

The cell door slammed shut behind Marjorie with a sound like a thunderclap. She glanced down at the angry looking red marks around her wrists, left by the over-tight handcuffs, and tried to massage a little life back into her cold hands. Solitary confinement. She doubted many remand prisoners ever saw the inside of a cell in the isolation block. It was stark. Especially as none of her meagre personal possessions appeared to have been transferred here from her previous cell. In one corner of the narrow room there was a stainless-steel toilet, with integrated wash bowl above the cistern. Opposite was a slim metal bed frame firmly anchored to the wall. She'd seen duvets thicker than its mattress. The single low-wattage bulb was encased in a thick wire-mesh basket set into the concrete ceiling. The walls were cheap grey paint over breeze blocks and the floor was scuffed and scratched concrete, painted the same colour as the walls. It was not what anyone could describe as cozy, no matter how rosilily optimistic their outlook. The door was grey painted steel. There was a rivetted inspection hatch at eye level and a larger swivel hatch below to deliver food and take away refuse. There was no chair. Marjorie sighed and lay down on the bed. It wasn't the worst place she'd ever spent Christmas, but it would certainly make her personal bottom five.

Two days earlier she'd woken up in her regular cell at her usual time of six o'clock. The snoring from the bottom bunk was soft and regular. She'd climbed down as lightly as she could and did some stretches and gentle exercises to both loosen up and warm up. She wasn't a young woman, but she kept as fit and active as she could. The cell block was virtually silent at this time of the morning and she was determined to enjoy the peace and quiet while she could. One of the less pleasant prison officers had been paying undue attention to her yesterday, she'd caught him watching her closely several times. Perhaps it meant nothing, but she preferred to be cautious. She decided to keep an eye on his comings and goings and see what she could deduce. Perhaps he'd seen her photograph in the paper or on the TV. The pensioner accused of robbing the Liverpool and Manchester branches of Sir Gareth Pomeroy's bank was something of a minor celebrity inside, so maybe that's all it was.

Once she was properly warmed up, she dressed and opened the door. The cells doors weren't locked unless there was a lock-down or some other emergency, this was only the remand block and everyone here was still technically innocent until proven guilty. She walked briskly down the corridor glancing through the few open doors. One or two sleepy heads turned to look her way but most were still asleep. The building was a modern annex to the ancient Victorian main prison. It was two stories high built in a rectangle around a central courtyard and exercise area. The cells were all on the outside edge of the two-sides, and the bottom, of the rectangle. The corridors were on the inside overlooking the central courtyard. Marjorie's cell was on the second floor at the top left-hand leg of the U-shaped corridors. There was a connection to the main prison, at the top of both the left and right legs of the U. The top block, closest the prison, had the hospital's infirmary on the top floor and the isolation block on the ground floor. There was no access to either of those areas. Marjorie had calculated that walking the U shape six times was about a mile. She liked to get two miles done before everyone was woken up by the morning alarm. She was on her fourth repetition, and had just started heading back down the right-hand corridor when she heard the steel gate to the infirmary and the main prison opening and shutting behind her. Hard soled shoes echoed loudly as someone followed her. She resisted the urge to turn to look. She'd almost made it back to her cell when a uniformed person drew alongside her. It was the prison officer that had been watching her.

'Don't imagine you're safe in here,' he said quietly out of the corner of his mouth. 'You're not. Not at all. If someone wanted you to come to harm it would be quite easy to arrange.'

'Is that a threat?' asked Marjorie, stopping to face the much taller, bulkier figure of the guard.

'Take it however you like,' he said.

'You should know that I don't respond well to threats. I'm not particularly fond of hints and veiled menace either.'

Marjorie read the prison officer's name tag.

‘So if you have a message for me from someone then just spit it out Mr. Grainger. I’m waiting.’

Grainger looked up and down the corridor to ensure no one was watching then leaned forward and down until his face was inches from Marjorie’s.

