

SARA JULIET'S DAY AT THE RACES

By Beth Black

Day number 264. Monday morning. Sara Juliet Jordan blustered into work, late. Her long, red hair had been danced about by howling winds outside. Everyone blew in, disheveled, preparing for the workweek to knock them over completely. Sara Juliet was no exception to this, except that she intended to go down fighting. She had to last 5 years, and she was halfway there.

"He's looking for you," The security guard called to her.

"I'm hurrying," she replied, racing across the lobby and leaping into an elevator.

Just before the doors slid shut, she noticed that guard was smirking at her. *Oh, crud.*

The elevator arrived at the Executive Level, where the luxurious marble floor and oak paneling broadcast a fictional tale of class and style. She marched into her little cubicle and stashed her purse under her desk. Removing her coat and flinging it onto the back of her chair, she sat for a quick repair job. A pocket mirror in her top drawer proved helpful while she deftly finger-combed errant strands into place.

Sara Juliet habitually wore business pantsuits. She ignored the offensive political references this added to his comments. Her boss, CEO Cyril Kreutsen, liked to make comments, and he hated pantsuits. But he couldn't make her stop. After all, it was considered appropriate professional wear described in the company handbook and similar to suits worn by the head of HR.

And there were reasons Sara Juliet put up with his remarks in order to wear her pantsuits. To her, they felt like suits of armor — protective, empowering and proper — with the added benefit of pockets. Jacket or pants pockets didn't matter, so long as she could stash her private cell phone each day to keep it close for the helpful little messages she received. Texts, tweets, and other messages her hidden phone shared during the day presented her with a small arsenal of good will that kept her going.

As if on cue, her cell silently vibrated to announce an arriving text. She popped up and glanced over the cubicle wall to confirm that no one was watching, then sat again and absorbed the message: ***UR a smart & worthy person.*** Her breath caught, and she smiled ever so slightly so that no one would see. The buttons lining the side of her phone pressed lightly against her fingertips as if begging her to delete such evidence and move on with the day. She obeyed by tapping the button to make it vanish. Then, she slid the phone back into her pocket and ran to make coffee for the department.

Sara Juliet poured a steaming cup and brought it into Cyril's office. She made a point of leaving his door open, holding the cup with both hands. The coffee swirled and lapped onto her wrist, burning her. But she continued inside the office and set the beverage before him. He tapped his pencil on the desk and glared at her. She stood rigidly before his anger. Recalling the message she'd just read helped her raise her chin just a notch.

"You were exactly one hundred and twenty seconds late this morning. Stop sleeping around. And get here on damned time."

Sara Juliet took a moment to respond. She knew this game. "I'm sorry, sir." That's all she said. She made a point of *not* responding to his attack on her womanhood. Sometimes it worked to just let him say a nasty thing and then get into work. Sometimes.

"So, who had you last night? Giving it out to all the wrong guys again?"

Instinctively, she stepped back. Said nothing.

His lips curled at the ends, reminding her of a fat worm twisting its way out of rotten fruit. "Close the door."

Once again, she held still. The air grew too warm. Dizzy, she wanted to throw open her suit jacket just so she could breathe. No chance of anything like that happening in front of Cyril. He would certainly see it as an invitation.

"Close it!" he barked.

"Sir, there's an opening in Sales. The VP needs a new assistant —"

"You know exactly how that will happen, young lady. And not a minute before. Now close the damn door. Don't make me —"

His phone rang.

"Sir, that's your wife's attorney," she said. "There's a discrepancy in the divorce settlement, and I knew you'd want to handle it over the phone."

He blinked at her.

"Rather than going to court again."

The phone kept ringing.

Sneering, he leaned forward and reached for the phone. To her he said, "Get out. I'll see you here after this call. We have unfinished business."

She closed his door and fled back to her cubicle. Popping open her jacket, she drew in a long breath and felt better. Sweat dripped from her forehead onto her keyboard. As she reached for a tissue to wipe it away, her phone gave silent notification again. The message read: "UR stronger than him. Don't let him win." The message took hold, and she vanished it.

Sara Juliet grabbed a file folder of accounting stats and headed for the elevator. Pausing by a co-worker's cubicle, she tapped his shoulder. "Tell him I had to handle an emergency at Accounting on the 4th floor."

