would now just about fit the cat), and then the awful upset with Karen. Sunday, Neil had buggered off just as she was putting their seventh wedding anniversary meal on the table (which she'd planned for weeks and slaved over all day) – a mate of his was having a crisis, apparently. And Monday, today, the head teacher had announced Ofsted would arrive mid-week.

The imminent arrival of school inspectors was enough to

strike fear into the heart of even the most confident teachers at the best of times, but Sarah's mid-week timetable was definitely the worst of times. Both Wednesday and Thursday were full teaching days with the toughest classes in Years 9 and 10. There would be no hiding place.

Sarah tucked her shaking hands under her legs and leaned her head gently on the wheel. Bile rose in her throat and the school lunch she'd had, against her better judgement, hinted that it would like to get reacquainted. Dear God, if she felt like this on Monday, by Wednesday she'd probably vomit and pass out on the classroom floor. A coping strategy was needed pronto.

Two images were simultaneously offered for consideration courtesy of the panic section of her brain: 1) a few huge gin and tonics in the bath, or 2) a rigorous workout at the gym.

Sarah's heart lurched for the gin, while her head figured that she should steer clear of alcohol, at least until Inspector Gadget had finished with her.

She flicked open her phone and pressed speed dial. *Great, answerphone* … 'Neil, it's me. Going to the gym. See you at home later … Had a really, really awful day, tell you about it soon. And can you pop into Sainsbury's on your way home and get something quick for tea, a pizza or something? I can't be arsed to cook.' *Especially not after I spent so long preparing the meal yesterday, and then feeding it lovingly to the kitchen bin.* She chucked the phone over her shoulder and, instead of landing on her handbag, it of course decided to join the diagrams of Dunkirk.

To shower here or at home? Sarah glanced at her watch; time was getting on, even though she was as pink as a shrimp and covered in sweat, she'd best get home. The rowing machine, treadmill and weights had loosed a few feel-good endorphins, and the tension that had twisted her shoulders into a hunchback had begun to trickle away with her perspiration.

Picking up her fluffy towel she wiped her arms and face, shoved it into her gym bag and walked towards the exit. ‘Sarah, hey how’s tricks?’

Turning round she saw Natalie, a woman she often chatted to at the gym, hurrying towards her. Sarah groaned inwardly. Natalie was OK, but she was a huge gossip and Sarah avoided telling her anything too personal. Besides, she had to go home and have a shower, stuff some food down and then tackle those books. ‘Hey, Natalie, I’m good. Can’t stop though; I’ve got lots of school work to do.’

Natalie chose to ignore that and poked Sarah on the arm. ‘Have you heard about the lovely Carlos?’ Natalie’s dark eyes shone with excitement. Carlos was one of the personal trainers at the gym.

Sarah sighed. ‘No, what about him?’

‘He’s been sacked for shagging a client in the sauna.’ Natalie leaned in conspiratorially. ‘And the client was a bloke!’ she hissed gleefully.

Sarah shrugged and turned for the door. ‘Poor Carlos.’

Natalie put her hand on Sarah’s arm preventing her from pushing the door open. ‘Poor Carlos? Poor half the women here, including moi. Such a waste if you ask—’

‘Yes, well I’m sure everyone will cope. Anyway, nice to see you but I must dash,’ Sarah said, and once again made to leave. Natalie was beginning to piss her off big style.

But incredibly, once again Natalie put her hand on Sarah’s arm. Bloody hell, couldn’t this woman take a hint?

‘Saw that lovely hubby of yours the other day. I didn’t have time to stop and chat to him though as I was dashing to the library before they closed.’

Lucky Neil.

‘He was just going in Mothercare with a drop-dead gorgeous woman, long chestnut hair, tall, leggy,’ Natalie nudged Sarah and

winked, 'arm in arm they were, looked really cosy.' She gave a false laugh. 'Only teasing, pet. Your Neil wouldn't cheat, would he … So who was she, his sister?'