‘You’ll get yours Mrs. Brownlow. And you won’t see it coming. A certain Londoner and his father have paid a lot of money for me to make your life a misery. A short misery, but a misery nonetheless and I can turn the CCTV off any time I want to.’

‘It’s not off now, is it?’ she asked, feigning fear.

‘It is,’ he said, smirking.

It was Marjorie’s turn to glance up and down the corridor. There was still no one venturing out of their cells. Her right hand shot forward and grabbed Grainger’s crotch through the cheap black nylon trousers. She squeezed, hard. His face went bright red and he strangled a cry.

‘I’m a firm believer in direct action Mr. Grainger. If you think you can threaten me without suffering consequences then you’re sadly mistaken.’

Marjorie tightened her grip a little more, and leaned a little closer so she could lower her voice to a whisper. There was a high-pitched squeal from Grainger.

‘I don’t know what they’ve promised to pay you, but it won’t be enough I can assure you. This is my one and only warning to you. Leave me alone, or else. You know how most people have a line that they won’t cross? Well I don’t. Oh, and I wouldn’t mention this little incident to anyone. After all who’d believe a woman in her seventies could reduce a big strapping man like you to tears? Especially without any video evidence.’

After one last hard squeeze, she released her grip and strode off towards her cell. She heard Grainger slide down to the floor, whimpering, but she didn’t look back. She hoped he was smart enough to leave it at that, but she considered it unlikely. The morning alarm started ringing while she was washing her hands. Her new cell mate, Mary, opened her bleary eyes and struggled into a sitting position on her bunk. It was only her second day in prison and she looked terrified most of the time.

‘Was there someone crying out there just now?’ she asked.

‘No, I don’t think so.’

Mary was young, naïve, and in Marjorie’s opinion did not belong inside. She suspected she’d been coerced into taking the fall for someone else who was free and clear on the outside.

‘Nearly Christmas!’ Mary said, elongating the last word past what even Noddy Holder could manage in an attempt to cheer herself up.

She got up and re-arranged the numbers on a tacky bright red Christmas countdown reindeer she had propped up against the barred window. She pressed ‘play’ on the small elderly radio/cassette player and slightly wonky Christmas songs came from the tinny speaker.

‘Just two days now. Are you excited?’

‘I’m beside myself,’ said Marjorie dryly.

Mary tore open her advent calendar window and ate the small chocolate inside without even looking at it.

‘Christmas will be okay in here, won’t it?’ asked Mary, suddenly worried. ‘I love Christmas. It will be...erm...Christmassy? Decorations, crackers and a turkey dinner and stuff? What’s it usually like?’

‘I’ve never been in prison before. I have no idea,’ said Marjorie sharply, but she saw Mary’s expression crumble and to head off any crying she added. ‘But I’m sure they’ll try and make it as festive as they can.’

Mary looked a little reassured.

Marjorie didn’t see Grainger again that day, and while queuing for dinner one of the friendlier prison officers said that she’d heard he’d gone home sick. Marjorie didn’t doubt it. She allowed herself a slight smile.

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The next day there seemed to be a bit of excitement in the air as they queued for breakfast. It was the day before Christmas Eve and a lot of the prisoners were expecting visitors. Someone had set up a rather sad, tatty looking artificial tree in the corner of the canteen. There were no baubles on it, and no strings of lights but it was at least half-heartedly wrapped in some ancient tinsel and there was some Christmas bunting sellotaped to the wall behind it.

Marjorie had no relatives, other than her sister, and she would never visit as she'd be utterly ashamed having a criminal in the family. Even if she were presently only an alleged criminal, instead of a proven one.

After breakfast she saw Grainger in the distance arguing with another officer. He looked angry. He didn't see Marjorie watching him and she kept well away.

Mary kept referring to the day as 'Christmas Eve Eve' which Marjorie had initially thought mildly funny but was now starting to find a tad annoying.

The morning wore on uneventfully. Marjorie had decided she would never complain about being bored again, assuming she ever got out of prison and back to her normal life. No boredom on the outside could compare to that enforced on those inside.

