

FLOORED

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FLOOR 1

Drew arrived at his office without killing anyone.

Granted, that was a normal state of affairs, but this morning he'd come closer than usual to calamity.

Wearing odd socks can do that.

Well, worrying unnecessarily about wearing odd socks.

He'd discovered the minor wardrobe error soon after leaving home and frequently glanced down at his feet, trying to assess how obvious the disparity of blues was. He was hardly a style icon but didn't want to look foolish.

Repeatedly peering into the Ford Focus' footwell was undoubtedly why he'd nearly mowed down a young woman on a pedestrian crossing. Luckily, he'd stopped just in time. She'd given him the evils, followed by a creditably persistent, ramrod-straight index finger.

Still, as motoring incidents went, he'd suffered worse.

Much worse, he thought.

He'd sworn violently. The car window was open. A middle-aged lady was walking past. She'd given him the evils, too. A little bile had

tickled Drew's throat as he slowly pulled away from the zebra crossing, heart hammering.

Mondays. What are they good for? Absolutely nothing.

Slowly, he regained his composure. Enough drama for one day. And it was only 07:50.

The remainder of the commute passed without incident, and he breezed into the building's airy foyer.

As he tapped his pass on the electronic reader at one of the three security turnstiles, he became aware of someone else having a Monday morning to forget.

'Look, I work here.' The female voice was hushed but urgent.

He glanced over. A petite brunette struggled to get the touchpad to give her ID a happy beep. Her restrained attire was augmented by tinted glasses. He wondered whether she'd forgotten to remove them or was just trying to appear cool. Yet, her demeanour seemed far from trendy or gregarious.

The security guard looked disdainfully at her. 'Anybody could say that.'

Drew frowned. This wasn't Alan, the regular attendant. Alan was a decent bloke. Supported Bristol Rovers. Tolerated Drew's lame banter.

This guy? Officious—and clearly enjoying it.

'My pass was fine last week,' she protested, tapping it again.

'Anybody could say that too.' He'd obviously consumed the entire library of rule books for breakfast.

The girl waved her pass at the guard's face. 'Please, just let me through.'

'Sorry, Miss.'

Drew took a step forward, keen to broker peace, but another white knight strolled up. This one had the build of a rugby fullback but with un-mangled ears and perfect hair.

‘It’s okay, Len. She’s fine,’ Mr God’s Gift said.

The girl flashed a nervous smile but didn’t make eye contact.

‘Rules is rules,’ the security guard—Len—said. ‘I don’t recognise her.’

The white knight flashed his even whiter teeth. ‘New here, aren’t you?’

Len’s eyes narrowed. He folded his burly arms.

Drew was wary of a punch-up—assuming the cape-free superhero would jeopardise his immaculate dentistry to rescue a damsel in distress. Even one whose expression said she wouldn’t touch him with a ten-foot pole.

Len stepped across the lane, blocking her path. ‘Rules is rules. She’s gotta get a temporary pass.’

‘Not surprised you don’t recognise her.’ The rescuer leant in. ‘She spends all day locked away, like rhubarb being forced.’ Out came the smile.

Drew felt queasy. *What a dick!*

‘Better than being forced to do other things—like share an office with *you*.’ The girl gave the briefest knowing look as the torpedo hit home.

Then, fizzing with nerves, energy, or discomfort, she abandoned the turnstile and strode to the long, fake marble reception desk. Drew was amazed she walked so smoothly, given her massive brass balls.

Go girl!

The disarmed knight sneered and slunk away towards the lifts.

Good. That’s no way to treat a woman.

Len smirked, then returned to the security station beside the metal detector arch. As he did, the regular guard, Alan, arrived and conversed with his colleague.

Drew watched the girl, mousily hunched over the sign-in book, wordlessly enter her details. She was given a day pass. As she left, he smiled supportively. Her response was the briefest meeting of their eyes and a flicker of embarrassment.

Had she seen his socks? He looked down. Everything seemed nicely disguised. Then he clutched at his fly—but it was zipped.

Phew! Public embarrassment averted.

Someone coughed; Drew was blocking the way. He muttered a lame apology, then went to Phase 2 of the entry rigmarole.

He didn't understand why an ordinary fifteen-storey office block in Winchester needed the security of Fort Knox. Perhaps he should make a point of asking? Alan would probably just tap his nose. Len would likely clap anyone in irons for asking.

Drew dutifully put his metal belongings in the plastic tray—knowing the activity was redundant—and stepped through the arch.

The alarm trilled.

Alan beckoned. Drew held out his arms in the practised fashion and allowed the guy to wave his wand.

‘Smuggling guns again, Drew?’ Alan asked, winking.