Sarah put her hand on the door handle, more for support than intention to push it open. *No, please, no* … Sarah's heart thundered against her rib cage and for the second time that day she thought she was going to lose her lunch. How many drop-dead gorgeous women with long chestnut hair did she know, and going into Mothercare … no wonder Karen wouldn't tell her who the damned father was.

'Hey, are you alright, love? You've gone ever so pale … I hope I haven't put my foot in it,' Natalie said. The nasty gleam in her eye and pretend concern on her spiteful face told Sarah that's *exactly* what she'd intended to do.

'What? No, course you haven't. Yes, yes, it's his sister,' she managed. 'I'm alright, just tired, Natalie. Bye.'

Sarah fled on jelly legs out through the changing rooms and into the car park. The damp cool of the night air rushed over her flushed face and neck, helping to steady her nerves a little. The clock on the dash said 6.05. Neil would probably still be in Sainsbury's and it was on the way home, anyway. Had the friend in crisis yesterday been Karen? The one he'd abandoned his anniversary dinner for? *Take deep breaths, you're overreacting, it will all be fine. Go and see Neil, he'll explain.*

As she drove, Sarah tried to focus. Neil and her oldest friend would never do that to her, surely. In fact, Neil had seemed surprised, almost shocked, when she'd told him that Karen was pregnant on Saturday.

'Really?' Neil's mouth had fallen open. 'Didn't think Karen was the mothering kind!' he'd said.

'Well, it obviously wasn't planned, and she's playing her "who's the pop" cards very close.'

'Blimey. So shall we have a takeaway?' Neil had walked into

the living room and picked up the phone.

Thinking about it all again now though, Sarah remembered that he *had* turned very pink and hadn't looked at her directly. Perhaps Neil hadn't been shocked that Karen was pregnant at all. Perhaps he'd just been shocked because Karen had chosen to confide in her.

'And anyway, people may think *I'm* not the mothering kind!' she had yelled after him. 'Little do they know the reason we haven't heard the patter of tiny feet is because *you* have got cold ones where fatherhood's concerned!'

'Don't start on that again now; you're like a broken record with the baby thing. Do you want your usual?' Neil had dialled the curry house and there the matter had rested.

Sarah swung the car into a space and switched off the engine. She was getting ahead of herself. Neil probably went red on Saturday because he knew that Sarah would start on about babies again, would be jealous that her oldest (single) friend had become pregnant, while Sarah, a happily married woman of seven years, wanted to be, but her child-shy husband didn't think it was the right time yet, and hadn't done for the last three years. But would he ever?

She got out of the car and marched towards the brightly lit supermarket. There must be a rational explanation for why he'd been going into Mothercare (arm in arm) with Karen. She'd just walk up and ask him outright. No beating about the bush, no giving him time to think of some lame excuse. Sarah would know immediately if he was lying. If he scratched his left earlobe and swallowed repeatedly until his Adam's apple bobbed like a float on a lake … then God knows what she'd do.

Neil was in the frozen food aisle when she pounced on him. 'Oh, hi!' He pinched her cheek. 'God, you look a bit messy, love.' He smiled.

'I didn't have time for a shower at the gym, but then I

supposed you're used to your women drop-dead gorgeous nowadays, eh?'

Neil frowned, pulled his left earlobe and held up a pizza. 'No idea what you're on about. Your message said you'd had a really awful day, but don't take it out on me. Now, shall we have pepperoni, or four cheese?'

Sarah had to lean her weight against the freezer. He may just have an itch on his ear … please don't let it be true … please … and not with Karen.

Neil was still holding up the pizza and frowning. 'Well, which one?'

'Are you the father of Karen's baby?' she whispered.

Neil flushed scarlet, put his hand to his ear, swallowed hard a few times and laughed a hard, brittle, and very false laugh. 'What? What did you just say?'

'You heard me!' Sarah screeched, making shoppers in their aisle, and the next three, stop dead in their tracks. An old couple deliberating over a packet of frozen Yorkshire puddings dropped it and stared open mouthed, a young couple pretended to read the instructions on a pizza, a middle-aged woman with a little boy slowed her trolley and shushed the child, and a young woman knelt to tie her trainers. Sarah could practically feel the curiosity emanating from all of them.