After lunch there was time for some exercise in the yard for those that wanted it. Marjorie collected her coat and headed to the door. She needed some fresh air. She saw about four other women milling about. It was always the smokers who headed outside first, as it was the only place they were allowed to indulge. Mary was outside, keeping to herself, puffing away. Marjorie started walking laps as the yard filled up slowly. After a few minutes she realised she was seeing a few faces she didn't know. The prison officer that Grainger had been talking to was by the gate through to the main prison, she saw him open it and allow another two women into the yard. Something was wrong. The convicted prisoners weren't meant to mingle with those on remand. This must be Grainger's new idea. An indirect approach. She tensed and started moving a little more purposefully. She surreptitiously counted the people she didn't recognise. There were now five. They were moving around the yard but were staying fairly near each other. One or two of the wiser remand inmates had also noticed the newcomers and were making their way to the exit. Marjorie saw Mary, eyes closed enjoying the weak winter sun, stub out her cigarette, oblivious to the building tension. She was at the far end, as far from the exit as possible. Marjorie changed direction to swing past her. She wanted to warn her to leave the yard, in case things got messy. The strangers were nearing Mary's position, but glancing around keeping an eye on Marjorie. Marjorie started jogging and swinging her arms around, looking for all the world like someone warming themselves up. She was approaching the newcomers when she saw Mary look up, suddenly aware of what was happening. Her eyes widened in recognition, then fear. The tallest and biggest of the women had her hand in her jacket pocket. She turned towards Mary and pulled out what looked like a sharpened toothbrush. Marjorie suddenly realised they were here for Mary. Not for her. The remaining women formed a protective arc behind the ring leader. Partly to block anyone's view of what was going on and partly to stop Mary from getting away.

Direct action. Marjorie spe

d up, looped around the right-most person forming the arc and headed straight towards Mary. She timed it perfectly. She crashed straight into the ringleader just as she moved to attack Mary, knocking her off balance. Marjorie grabbed the woman's wrist with her left hand. Her hard bony fingers squeezed as tightly as possible, digging her fingernails into the soft skin on the inside of the wrist. Marjorie grabbed the makeshift weapon and yanked it from the woman's numb fingers as she fell to the ground.

'Oh goodness gracious! So sorry my dear, I didn't see you there,' said Marjorie to the woman sprawled on the floor. 'I'm in a world of my own when I'm exercising.'

One of the four other women moved hesitantly forward to help the fallen woman up but Marjorie moved first. She reached out her left hand and pulled the other woman up off the floor. As soon as she was upright Marjorie held on tight and pulled her close. She pressed the home-made knife into the woman's side with until she felt considerable resistance.

'Now I don't know you deary and you don't know me,' said Marjorie quietly. 'But I've been dealing with people far worse than you all my adult life. Tell your friends there to go back to where they belong. Now.'

The woman shook her head and struggled to free her hand from Marjorie's grip. Marjorie pressed the knife a little harder.

'Do it,' said Marjorie.

'It's all right girls. Change of plan. You go back. I'll be along soon. I'm just going to have a chat with this old lady,' she gasped.

The four other women hesitated and seemed unsure about attacking or doing as they were told. Marjorie pressed harder still. She might have been drawing blood by now but she didn't dare look.

'Get lost, now,' blurted out the woman.

The four turned and walked briskly to the gate which was opened and shut behind them by a puzzled looking officer.

'What's your name?' asked Marjorie.

'Sheila. Sheila McGovern.'

'Lovely to meet you Sheila. I'm Marjorie Brownlow. Mary is under my protection. She's my cell mate and my friend and if anything happens to her I'm going to hold you personally responsible Sheila. Whatever happens to Mary happens to you. It's a sort of eye for an eye thing. Do you understand?'

Shelia nodded.

'In fact, because I'm extremely kind and generous, whatever happens to her will happen double to you, even if you had nothing to do with it. So do please let everyone in the main prison know that she's off limits. Is that all right?'

Sheila nodded.

