



*ONLY A GAME  
AFTER ALL*

*SUSAN KATRINKA BUTLER*



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This is a work of fiction. It is however based on a true story, but names have been changed to protect the innocent.



# CHAPTER ONE

“I’m late. I’m so late,” she lamented out loud. “How can I be so late? I’m organized. I arrange my time efficiently. Would love to be able to just go home and start my new sci-fi book, like that would really happen. Work comes first, even if the Martian landscape is ...”

Bam!

She shook her head, barely acknowledging her sprawl on the well-used linoleum of the school hallway floor, with her books, notebooks and loose papers scattered around her. She’d just retrieved them from the neat stack in her locker after a fight with the padlock; of all days, it had to be stubborn.

“Oh, Sarah, I’m so sorry,” a dark haired young boy choked as he tried to help her up. Their heads butted.

She landed on her backside, again. He flailed backwards. She almost cracked a smile. “No need. I was in a hurry, as always, and daydreaming.”

“More my fault than yours,” he creaked, clearing his throat. “I, uh, was dashing up to Chem lab, late as usual.”

“As usual,” she attempted a joke with vague recognition of the lower classmate. She appreciated the disclaimer, but knew it had been her fault, not thinking in the present. The crash unwittingly drew the attention of a few of their teachers to both their chagrins.

She stood to her full height of six feet, idly brushing off her backside, accepting what he’d retrieved with a quick nod. “Thanks. See you tomorrow, er, in English class.”

“Ooh, don’t remind me. The last time the old man ...”

“Er, yeah, but I’ve really got to dash. I’m late.”

“For a very important date?” he jibed and she cracked a grin.

“Ya. You call me Alice in the future, I’ll deck you!”

The boy chortled as she saluted but rubbed his head. She probably would.

She pushed through the back door in her hurried steady fashion to jump into her newly acquired red sports car. Uncharacteristically, she flung her stack of homework on the seat next to her; it was already so badly mixed up, a little more wouldn’t hurt. She raced controllably to the highway.

The drive across town to the medical center had a calming effect, preparing her for the transition of a high school student to an employed adult. She benefited from the practical experience of working in medicine that she otherwise wouldn’t obtain.

The hospital classes in general, and her instructor in particular, frowned upon “on-the-job training” while she was yet an undergraduate. Luckily, the Medical Center was a private practice and her father was the head of it. There wasn’t much the head nurse could do about it, since Nurse Bloomingfield was a friend of her father’s and knew her history.

She remembered when her father, the very personable and actually renowned Dr. John Franklin, had commented in passing that she’d learn far more at the center than mere classes. She’d wholeheartedly agreed and uncharacteristically pinned him down as to when, class rules or not, before he could otherwise back out. He never went back on his word, even if he didn’t exactly remember giving the job offer. He was not normally vague, especially in his chosen field, though of late wasn’t especially focused on his family. Wonderfully, it was a done deal. She cemented her scheduled workdays in a totally professional manner, of course, though she’d felt like jumping for joy and hugging the man for his suggestion.

Jerking her emergency brake, she parked in her slot. She took a

moment to re-pin her below the shoulder length blonde hair back into its neat French twist. Checking make-up in the rear view mirror, she added a quick smear of lipstick and dusted off her simple high-necked long sleeved secretary dress. Today wouldn't be too difficult, yet she hated being late when she'd promised to try to be early.

Locking her car, past regretting having to do so, expectations of moral human behavior notwithstanding, she hurried past the smoky glass door into the cool quiet of a carpeted waiting room and on through the inner door to wait for its buzz. "Sorry, Cindy," she whispered. "I did try to hurry, but it couldn't be helped. First, one thing then another, er ..."

"Hey! No sweat. The work always waits," Cindy chuckled quietly. "I think you're playing 'girl Friday' today, anyway. That stack of 'yuk' over there is yours to file, but now Dr. Bowman's ready for Mrs. Terhorst. Care to do the honors?"

"Gee, thanks!" Sarah wilted, but straightened up with a sour grin. She walked back to the waiting room and called the elderly lady forward, helping her down the hall to an examination room. It was good practice in keeping her patience and pleasant smile as she listened to and ignored the cryptic un-pleasantries that spewed from the caustic lady. The lady (euphemistically) was old enough to have an opinion on almost anything.