'You can't be serious …' Neil stopped, but his Adam's apple jiggled for England. Sarah's vision seemed to have narrowed, tunnelled, until all she could see was that damned apple bobbing in his red blotchy neck. She shook her head, took a deep breath and blinked back tears.

'Oh, but I *am* serious, very serious.' She glared at the little audience they'd gathered and then back to Neil. 'So, are you the father?' Sarah flung her arms wide and thrust her neck forward. 'I need you to tell me the truth, and I'm sure all these nosy buggers listening in won't sleep until you do, either!'

Chapter Two

18 months later

The sound of the door clunking shut behind her, the cool touch of the hall tiles underfoot, and the lingering aroma of last night's curry, signalled she was home at last; another school day from hell was over.

Sarah wriggled her toes a little more on the smooth surface, and then dropped her sweaty shoes into the basket at the bottom of the stairs. Holding her aching back, she bent over, picked up the mail from the mat and flicked through the pile. *Crap, crap and more crap. Never mind about the decimation of the rainforests – the two-for-one garden gnome offer at Paradise Garden Centre is much more important.*

Bing-bong! She jumped as the doorbell chimed. Sarah rolled her eyes. *Who the hell is this, now?*

She sneaked into the living room and peeped through the blinds. It was damn near wine o'clock, and after the day she'd had, if it wasn't Johnny Depp out there, she wasn't interested.

Sarah could see that the caller was male, dark-haired, tall and suited. He had his back turned to her, and was tapping a clipboard on the side of his leg. *Nope, not Johnny Depp. Probably a time-waster, so he could bugger off.*

Just as she was closing the gap in the blind, the man turned and spotted her. He smiled, raised his clipboard and waved hello with his pen.

Bugger … I'll have to open the damned door now!

'Hello,' she said, opening the front door slightly, 'I'm sorry, but I've just got in. I've lots to do, so I haven't got time to buy anything.'

'Well, that's alright then, because time is my business,' he said.

Sarah noted that even though he wasn't Johnny Depp, he wasn't half-bad. He looked to be about thirty-five, had gorgeous sea-green eyes, a long aquiline nose and a full sensuous mouth. The mouth was curling at the edges in a slow smile.

She sighed. *Never mind his smile, Sarah, he's a time-waster, get rid of him.* 'As I said, I am really busy, and as you have just said, time is your business. Timeshares I expect, so I really must …'

'I'm really not selling anything.' He placed the pen between a set of perfect teeth, lowered his eyes and traced his finger down the pages on his clipboard.

'Well, I don't mean to be rude, but I must go,' Sarah said, already starting to close the door. What she needed was a big glass of red and her feet up.

He looked up from his board and smiled again. 'I think you *do* mean to be rude, actually. Don't worry, I just need to go over a few instructions with you. You have a huge task to complete, and we need to make sure you know exactly what's going to happen.' He took a step towards her.

Sarah immediately slammed the door in his face. Who the bloody hell did he think he was, completely ignoring her? He was obviously a complete fruit loop – handsome, but a fruit loop nonetheless. A task to complete; now that was a new one.

Marching into the kitchen, she grabbed a wine glass from the cupboard and poured a big glug of red. Now, a comfy sofa and mind-numbing rubbish on the TV beckoned. Taking a mouthful of wine she walked into the living room, and nearly spat it out again. The fruit loop was sitting casually on her sofa, grinning from ear to ear.

'Ooh, have you got a glass for me, Sarah? I could murder one.'

Managing to swallow the wine, she backed towards the door, gasping, 'How the hell did you get in here, and how do you know my name?' Frantically, she tried to remember where she'd put her mobile; was it still in her school bag?

Fruit loop held up his hands. ‘Hey, sorry, don’t be afraid. Asking for wine was crass of me. You must be freaked out. Look, I promise I’m not here to hurt you.’