The young man swung around and eyed her. "I'd prefer not to be your messenger."

They glared at each other. "Tell him!" she threw the words into his face with all the quiet force she could muster. "Or I'll tell him about your long lunches that I covered."

He backed away and returned to his computer screen, ignoring her. Sara Juliet went for the elevator. Safely off the Executive Floor, she stood grasping the file tightly all the way down to Accounting, thinking about all the times she'd offered to transfer to another position in the company. And he always refused. Giving in to his demands once had done nothing to save her. He would never let her leave. He would never give her a good reference. He would trash her life completely and the clock was ticking. But she had made it this far, and she had managed to learn enough about the business to become important as a staff member. So, he let her escape once in a while. At least for the time being. Good thing she'd told the attorney to call during the first half hour of the day. Experience had taught her well.

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Accounting fixed the problem faster than she'd hoped, and she couldn't put off returning any longer. She returned to her cubicle. Everything seemed quiet. His door was closed. Her desk phone showed a line in use, so he was busy. She swiveled in her chair and reached for a stack of reports that were almost due.

Sara Juliet really needed this job, and somehow, she needed to find a way to earn his respect. He was a powerful man in this state, and his grasp reached across many cities. She would have to leave her family and friends way behind to escape the outcome of quitting this job. Her phone notified her again: ***UR kindhearted & gracious. Worthwhile people adore you.*** The compliment seeped into her system, relaxing her.

At noon, Cyril prepared to leave for an elegant lunch-hour meeting with his Sales VP. He wouldn't be back for at least an hour. Sara Juliet reached down to grab her purse for lunch break, when she glanced up to discover him looming over her cube wall, waving a sheet of paper. "You haven't checked my outbox for over an hour."

"I'm sorry. You were working, and I didn't wish to disturb you."

"Well, this needs to be typed up before my next meeting, at 2:00. Stay and type it. He wheeled and stepped away. "Be here when I return from lunch. I have some dic ... tation." He fixed weasel eyes on her. She nodded.

Once he was truly gone, she wolfed down a candy bar from the floor's vending machine and returned to work. It was not her natural reaction to despise someone, but she hated Cyril. Right now, he's probably about to order roast beef or shrimp salad. Short of murdering him, the solution seemed simple. *I just need more candy.* Her hand shook in suppressed anger as she opened her coin purse. There, rustling with the coins, waited a small slip of paper. She pulled the note free. It felt soft in her grasp, and the edges of the paper teased her fingertips gently, as she unfolded it. She read: ***You have what it takes to be successful.*** It was a nice message and her vending machine lunch didn't taste half bad, after all. Who would have thought crunchy peanuts and satiny chocolate could blend so well together? She kept the little slip of paper and glanced at it from time to time while typing Cyril's document. *How nice to be appreciated!* Though these notes certainly did not come from her boss, they were good. A good thing, indeed. It might have been nice to enjoy his appreciation and job security. Nevertheless, the messages still brightened her day.

At 1:15, she sat on the edge of the chair in Cyril's office and wrote as quickly as she could. Like most modern-day secretaries, she did not know shorthand. It was a lost art; ever since secretaries with college degrees became the rage, rather than graduates from secretarial school. Instead, she used Fastnotes, a fancy name for writing really fast. Today's secretaries simply practiced writing fast and created their own personal shortcuts. It wasn't something her major in Business Administration had prepared her for. She tried to catch all his words, because Cyril waited for no one. He spoke quickly and never glanced up from his notes as he talked. At last, he was finished. "After I sign it, cc the entire upper staff, and give me a copy for my files." With that, he was done with her. She'd seen him act this way this before. Like a different person. Not pleasant, but at least not scary. At 2:00, he left for the meeting, and she could breathe again.

Back at her desk, she found the day's mail that included a letter addressed to her. Self interest won, and she opened hers first. It was a note on delicate stationery that read: ***You are a capable woman***

appreciated by many good people. You deserve to be free. A pleasant aroma of flowers graced the air. This one, a bit over the top, made her chuckle softly. Her own private joy.

When Cyril returned from his meeting, her typed version of his report was waiting on his desk. She'd stuck a "Sign Here" note flag on the final signature page." Her fingers were crossed under her desk as he bustled past.

"Your report –"

He glared at her.