‘I'd make the ideal decoy, right?’

As expected, the wand beeped as it passed Drew's right knee.

‘Word to the wise. Don't try jokes at the airport.’

Drew held up a palm. ‘Never would. Full body cavity search is not my idea of fun.’

‘Mine either.’ Alan waved him on. ‘Have a good day.’

Drew collected his shoulder bag from the table and headed for the stairwell, forgoing the elevators as usual.

The building's two ageing lifts sometimes struggled to meet demand. It was another good reason for taking the stairs—plus, it was the only meaningful exercise Drew ever got. Yes, he had a gym membership but hadn't got around to not attending a facility in Winchester rather than not using one in Bristol. Still, for thirty-two laps of the sun, he wasn't too much of a physical has-been.

After trudging up nine flights of wide stairs to his office, he emerged into the lobby as his colleague Pirin exited the wire-hung death trap he'd chosen to travel in.

'Morning, Flower.' Pirin spread his arms. 'Ta-da! No horrible death. As usual.'

'Leave it out, mate, okay?'

'Are you going to be like this here, too?' Pirin cocked his head, and a sympathetic expression appeared on his unnecessarily good-looking face. 'New town, new office—time for a reboot?' He thumbed at the lift. 'You do *know* the statistics on—'

Drew lowered his voice. 'Of course I know the bloody stats. I don't need another sodding "Get over it" pep talk. I'm a slave to my emotional baggage—I get it.'

Pirin held up his palms defensively. 'Okay. Time out. Sorry. I know it's a difficult week, with... the anniversary.'

Drew's spirits sank. 'Yeah. More baggage. I think that's my emotional hand luggage.'

Pirin patted Drew's shoulder. 'Stow it in the overhead compartment this year, okay?'

'I'll try.'

Yet Drew knew he would fail. The spectre of Katie's death wouldn't vanish any time soon.

A *PING!* announced the arrival of the second lift. Amongst those exiting were the CEO's delightful PA.

Lotus Brown was mid-twenties, blonde, blue-eyed, and much too good for Drew. Whilst he'd only encountered her a few times in the last fortnight, she was too good for an unashamed ladies' man like Pirin as well.

She was talking on her phone but flashed raised eyebrows in greeting as she passed.

Drew watched Pirin's gaze linger on her backside, and his eye was briefly drawn in the same direction.

'You were saying about all this emotional baggage which prevents you from dating again?' Pirin crooned, overly quick to accuse—the pot calling the kettle black.

Drew shook his head. 'Not now, okay? I've got work to do. Now I'm at HQ, I want that promotion.'

'Do you think you have a chance?'

Drew shrugged. 'Barrie left to become a goat herder in Laos or something. You know— "re-examined his life choices". That leaves an opening. If I make a good impression here, who knows?'

Pirin wrinkled his nose. 'Good luck. The boss is a tosser.'

'I heard that. Anyway, at least you and I didn't get ditched after Bristol. So, what are you editing this week?'

'"World's Smartest Dogs", episode two.'

'Wow. Sounds thrilling,' Drew jibed.

'It's TV. This is the twenty-twenties. Lowest common denominator, but as long as it makes money, right?'

'I suppose.'

'Says the accountant.' Pirin angled his head towards the corridor. 'Anyway, I'll crack on. See you around.'



Drew's morning passed in typical fashion. He balanced the books on the shoot for Park Productions' latest TV project, "Extreme Dominoes", shook away the twinge of RSI that typically accompanied gruelling spells of spreadsheet work, and broke for lunch.

He returned his third empty coffee mug to the kitchen area and headed for the stairwell.

On a diagonal course were Lotus and the CEO, Kevin Yates. His tie was loose, and his top button undone—the default look. Drew didn't know whether Yates did it to appear cool and approachable or because he was inherently a slovenly arse who'd been promoted above his ability.

Drew's previous boss had an infinitely better reputation, but that was water under the bridge. Yates was now the man whose good books Drew needed to get into—whatever he, or anyone else, thought of the guy.

'Oh, hi, Drew.' Lotus brightened.

He feigned nonchalance. Poorly. 'Hey, Lotus.'

The CEO halted, which meant she stopped, too. Her hand paused over the tablet she carried.

'You're Drew?' Kevin said. 'Drew Flower?'

Had Drew made a massive cock-up in one of his financial reports? Had he been missed off the list of redundancies during the company restructure? Had Lotus caught him glancing at her bottom—*for three microseconds!*—and blabbed to her boss, citing sexual harassment?

He swallowed dryly. 'I am.' *Best to be honest.*

'You made that policy suggestion—the creative sabbatical,' Kevin said.