Sarah inched out into the hall. Even if she could put her hand on the damned phone, she probably wouldn’t have time to dial 999. No, the best solution was to make a run for it. She set down her wine glass on the hall table and turned for the front door … only to see fruit loop standing in front of it.

She felt the floor come up to meet her, and leaned heavily against the wall. This was impossible; he was sitting on her sofa in the living room, wasn’t he? ‘How the …?’ He held up his hands again, silencing her. ‘I told you, time is my business.’ He shrugged. ‘I can make it stop, go forward and back, but only for a short while, otherwise the dimensions get mucked up. I would certainly get into big trouble with the powers that be, too, but we’ll talk about that another time; there’s enough for you to take in at the moment, as it is.

‘Anyway, suffice to say that I stopped time, walked round you, here in the hall, and then started it again. Same way I got in here, too. Now, we really must get down to business. I am not here to hurt you, I repeat *not here to hurt you*, Sarah. My name’s John, by the way.’

John walked towards her, gesturing that she should return to the living room. Sarah led the way on shaky legs and then sank down into her armchair. She figured that the fallout from the Neil-and-Karen trauma and her stressful job had, at last, pushed her over the edge. Lots of her teacher friends had breakdowns … this must be her turn. Actually, now that it had happened, she felt relieved, really …

‘So,’ John’s voice broke into her thoughts. ‘Sarah Yates, thirty-four, divorced.’ He looked at his clipboard. ‘No children, history teacher at Grangeworthy High, stressed, disillusioned with the way teaching is going, though not with the subject of history, and

not with most children, just the minority who eat you alive. The latest bane of your life is Danny Jakes of 9CM, who told you recently to "stick your detention up your fat arse!"'

John, now seated on her sofa, pulled a face of sympathy across the room, flicked over the page of notes and continued. 'Err … husband ran off with best friend, they now have a child, you despise them both, especially him, because you gave him the best years of your life, and now think that your chance for kids has passed. You desperately wanted a child but your ex always put you off, always found some kind of excuse.' An even more sympathetic look found a home on John's face. 'Dear, oh dear.' He placed the clipboard down and looked across at her again. 'Now, I have got the right, Sarah Yates, haven't I?'

Sarah wished that he hadn't, but sadly he had described her life in a nutshell. Neil had indeed left with Karen about eighteen months ago now. It had been a drunken one-night stand apparently; the pregnancy had come as a terrible shock. They hadn't planned to keep the child, but then time went by and Karen found it impossible to have a termination. They started getting used to the idea, and Neil insisted on providing financial support, hence the trip to Mothercare.

Then, when Sarah had found out and everything was in the open, Neil and Karen had decided to make a go of it. So, it was Sarah's fault really – how nice for them to have it all magically and neatly resolved like that.

It was old news, but the pain was still as fresh as a daisy on a spring morning. Hearing the facts read out like a shopping list, even though John seemed sorry for her, did not help. The pity of strangers … wasn't that a poem, perhaps a film? She should audition for the lead role. Sarah sighed and rubbed her eyes.

'Yes … yes that's me, unfortunately. Now, you need to disappear because I'm suddenly feeling very weary. I'll make an appointment with my Doctor in the morning, but for now, I just

want to sleep.'

'Doctor, why?'

'To get some antidepressants or something for this breakdown I'm having.' She shrugged. 'I'm obviously talking to a hallucination.'

John threw back his head and laughed. 'No, Sarah, I'm as real as you. It's normal to feel shell-shocked, but you'll get over it quite quickly; people usually do.'

'So, I'm not having a breakdown?'

'Not as far as I know … look, I am what's known as a Time-Needle. It's something you're born into and can't do anything about. My dad was a Time-Needle until his retirement a few years ago and so was his father. Our job is to sew together holes that have opened up in time using a Stitch. If they remain open, people will die. I find Stitches in time and you're a Stitch.'

Sarah looked at him open-mouthed for a few moments, and then, springing up, she wagged a finger at him. 'OK, that's it, and that's all! I need a drink!'