By six in the afternoon, Sarah had finally reached the last pile of files. Cindy came up behind her, watching the fluid precise movements of Sarah's system.

"You know, that's the only job I don't like around here."

"Hm?" Sarah mumbled while concentrating on the tiny print at the side of each manila folder.

"Putting up the files," clarified Cindy despite the fact Sarah was clearly not listening. "I don't mind pulling them, but at the end of the day, just filing away the tall stack is pure tedium."

Sarah blinked then laughed. "Someone has to do it, so you can



pull them down again! Besides, it's all part of the game, after all."

"Oh, sure," doubted Cindy, then she brightened. "Say! You doing anything later? A few of us are going to get beer and a pizza and catch up on some gossip."

Sarah glanced down at her real world contemporary and shook her head. "Thanks, but I can't. I really appreciate the invite, but have to whip up dinner when I get home and have a carload of studying to do, once I get it reshuffled. Some other time?"

Cindy blinked, then dismissed trying to understand. Sarah was always spouting from some other plane of existence. "Like right. Why not slow down? Going to two schools, plus working here, is going to kill you! You have the rest of your life to study. Now is the time to play! I can chum you up with ..."

"No, thanks," Sarah laughed, tired eyes still twinkling. "Besides, I play."

"Like when?" Cindy challenged. "Weekends, I suppose?"

"I have a second job on weekends."

Cindy groaned volubly. "Well, when?"

Sarah shrugged and sat on the back of the chair on which she'd been standing. She quirked a half grin. "Well, last month, a group from school went roller skating at the new arena and persuaded me to join. It made for good physical exercise that cleared the mind."

"Big deal! One time and way last month, yet. Now it's near the end of this month. When I was in my last year of school, I'd be out every night just having fun and meeting people; you know: finding out what life's all about," Cindy instructed sternly. "You're going to burn yourself out at this rate!"

"I doubt that could happen, Cindy. Besides, learning is fun; with my diverse jobs, I meet people, if that's the issue; but I appreciate your, er, concern. It's just that, right now, I can't afford to waste time on trivia and self-indulgence, no matter how much fun it can ... er, could be. You know that already."

"Yeah, but I swear, you're not human!" Cindy tossed with an

abandoning shrug and received a copycat indulgence.

Just then, Dr. Franklin walked by and stopped. "You girls don't have enough to do?"

"Just passing the teeniest bit of time with an unauthorized break, Doctor!" Cindy spouted sprightly, her dark eyes sparkling. "Going right back to work, sir!" She saluted and did an about face, her pixie length brown hair barely tufting while marching back to the front desk, though a longer one inch thick strand curled cutely at her chin, and it was startlingly blue tinged.

"Hi, Dad," Sarah sighed with an apologetic smile. "Almost finished here. I should have dinner ready around 7:30."

"Good," he answered vaguely, then with a smile, looked up from the papers in his hand. "Have to run by the hospital and check on Mrs. Hall's goiter. See you at home."

"Right," she nodded automatically, watching her tall distinguished father disappear into a cross hall. "Well, let's get to it," she verbally reminded her resting body and hopped off the chair to slide it back to its proper place once the final file was in place.

Picking up her purse and coat, Sarah called goodnight to Cindy, who was flipping off the overhead lights, and dashed to her car. It took about twenty minutes to drive from the office in the suburbs to her home in the northwest side of the city proper. The drive in the evening was peaceful after the rush hour traffic subsided. She crossed the song-bridge, so named as its metal webbed construction for ice prevention made music when tires raced over it. It was humming its familiar tune as usual and she unconsciously mimicked as she pulled into her wide driveway, parking far left. Her father needed the room to pull into his side of the two-car garage at the base of the split-level house. Part of her mind trying to plan dinner, she picked up her scattered books and rearranged them before climbing out and up the angled steps to the front door. A sudden smile crossed her lips when she realized she'd struck her physics papers into her history book. "Oh, brother!" she sighed inwardly,

returning the friendly wave of the neighbor across the street while maneuvering the heavy unlocked wooden front door inward.

## CHAPTER TWO

“I saw you!”

The creepy accusation caused her to jump. Most of her books toppled, again. She sighed tiredly and bent to retrieve them. Welcome to her real world. She so wished a star jump to somewhere could be real just then, sci-fi being her real joy away from this pedantic reality.