That perked Drew's senses and dissipated the sudden worry. His sharp inhalation caught a whiff of Lotus' perfume. His heart skipped. 'I did, yes.'

‘Walk with me,’ Kevin said.

That didn’t sound like a refusable offer—and Drew would be mad not to seize the opportunity—so he fell in beside Kevin.

Wretchedly, within a couple of seconds, their destination became apparent: the lift.

‘I... er... how can I help?’ Drew’s mouth felt dry.

Lotus thumbed the **Call** button. Drew glanced up at the floor indicator: one lift was on **G**, the other on **4**. The **4** became a **5**. Then a **6**.

His heart thundered in his chest. Lotus looked up from her tablet and flashed a smile, but it didn’t relieve his growing terror.

‘Should we... take the stairs?’ he suggested.

The CEO frowned. ‘Why?’

‘Oh, well, nothing. Obviously, it’s better for your health. I don’t mean *your* health. People’s health. I’m not saying you’re old, or out of shape. For all I know, you’re down the gym every night.’ He grimaced. ‘Are you? I mean, it’s none of my business, but why wait for the lift? They’re pretty old and slow, aren’t they? We could be down on the eighth floor by now. If you’re—we’re—going down, of course. Or up. Up is fine, too. Better for your calf muscles as well—’

PING!

Lotus and Kevin were staring at him. Probably because he was babbling like an idiot. Perhaps he’d get lucky, and the floor would swallow him up in the next two seconds?

Yates frowned. ‘Are you all right, Flower?’

‘Me? Yes, fine. Super. All good. So... stairs?’ he asked with forlorn, last-ditch hope.

‘I’m a busy man.’ Kevin stood aside as three people exited the lift.

Drew was seized by dread. He was going to pass out. But here was the chance to engage directly with the CEO about an initiative he’d championed for three long, emotionally painful years. Whilst he’d

had no luck at the previous office, maybe being closer to the seat of power would help? Plus, it was an opportunity to be very visible at the exact time the post-reorganisation promotions list was being drawn up. Could this really be a turning point?

Lotus wore a supportive, almost concerned expression. Another whiff of perfume blew away Drew's light-headedness. *Try not to look like a wuss in front of her.*

Kevin stepped inside the lift. "Walk with me" had been a misnomer—a stomach-churning, buttock-clenching catch-all that had Drew's teeth clamped together so tightly he feared they'd fused. And Park Productions didn't offer a private dental plan.

Somehow, he dug up sufficient inner strength and crossed the godawful threshold into the metal box of doom. He hugged the wall, making room for Lotus, her eyes, and her scent. Perhaps if she heard his suggestion, what a caring soul he was, and how much he wanted to nurture fellow employees, she'd allow him to inhale her perfume at even shorter distances?

'Oh, Lotus, no point in you being here. Need to get those documents off to Arri ASAP. Thanks.' Kevin nodded.

She smiled dutifully and backed away into the lobby. 'Absolutely.'
Kevin thumbed 2.

Seven floors! Drew's spirits dived. He tried to block out the sound of the doors closing, focussing on the appealing view beyond them as it narrowed to nothing. He begged himself not to soil his Star Wars boxer shorts. They were part of a 3-pack gifted to him by Katie—a sweet 28th birthday present that they both knew was deeply sad for a grown man to wear—yet he couldn't bear to chuck them out just because she was no longer in his life. It was a stupid memory to hold on to, but a charming one.

Right now, he could have done with something more like a handle to grasp, because his legs felt like jelly.

‘Are you okay, Drew? You look pale.’

The lift started. He held in a gasp or a scream. Or a torrent of expletives beautifully terminated by a flop sweat and copious chundering.

He moistened his throat. ‘I... Fine. Ish. Bad... um... bad prawns at lunch, probably.’

Kevin checked his Bulgari. ‘Finished lunch already? Ah. Out partying at the weekend?’

‘Yes,’ Drew lied, desperate to keep any conversation flowing, to take his mind off the paralysing dread and crucifying echoes of history. ‘Had a skinful. That’s probably it. Sorry. Anyway—I’m... er... “walking” with you now, so... the suggestion, was it, you wanted to talk about? Sir?’ He eyed the floor counter, willing it faster. They passed 8.

Kevin looked like he was listening to a gibbering simpleton, which wasn’t far from the truth. ‘Yes. I’ve heard good things about you, Flower. Now, this suggestion has come across my desk. Honestly, I think the idea has merit. So—what was your reasoning behind it?’