She shot out. John followed her to the kitchen. He watched, frowning, as she pulled a wine glass from the cupboard and picked up the bottle, all the while muttering under her breath.

'Err … you have a glass out here in the hall already,' he said, going to the hall and returning with the glass.

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry, I forgot. How silly of me. I mean, I *am* behaving perfectly normally, aren't I? Talking to a Time Lord, Needle, or whatever the hell you are, listening to stories of sewing holes together in time, and what was the last thing?' she said, knocking back the wine in one gulp. 'Oh, yes, I'm a Stitch … Yup, perfectly normal!' She poured more wine and glared at him.

'Oh dear, you really need to calm down a bit, Sarah. Do you mind if I have this one?' John asked, holding up the wine glass.

Sarah shrugged and stared out of the window. This was worse than she had initially feared. Not only was she having a full-

blown breakdown, she couldn't make the damned hallucination stop. Her mind was totally out of control!

She closed her eyes and breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth, counted to three, and snapped her eyes open. No, he was still there, sipping her wine as if he was real! Her addled mind had conjured up a gorgeous guy and called him John. Johnny was apparently too obvious. God, how sad was she? Sipping her wine, she decided that the best thing to do was go with the flow. *If I play along, show myself … my mind, that I'm not scared, perhaps the stress will go away … and with it, the hallucination. And anyway, what choice do I have?*

'You look a bit calmer now,' John said, setting his glass on the table and drawing up a stool.

Sarah sighed and opened the fridge door. 'Yes, well I think it's sinking in a bit now. Would you like some crackers and cheese? Wine on an empty stomach isn't such a good idea. I was going to dial a pizza later, but I've gone off that idea; funny, that.'

'Yes, please if you're sure it's no trouble,' John said, peering round her at the contents of the fridge. 'Ooh, and a bit of that cold ham and pickles if there's some going begging.'

'Anything else, you know, while I'm here?' Sarah asked.

'Err … is that Sainsbury's houmous?' John asked, licking his lips.

A few minutes later, Sarah, seated opposite at the kitchen table, watched as John made short work of his food. She decided he did look a bit like Johnny Depp, but his face was broader, his jaw squarer, and as far as she remembered Depp's eyes were brown, not green like the twinkly ones looking at her right now. Biting into a cracker, Sarah pointed a piece of cheese at him and asked, 'So, you're a time traveller; do you have a wife?'

'A wife?' John looked startled. 'No, but I think we need to keep our relationship platonic, Sarah. It's not that I don't find you attract—'

'No! It's a book and a film,' she said, horrified that he'd thought she was coming on to him. She sighed and shook her head. *Hang on? What the hell does it matter what he thinks, he's not bloody real!*

'Oh, I see,' John was saying. 'I don't keep up much with books and films.' He popped a pickled onion into his mouth. 'And, I'm not a time traveller; you are … or will be, if you agree to it, of course.'

'Oh, right, yeah. I'm always zipping about the universe in my trusty TARDIS. More ham, John?'

'Now you are just being facetious, Sarah. Ham … mm, just a couple of slices will be lovely, thanks.'

'Anyway,' Sarah said, with her head in the fridge, 'thought you said I was a Stitch in time, not a time traveller.' She forked ham on to John's plate, a thought suddenly occurring to her. 'Ha ha, "a stitch in time saves nine"! Mind you, that old saying means that if you don't attend to a problem immediately, the problem will get worse. God knows quite what *you* meant, John.'

John thanked her and took a sip of wine. He stared at her across the table while she crunched her crackers. 'Look, Sarah, I think you're ready to hear what this whole thing is about.'

Sarah drained her glass and folded her arms. 'Yup, I think I'm ready too, John; fire away, why don't you?'

'OK.' He leaned forward and pushed his plate to one side. 'The meaning of the old saying "a stitch in time saves nine" has become corrupted over the centuries. It actually means that if a hole in time isn't sewn up by a Stitch, nine people will die. Those nine people may, or may not, be pivotal actors on the stage of history, but if they die, or are never born, the effect on the future is always negative. The Stitch has to travel back through time to save them.'

