

The Best of a Bad Situation

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The Best of a Bad Situation

by [Dynapink](#)

Summary

What a way to start the day: trapped in a stalled lift with the boss, in a skirt and heels! Eh, things could be worse.

Minute one

“Ah, Sandra, just the person I was coming to see.”

DSI Sandra Pullman turned around and greeted her superior officer with a friendly smile. “Morning, sir,” she said. She pointed at the file folder he had tucked underneath his arm. “New case for us, then?”

“Yes,” Robert Strickland answered. “Missing girl, disappeared from her home in August, 1986.” They reached the lift, and he pushed the down button as he continued talking. “All the usual stuff, but there are one or two puzzling aspects that I thought your team might enjoy teasing out. Ladies first,” he said as the door opened.

“Age before beauty,” she said, a bit snappishly.

Strickland blinked at her in surprise and entered the lift without another word. Sandra gulped and stepped in after him, a slightly horrorstruck expression on her face. “I’m terribly sorry, sir. That was an inexcusable thing to say, and I can’t apologise enough.”

“It’s all right, Sandra. Don’t feel the need to apologise.”

She gave him a brief smile that was half sheepish and half insolent. “Clearly I’m too used to talking to my team.”

Strickland laughed. “Yes, I can see how that would tend t--- Steady on, what’s this? ”

As he spoke, the lights began to flicker and the steady drone of the motor became louder and less steady. Abruptly, there was a moan from the mechanical works and everything shuddered to a stop.

“Oh, hell’s bells!”

The emergency light switched on, leaving the cramped interior bathed in a dim, rather greenish light. No sound, though. Even worse, no movement.

Minute three

Strickland put his mobile back in his pocket. “Everyone else had the same idea. Can’t get through to maintenance at all.”

“Not surprising,” Sandra said as she ended her own call. “Jack says the power’s out all over the building, and probably beyond. Don’t we have backup generators for just this sort of emergency?”

“Yes, we do, for ‘top priority use’. Clearly the lifts aren’t considered top priority.

Sandra laughed. “How very bureaucratic of them.”

“Hmm? How so?”

“You know the sort of thinking. If the lifts are out of service, everyone can just take the stairs.”

“Of course,” he agreed. “And the thought never occurs to anyone that at any given moment most of the lifts in the building will be occupied.”

“Mm hmm. And since that’s likely to be true, they’ll start with the main ones first. Jack said he would alert someone to our predicament, but I doubt we’ll be first on the list.”

Strickland gave her a slightly rueful look. “And now I’m afraid you know the awful truth about me, Sandra. I may seem like a ‘high-ranking official’, but I’m neither as high-ranking nor as powerful as I’d like everyone to believe.”

Sandra snorted, and the sound quickly turned into a genuine laugh. After a second, Strickland unbent enough to let out a small chuckle. Things could, after all, be worse.

Minute ten

“Okay, I’ve had just about enough of this,” Sandra said, her voice registering considerable irritation.

Her superior looked at her in some surprise. Up until this very minute she’d seemed not only calm but completely unflappable. “I’m sure it won’t be much longer,” he said, in a slightly clumsy attempt to sound comforting. “The power will be back on soon, surely. Either that or someone from maintenance will be along to find us.”

“Well, they’re going to find me barefoot and sitting on the floor,” she informed him. “And I hope you don’t object to me being ‘out of uniform’, because I can’t stand these bloody heels another minute.” Fitting word to deed, she reached down and took off her shoes, rubbed her feet, and then sat down on the floor of the lift, tucking her legs underneath her.

Strickland stood awkwardly over her, seeming to look down at her from an enormous height. “It looks rather dirty.”

“More like appallingly filthy. I’m going to need a shower and a change of clothes by the time we get out of here. Anyway, we might as well go over this new case you’ve got. Help pass the time.”

He handed down the folder. “Good idea. The girl’s name is – or was – Sara Taggart. At the age of nineteen, she disappeared from her parents’ home in Cornwall. According to her family she went to bed as usual that night, but the next morning she’d seemingly vanished into thin air. Her bed had been slept in, the front door was locked and the chain on, but her keys and all her things were still in her room.”

“Out through the window?” suggested Sandra. “The original case notes make mention of a trellis near her bedroom.”

“Yes. The inquiry at the time concluded that the most probable scenario was that the girl simply left the house through her bedroom window, most likely to meet a boyfriend, and later met with foul play at an undetermined location and at the hands of person or persons unknown.”

She nodded absently, remaining silent for a minute or two as she read on. Out of long habit, she spread the papers out on the floor in front of her. Pulling a sour face, she asked, “What’s all this guff about her brother?”