"It's, it's on your –"

But he was gone, already inside his office and ignoring her. Sara Juliet didn't bother to finish the sentence. It felt good to be a mere tree in the forest, though she had a sudden urge to yell, "Timber!" She clenched her fists under her desk, and slowly the urge faded.

Her desk phone jangled with an inside line. Cyril.

"Yes, sir?" she asked.

"Get in here. I signed it. Those copies won't make themselves. Though you'd do better to put your ass on that copy glass. I'd pay for that."

She hung up and made one quick call before going into his office.

He was standing in front of his desk when she walked in. Swiftly, he moved to the door and shut it behind her. It chilled her, but she forced herself to count. *Thirty seconds. Thirty damn seconds.*

She ran behind the desk and paused. It felt like they were kids playing tag. Which meant it felt horrible, frightening and silly all at once.

"I'll just go make those copies," she said while grabbing for the paper on his desk. He swung around to her right, so she took off to the left side of the desk.

"Nope. No, you won't. First things —" He followed her around his desk. They were nearly at the door.

A loud knock on the door startled him. "Go away!" he barked. "I'm in a meeting!"

The knock repeated, louder.

Sara Juliet shrugged. "Allow me!" She rushed to the door and flung it open. There stood an administrative assistant from Accounting. Her name was Monica. She was a pleasant woman in her fifties. She was the person Sara Juliet called before entering Cyril's office.

Monica glanced at them both and cleared her throat. "Sir, I just wanted to let you know that we put out the escrow fire on the merger."

He stared at Monica for what seemed a full minute. Then, he retreated a few steps. Sniffing, he seemed at a loss. "Of course. Now, both of you, get out."

Safely out of his office, she mouthed, "Thank you!" to Monica. The older woman just shrugged and whispered, "You should think about quitting."

After she left, another text arrived: *You're admired by more people than you know.*

She was indeed a worthwhile person, yet so alone...and this man, this creep, had all the say. She wanted to yell at him about the unfairness of the situation, but then she remembered the messages. They

cheered her. She wasn't truly alone, after all. She could be strong. With those messages, somehow, she knew she could survive him.

She pressed the button to start the copy machine and checked her watch. The day was sprinting to its finish. This wasn't enough to keep her busy to the end, though. She needed something else. Aimlessly, she pulled the original report out of the copier. The machine was still ka-chunking out copies when something on the document caught her eye. A new name. Apparently, he'd gone through with his threats to fire the VP of Acquisitions. The new person was a woman named Emily.

Sara Juliet knew what to do.

By the time she completed the "Welcome Onboard" meeting and tour of the building, it was time to close up shop for the day. She returned to her cubicle and glanced around. His office door was open, but the light was off, a sure sign Cyril had gone for the day.

Contented, she sat at her computer, ready to work. A task reminder from her Outlook Calendar popped up onscreen. The task read: "Prepare for Tomorrow."

Two clicks, and she completed half the job. It was a simple task to arrange automatic text messages sent the next day. The last half of it involved much more effort. She opened a blank document and chose a template labeled, simply, "For Tomorrow" – and a fresh, white screen appeared. A blank page, dreamy and accommodating as life should be, waited patiently for her input. Eyes fluttering, she paused to think. Then she typed. She would not stop typing until a kindhearted, empowering message filled the page. Then she printed this precious document on some pretty flower stationery. Sealing the envelope, she started to feel she could conquer tomorrow in many small ways. Next, she signed on to her message account and prepared a day's worth of texts to be sent automatically at two-hour intervals. Each message encouraged and praised her. If no one else could handle the task, Sara Juliet took over and lifted her own spirits as high as they needed to be. Even if it took pages of messages, like the one currently on her screen. Ever since beginning this project, she'd started to feel better, stronger, and more ready for a change.

She would find some method to escape Cyril's bad intentions, and if it didn't work, she would reach out to all her contacts and begin searching for another position somewhere. Doing this task every evening reminded her that she would never be alone. She had herself, after all. She could call that university about continuing her education. She could check out that singles' reading group at the library. She could do it all, somehow. Making it happen didn't seem so hard with a little encouragement along the way. She scanned her work, her special project, noting the texture of each word, and a smile flickered across her lips.

The first line read: *I have faith in you.*