Sarah swallowed a cracker and began to admire the capacity her brain had for such intriguing plots. She was even starting to

enjoy it. Great-looking guy, wine, interesting conversation, even if it *was* all in her head; it was better than watching EastEnders on her own … again.

'OK, John,' she said, rolling up a slice of ham and dipping it in the houmous. Sarah wasn't fussed about what a hallucination thought of her table manners. 'So, I'm this Stitch. Why are there holes, why me, and what do I have to do?' She shoved all the ham in her mouth at once.

John raised his eyebrows slightly as he watched her stuffing her face, but didn't comment. 'Why do holes appear? There are lots of theories too complicated to go into now. Why you? I have no idea, I just get the information. What you have to do, I *can* answer.' He took a dainty nibble of cheese and dabbed his mouth with a bit of kitchen roll. 'A stitch is a person but it is also the acronym for your task. You have to:

S-ave
T-hree
I-mportant
T-errestrials
C-lose
H-ole.'

Sarah frowned and dabbed her finger at the last few crumbs of cheese on her plate. 'Great acronym. It has just one dastardly flaw, Mr Depp.'

'Mr Depp?' John asked, draining his glass.

'Yes, you said earlier that I had to close the hole to save *nine*, like the old saying. Well, now, you just said *three* important terrestrials.' Sarah sat back, folded her arms and giggled. *Seems like my hallucination is having a breakdown, too!*

'No flaw, Sarah, you save three, and then the children that they go on to have, or sometimes, grandchildren, make up the nine,'

John said smugly. ‘Is it OK if I pour another?’ He held up his glass.

‘Yes, why not? And get one for me, would you?’ Sarah held her glass above her head as he walked past. She’d already had one large glass, but hey, the wine was helping her relax, and she definitely needed that. With any luck she’d pass out and wake up tomorrow John-less. ‘Oh, and I think we’d be comfier in the living room,’ she called over her shoulder as she left the kitchen.

Sarah flopped on to the sofa, punched the cushions, and slotted them behind her back. She stretched and yawned loudly as John came in.

‘Don’t get too comfy and go to sleep. You need to understand what’s going to happen,’ he said, handing her the wine.

Sarah noticed it was a very small glass. ‘So do you ever go back in time, John?’ she asked, swirling the wine around her glass.

‘No.’ He looked at her aghast. ‘If a Needle ever goes back in time without express permission there are always consequences for him. He would be seriously punished.’ Sarah pulled a face but said nothing.

‘OK,’ he said, picking up his clipboard and sitting in the chair opposite. ‘Looks like the three that you are down to save are: a homesteader in the Old American West, someone caught up in the Sheffield Blitz, and,’ he flicked paper, ‘ah, yes, a suffragette in early twentieth-century London.’

‘Well, *that* confirms it then. I am having a breakdown.’ Sarah sighed, yawned again, and closed her eyes.

‘What does?’ John frowned.

‘Well, it’s a bit bloody predictable, isn’t it? I teach all those things in my job, don’t I? My brain has neatly woven them into my hallucination.’

‘No, Sarah, you aren’t having a breakdown. It’s partly because of what you do, that *you* have been chosen as a Stitch. You have to know the period well, to be able to blend in.’

Opening one eye she said, ‘I thought you didn’t know why I

had been chosen – that you "just got the information"?' Sarah waggled her index and middle fingers in mock quotation marks.

'Yes, that's true, I only know little bits.' John sighed and looked at his watch. 'But as far as I can tell, Stitches are chosen because they have hidden qualities, courage and stuff. They don't always recognise that in themselves and stitching brings it out … in most of them. Look, I need to know, are you going to do this or not?'

Sarah closed her eye. 'Hmm, I don't think I'd be in the *most of them* category. I feel right out of courage at the moment, John, hidden or otherwise.'