“I saw you making eyes at him!” Lynn Franklin further accused while clutching the banister of the stairway. “They are *my* friends, not yours!”

“Yes, Mama,” Sarah agreed tiredly. “Why don’t you go back upstairs and lie down to rest before supper?”

“You like that, don’t you? Taking things away from me, running the house and ordering people around all the time!” her mother babbled, weaving slightly.

Piling her books temporarily on the lower step, Sarah put her arm around the woman’s waist to support her. With painstaking tolerance, she coaxed Lynn to take a step up.

“You all just want me out of the way,” continued the watery complaint.

“Come, Mama. I’m sure rest will do you good. No one is taking anything away from you. I’m just helping until you feel better,” Sarah calmed, yet her voice was a monotone litany.

“I am sick, you know!” Lynn asserted belligerently. “You think I drink that stuff if I wasn’t sick? And didn’t need it? Can’t stand it,

but it is doctor's orders ... well, isn't it? I ... mean," she stumbled and clutched hard to Sarah, almost making them both fall. "Didn't *HE* say to take a little nip, to relax, to help my nerves? You know that!"

"Yes, Mama," Sarah agreed dully. She had the woman almost back to her room and suppressed a wrongful sigh of relief. "Here we are. Just lie down a few minutes. It will help your head. I'll be back in a short while, just after I start ... er, when supper is ready."

Lynn landed crookedly on her bed and hastily gulped at a glassful of amber liquid. Finally, she nodded and took a breath. "Well, all right. If you're sure. I'll lie down for just a few minutes." She feigned a fluttering little girl obedience, keeping up the fiction that she would be up later. "I do have an awful headache. Why do I get these terrible migraines? Never had them before," she whined. She finally focused on Sarah. "You're the only one who understands."

"Don't you think you've had enough, Mama?" Sarah asked softly from her stance against the doorframe, nodding toward the liquid sloshing more or less successfully into the glass. Strangely, or maybe not so strange, she was more concerned about the carpet than the woman. "Why not lean back and just rest until dinner?"

Lynn glared wildly, making Sarah flinch. "Why should I? I can drink if I want! You know I don't really need the stuff!"

Sarah flushed at the contradiction, but wisely kept silent as Mama ranted.

"I can stop anytime I feel like it! I jus' don't feel like it. I only jus' take a little nip to help calm the—me—down and stop these dreadful headaches!" She coughed long and hard and lit a cigarette, inhaling deeply. "I'll jus' sit here a minute or two and be down soon. You know, supper was one meal we enjoyed. He was so grateful, after me working in the office all day. I could still do it, too. Proved it when you went away."

"I didn't just go away. I was hospitalized, because you ..."

"Then after supper, we'd sit, and talk, and talk, and talk ..."

“Watch your cigarette, Mama,” Sara warned, watching her mother’s flailing hands as she talked. The sheets were coming perilously close to the burning tip. It was obvious Lynn wasn’t listening, caught up her own reverie.

“Think I don’t know I got a cigarette lit?” Lynn snapped. She cleared her throat noisily, choking, and promptly lit a second cigarette, ignoring the one she’d slammed into in the ashtray. Then sighing childishly, her mood again flipping, she glanced up piteously. “Just switch on that record I like so well. There’s a good girl. Now, you can go. I know you’d rather be anywhere else than sitting here listening to a lonely old woman. Go on! Off with you!”

“Oh, Mama! You’re not old, but supper does have to be started,” Sarah apologized, totally vexed.

“Sure. All right! Nobody cares, really cares, anymore. Nobody,” crooned Lynn drunkenly.

“I’ll be, uh, back soon, Mama,” Sarah put in dutifully, finally escaping. She glanced at her record player as she closed the door and sighed. It had been a long time since she’d played it in the privacy of her own room. It had once been a prized birthday present, before the advent of all the electronic and almost metaphysical magic of the CD’s and iPod; but since her mother had found a need for it, the turntable had been transported to her parent’s dresser. Some of her favorite records, prized and irreplaceable vinyl, were all becoming ruined. However, the gesture did provide some respite. With a final sigh, Sarah resigned her thoughts to the back of her mind and headed downstairs to quickly scan the cupboards for ideas concerning supper.

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