Marjorie let her hand go and then shoved her hard. She kept watch as she headed back to the gate. Once Sheila was gone, she turned to Mary.

'Let's get back in the warm then you can tell me what on earth all that was about,' she said.

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It transpired that Mary's on-and-off boyfriend was involved with some extremely dodgy people. He'd hidden a sizeable quantity of stolen goods and ecstasy tabs in her attic and forced her to take the blame as he was already on parole and couldn't afford to be in any more trouble. This had been the final straw for Mary once the reality of being in prison had dawned on her. She'd called her solicitor yesterday and told him that she wanted to make a statement to the police.

'Where did you get your solicitor Mary?' asked Marjorie.

'It was the one Kevin always uses. He's supposed to be really good.'

‘Don’t speak to him again. He’s not working for you Mary. He’s working for Kevin and his associates. He must have arranged that attack on you. I suggest you talk to my solicitor, Sara Masefield, she’s very good and you can trust her. I’ll give you her number.’

Mary nodded and thanked her.

‘We also need to get you out of here. I may have scared Sheila off for now but she may be stupid or desperate enough to try again. I’m going to teach you how to fake meningitis symptoms. They’ll have to get you out of here and into hospital for tests, which will take a few days. You’ll be safe there. Now pay attention.’

Just over an hour later Mary was stretchered out of the cell after a bout of severe vomiting, complaining of muscle and joint pain. She appeared confused almost to the point of delirium, had a stiff, sore neck and couldn’t bare bright lights.

Marjorie was just retrieving the salt shaker from its hiding place, ready to return it to the canteen from where she’d stolen it, when Grainger arrived at the cell door.

‘So that’s how you induced Mary’s vomiting is it? Drinking salt water?’

‘Feeling *cocky* are you Grainger?’ asked Marjorie pointedly.

He scowled, then rapped his knuckles against his groin. There was hard clonking noise.

‘Mary will be back here in a few days. I can wait. Besides you won’t be around to interfere next time. I’m wearing my old cricket box. You won’t catch me like that again, you old bag.’

Marjorie shrugged.

‘As I said, you’ve had your warning. I suggest you walk away right now.’

Grainger came into the room, fingering his baton.

‘I think you attacked me. I think the only way I could protect myself was to use my baton. I think it’s just a tragic accident that it fractured your skull.’

Marjorie grinned.

Grainger drew his baton and walked confidently towards Marjorie. He twirled it expertly as he dropped into a slight crouch. Marjorie stood still, her hands behind her back. Grainger feigned a swing at Marjorie, but again she didn’t move. She knew his first move wouldn’t be the real attack. He drew back the baton for a proper swing, his eyes flickered between Marjorie’s eyes and her right hand. His wrist snapped forward as Marjorie’s left hand jerked forward and up. The lidless salt shaker held tightly in her hand flung several ounces of salt straight into Grainger’s eyes. The baton whirled past Marjorie harmlessly and he screamed as the salt burned his eyes. Marjorie stepped forwards, snatched the baton from him and plunged it viciously end-on into his belly. As he doubled over Marjorie swung the baton towards the back of his head. She was tempted to finish him off but decided that was not the wisest move so just gave him a gentle tap that would daze him. He lay gasping and vomiting on the floor.

Marjorie walked over to the radio/cassette player and pressed the ‘stop’ button as Grainger’s boss, the Deputy Governor, walked into the cell with two other uniformed officers.

‘I hope you heard all that,’ she said, ‘but I recorded it anyway so you can use it in any disciplinary or criminal action. I’ll have to apologise to Mary for wiping her Christmas songs.’

She popped the tape out.

‘I will have to lock you up in solitary Mrs. Brownlow. You did assault a prison officer. Rules are rules. Besides it might be safer there if Grainger had other corrupt officers working with him.’

Marjorie held her hands out and the two officers put handcuffs on her, none too gently. Marjorie awkwardly handed the cassette to the Deputy Governor.

‘Happy Christmas,’ she said, as she walked out of the cell towards solitary.

THE END

Christmas

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