“That would be Arthur Taggart. Twenty-three at the time, living at home on the dole. He’s the odd twist I was telling you about.”

“Because he disappeared almost exactly a year before Sara?”

“That, and the fact that he just as mysteriously *reappeared* seven months after his sister went missing – claiming to have been abducted by UFOs.”

Sandra rolled her eyes. “Oh, lovely. One of those.”

“Yes, one of those. I expect you’ll have a wonderful time interviewing him, provided you can track him down. Either way, at the time he couldn’t be shaken from his belief that it was the same aliens who later took Sara.”

“Great. I’ll have to put Brian on that one. Can’t *wait* to tell the team that our only lead is that the girl was apparently kidnapped by little green men in a silver saucer.”

“Could be just the one man in a blue box, I suppose.”

Sandra looked up at him in surprised amusement. He was approximately the last person she’d ever expect to hear a pop culture reference from, but after all, it was already turning out to be that kind of day. She wondered if he were feeling punchy from their unexpected confinement, or if this was a side of him that might actually be normal, if somewhat unexpected. His expression was as neutral as it ever was, and the angle from which she was studying him was hardly ideal.

“Look, sir,” she said quietly, “I know the floor is disgusting and your suit is expensive, but would you mind sitting down before I break my neck looking up at you?”

Strickland’s face – what she could see of it – was a study in fastidious repugnance. “Is that really necessary, Sandra? I understand the shoes, but... Oh, all right. I suppose it would be easier than trying to shift through all those files while standing.” With the faintest hint of a shudder, he lowered himself to sit beside her.

Sandra’s lips twitched, but she managed to control the urge to laugh, turning it into a slight cough instead.

“Better?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Much. Thank you.”

“Yes, well, we’ll see how much you thank me when I send you my dry-cleaning bill,” he said wryly.

“I think we should send both our cleaning bills to the power company. Or at least our own maintenance staff.”

“Excellent idea. I’ll make it an official expenditure request.”

Amazing. A second joke from him in under two minutes. Really, she had no idea Strickland could actually be surprisingly good company, once he loosened up slightly. And the sight of him sitting beside her on the dirty floor of the lift was a mental image she was going to treasure for a long time to come, every time he gave her or the team a dressing down.

Minute twenty-seven

“So? What are your thoughts so far?” he asked, after they’d gone through everything in the file.

She shook her head slowly. “I’m not sure yet. It could be just what the investigating officers originally concluded, teenager meeting misadventure after sneaking out to meet someone, but I can’t stop thinking about the brother. We really have to find him. I have a lot of questions to ask him. Honestly, I wish the lads were here to give us their input.”

“Quite frankly, I’m glad they’re not,” he replied, looking around at the narrow walls of their temporary prison. “I rather suspect Gerry’s personality could get just a bit overwhelming in tight quarters.”

“Oh, it definitely can,” Sandra agreed emphatically. “Still, in this situation, better him than Brian. He’d be reeling off statistics about the unlikelihood of the car breaking loose and falling down the shaft, just to make us feel better about a possibility no one had thought of in the first place. And of course, that bike of his is the size of another person.”

He thought about that. “Oh, god, yes, the bike. Mind you, I’d rather be stuck with the whole lot *and* the bike than with my ex-wife. How about you?”

“I barely know your ex-wife,” she said, which gained a small snort of amusement from Strickland. “Now, my mother on the other hand. If she were here, by this time I’d have either broken every nail trying to claw the door open or gone through the emergency hatch and climbed the cable till I found a way to escape.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but whatever he was going to say was destined to remain unsaid, for at that moment the lights came back on and the motor hummed back into life. After a few seconds the lift shuddered back into movement and continued on its downward journey.

With a sigh of relief, they gathered the papers together and both stood, slightly stiff after nearly twenty minutes on the cold, hard floor. Sandra slipped back into her shoes just as the doors opened.

“Not an experience I’d care to repeat,” she said as she stepped out into the familiar corridor.

“No, nor I. Still, it could have been worse, I suppose.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “It could definitely have been worse.”

“Sandra...” He hesitated.

“Yes, sir?”

“I was just wondering if you’d like to come to dinner with me. After you get back from Cornwall, obviously.”

She stopped abruptly. She looked at him, taken completely by surprise at the offer. Then that mental image of him sitting on the floor in the dirt like a child, making awkward jokes, reasserted itself and she couldn’t help smiling. “All right. I look forward to it.”

“Then so do I.”

And then they were at the doors of the UCOS office, and everything was all normal again.

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