'But will you do it?'

'Do I have a choice?'

'Yes … though you will have deaths on your conscience if you don't.'

'Oh, that's nice then. Has anyone ever refused?'

'A few,' John said. 'One had devastating consequences. There was a guy a few hundred years ago, his name was Norman. He refused, and someone who should have been born wasn't, and eventually someone who shouldn't have been born was.'

Sarah opened both eyes. 'Who?'

'Hitler.'

'Hitler! God, how awful!' Sarah said, reaching for her wine glass.

'Yeah, you know that saying, "time waits for no man"? It was originally time waits for Norman, but unfortunately, Norman didn't care.'

Sarah scratched her head. 'But I don't get it. If I go back to the Old American West and save somebody, their children or grandchildren will already have been born, had children of their own, grown old and may be dead by now. So how can all of that have happened if I haven't even gone back in time yet? And what I do back in time will totally mess up the future … won't it?

'No, Sarah,' John said, shaking his head. 'You've just grown up

watching films and reading books that *assume* that's how time works. Scientists have no real clue. They *say* they do and provide lots of equations and write books to prove it, but unfortunately, they have it all wrong.'

'Wrong? So, how …?'

'Never mind all that now. We really don't have the time … no pun intended,' John said, smirking.

Swinging her legs to the floor Sarah leaned forward and ran her hands through her hair. This was *beyond* crazy now. She decided the best option was to agree to everything and then hopefully John would go. He kept glancing at his watch, so must want to be off. *There you go again, Sarah; he's not real!*

'OK, I'll do it. What happens next, and who do I save first?'

'Now that's a little tricky,' John said, looking sheepish. 'We aren't told that bit. It will happen unexpectedly and you'll just have to cope the best you can … Also, there's no guarantee that you will pick the right person, and even if you do … no guarantee that you can save them. It's all part of a test to see if you're up to the job, I think.'

'Oh, this just gets better and sodding better.'

John ignored her. 'Anyway, other Stitches have told me that everything generally falls into place when they get there. So, Sarah,' he stood up and moved to the hallway, 'I'll bid you good evening. I need to check that everything is as it should be at the market garden. I have two staff, Roy and Helen, that lock up for me. They run the small shop that's attached to it too, but I always like to check everything.'

Sarah jumped up and followed him to the door. 'You're a manager of a market garden?'

'No, I own it. It doesn't really feel like a job; I love it,' he said, grinning. 'I don't really like this Time-Needling stuff, but as I said, I was born to it and can't do anything about it – awful really, so much responsibility.' John opened the door and stepped out.

Sarah shook her head. What kind of an imagination must she have?

John said goodbye and crunched a few steps along her drive. He hesitated and turned round. 'Oh, and don't mention anything about the future to anyone from the past. That would be problematic.'

'Yes, right, I can see how it would be. See you!' she called, quickly shutting the door.

Bewildered, Sarah walked round the house locking the doors and stacking plates and glasses in the dishwasher. Neil and Karen had a lot to answer for. She wondered if they would feel a tiny bit guilty when the men in white coats showed up at her front door with a nice strappy jacket. She poured a glass of water and opened her telephone/address book at the 'D' for doctor page, placing it by the phone. Snapping the hall light off, and the house into darkness, she trudged up the stairs to bed.

Ten minutes later, John stepped into the hallway. He flicked on a small torch and tiptoed to the bottom of the stairs. Reassured by thunderous snoring from upstairs, he carefully opened Sarah's schoolbag and slipped an envelope into it. He dropped Sarah's spare key, which he'd snatched earlier, back into his pocket, extinguished the torch and then quietly let himself out of the house.

To be continued …

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About the Author



Amanda James (aka Mandy) was born in Sheffield and now lives in Bristol with her husband and two cats. In her spare time, she enjoys gardening, singing, and spending lots of time with her grandson. She also admits to spending far too much time chatting on Twitter and Facebook! Mandy recently left her teaching role to follow her ambition to live her life doing what she most enjoys – writing.

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