Drew yo-yoed between hope and crippling unease. He wanted to remark that the CEO would know Drew’s “reasoning” if he’d actually bloody read the complete submission, but saying so was career suicide. Whilst he *desperately* wanted to get out of the lift, he was pretty keen on keeping his job. The free coffee might be shit, and Lotus would still be too good for him, but he’d resolved to give this sabbatical proposal his best efforts, and inferring that the CEO was a lazy sod—at the precise point the man was dangling the chance of adopting the initiative—would be colossal stupidity.

The whine of the lift was like nails down a blackboard. Drew tried to breathe evenly, suppressing hyperventilation. He wanted to curl up on the floor.

Focus. Pitch the idea. Ideally, coherently. Make Katie proud.

He checked the display. They passed 6. He hoped nobody joined the lift because Kevin would drop the subject. These submissions were made in a closed forum, and Drew didn't want anyone nicking the frankly stellar idea. Plus, if the lift stopped, it would lengthen the ride, which was already unbearably glacial.

He gathered the most competent response he could. 'Research indicates that it's good for staff morale and retention. I know we've struggled with loyalty since Empire Productions poached several people. Plus, it was exactly this kind of work-life initiative which catalysed Unwin... er... Simon Unwin to write, pitch and sell the concept of "Tower Block Diaries".'

He exhaled hard, amazed that he'd delivered three whole sentences without sounding like a scatter-brained loon.

As the lift passed 4, it shimmied. Drew wobbled, slapping a palm on the wall for support. He felt like a dog on Guy Fawkes night. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple.

'Hmm,' Yates offered noncommittally.

'Minimal effect on the bottom line, too,' Drew added. 'In fact, if an employee hits onto a ratings winner like Unwin did, there are six, seven, even eight figures to add back in.'

'Hmm.' Yates looked Drew up and down.

Drew surreptitiously returned the favour. Kevin's half-mast tie had a pattern consisting of tiny movie cameras. Drew didn't know whether to be impressed or saddened. He wondered if the man—late forties, slicked-back dark hair—also owned briefs sponsored by a famous film franchise.

This marked a new low today—trying to visualise the CEO's underwear. It would be more sensible to imagine the PA's underwear, and about as unlikely to result in a mutually satisfying romantic relationship.

Still, it had taken his mind off the circumstances for a few precious seconds.

The torture chamber passed 3. Drew prayed for something concrete to come out of this ghastly rite of passage.

Yates nodded sagely. 'I'll definitely look it over. You're right about retention. Very astute. Good to have you at HQ, Flower.'

Drew swallowed. 'Thank you.'

The lift bell pinged. Every muscle tightened—especially his sphincter—as he awaited the parting of the doors.

Mercifully, they slid back. Light and air swamped in like a beautiful dawn. He wanted to cheer. He wanted to jump for joy—but his legs were those of a newborn calf.

Kevin smiled faintly. 'Well done.' He strode away without a care in the world.

Drew remained rooted to the spot, processing the conversation, in disbelief that he'd ridden a lift without his head or bowels detonating. He sucked in oxygen, trance-like, calming himself.

The doors closed.

'Aargh!' He jabbed the **Doors Open** button, but it was too late.

The lift clanked into motion.

He screwed up his eyes. Now, there was nobody to witness his pain. Mercifully, the ride from hell was descending, which meant only two floors to G. Then, he'd celebrate the massive—and never to be repeated—milestone by getting a heinously unhealthy lunch. Ideally, he'd add a beer. Perhaps a whisky chaser or six.

Yes, return to the office pissed as a newt; that'll do my promotion chances a real favour. Dick.

He pressed a palm to his chest. The heartbeat was commendably restrained—a canter rather than a gallop. He wasn't going to die.

'Be careful,' said a female voice.

His eyes snapped open. He was still alone. *Now* his heart galloped.

‘What?’ he squeaked, glancing around nervously for the source of the disembodied voice.

‘Be careful,’ it repeated.

The lift slowed. His pulse didn’t.

PING!

His fingers flitted as he begged the doors to open. His mind blazed.

As soon as the gap was wide enough, he pushed through, parting the cluster of waiting people, and hurried through the foyer, desperate for fresh air.

What the bloody hell is going on?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm an incurable romantic at heart, and a sucker for great humour. I've been writing for many years, and all the stories contain either love, or humour, or both. I have a soft spot for stories with strong women and nerdy or hapless guys. Fundamentally, I try to write the books I like to read. I hope to distil humour, romance – and sometimes pathos or bittersweet vibes – into my novels.

Outside of writing, I enjoy photography, great scenery, a relaxing train ride, delicious coffee and cake, and catching up with friends. I'm also something of a geek, fascinated by maths, science and even fonts!

Chrissie Harrison is a pen name. Find out more, or follow me on social media;

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