

Short Story Pack

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The SALF

Chapter 1

It was my first day in my new job working as an engineer for the FBI's very mysterious and secretive QSF Division when shortly after nine-thirty my boss, Special Agent Harry Finn, simultaneously knocked on and opened my door. I assumed he was coming to introduce himself, to show me around and maybe even tell me what my job actually was. I was wrong.

'Grab your jacket and your laptop,' he said. 'We've got an assignment.'

He hustled off so I followed him and five minutes later we were in a black Chevy Tahoe speeding towards downtown.

'Agent Finn. Erm, Mr. Finn? Harry? What exactly do you need me to do? I didn't expect to be going into the field. I thought I'd just be designing and building equipment for you.'

'Finn. Call me Finn. Why would you think we'd pay you that ridiculous salary for something as mundane as that? I'd really rather not explain, 'cos you'd never believe me. I think it's best you just see it for yourself.'

About fifteen minutes later we pulled up outside the First National Bank having sat in mostly awkward silence for the rest of the journey. There were plenty of first responders on hand already, including local police and a fire truck. A large white crime scene tent was being erected around the entrance to the bank and the cops were herding the looky-loos back to a distant perimeter marked out with the familiar brightly coloured tape. I hoped I wasn't going to see dead bodies; I feared I might puke or pass out and that would create a really bad first impression. But the tent certainly wasn't an encouraging sight.

Finn handed me a bullet-proof vest, which I nervously pulled on over my shirt but when he saw me reaching for my bright green Timberland hiking jacket he sighed, re-opened the Tahoe and pulled out a spare FBI jacket and threw it to me.

'When you're on duty you wear that at all times out in the field' he snapped.

I mumbled an apology and tried to explain I hadn't been issued any equipment yet aside from my ID badge and a laptop; but he was already gone, heading through the tent and into the bank. I hurried to catch up, struggling with the zip of the jacket. I entered the tent, tried to brace myself for the expected blood and gore, and followed him into the bank.

Chapter 2

Unless you've been living out in the wilderness for the last year or so then you will probably know about the work the QSF Department does by now. It's been declassified for months and the media has been talking about us pretty much constantly. Finn has been the public face of the department and he's handled the job really well. Our approval rating with the average citizen is high, much higher than for many other law enforcement organizations. But I want you to try to remember what you felt when you first heard about us. You thought it was a prank, an April Fool, or that you'd completely misheard; or perhaps you are part of the dwindling minority that still cling on to idea that it's all fake news. If so, you probably don't believe the moon landings were real, or that Elvis is really dead either. I've news for you. It's real. Really real. Although I had trouble believing it myself initially, and I'm sorry to say Elvis, while he didn't go to the moon, really is dead.

The scene inside the bank was insane. I use that word deliberately. It was like the laws that govern reality were broken or, at the least, very badly sprained. I wondered for a moment if I'd been slipped some LSD or had fallen asleep and was now dreaming. It was a life-size diorama, that's the best way for you to visualise it. A diorama of a bank robbery in progress. Everyone inside the bank was frozen in place, rigidly immobile. I knew they weren't posing for a photograph because the positions some of the people were in were impossible to maintain. Everyone in the bank was staring at two masked men. They were holding a pistol each and the closest one was firing at the security guard who also had a handgun of some kind but he was frozen in a falling pose about half way to the floor. His right arm was trying to point his gun at the closest masked man and his left arm appeared to be coming up to instinctively protect his face. The other masked man was pointing his gun at a man in a suit behind the counter who was, middle-aged, balding and slightly overweight. I guessed that made him the bank manager. The maddest things though were the guns. The two masked men had both fired. The bullets were about six inches from the ends of the gun barrels and completely stationary. There was a frozen cloud of smoke and translucent flame around each, like a little sideways mushroom cloud with the bullet in the centre. One bullet was pointing straight at the manager, the other at the security guard. 'Don't touch anything, and I mean *anything*', said Finn. 'In fact, don't go near the frozen people at all; you don't want to end up like them.'

'W-w-what?' I said.

I followed this dazzling display of eloquence with a few choice Anglo-Saxon four letter words. Finn glared at me, not a fan of the swearing then.

Finn was talking to a tall thin man wearing a white lab coat. Finn was maybe six foot tall, as he was about the same height as me, but the other man must have been at least six foot eight inches. He was extremely thin, almost emaciated, with greying medium length hair parted in the centre, a large straight nose sat above a small grey moustache on an otherwise clean-shaven face. He was wearing tortoise shell glasses, which he took off and polished on his tie at regular intervals.

Finn introduced him.

'This is Professor Brian Coverdale the genius behind the impossible scene you see over there,' he said pointing at the frozen people.

'You must be our new engineer. Nice to meet you. Such a shame about Larry...' he tailed off.

I nodded and said yeah, still not really trusting my mouth with any words longer than one syllable. I wondered who the hell was Larry?

'It's a focussed quantum stasis field,' he said, answering my unspoken question. 'Informally we call it the SALF back at the lab.'

I could have sworn Finn shot an angry look at the professor; all this must still be top secret.

I dragged my thoughts back into some sort of order, finally.

'You're able to stop time?', I stammered.

'No, that's impossible. But yes in a way, sort of. In very simple lay-man's terms, I suppose we can. But I really don't like explaining it that way. It's not accurate.'

'Well thanks for clearing that up,' I said.

'For all intents and purposes, the answer is yes, we can stop time, temporarily,' said Finn. 'The how doesn't concern you. Look carefully at the people while I dim the lights.'

I watched as Finn edged his way round to the light switch, taking great care not to get too close to any of the frozen people. He flicked the lights off and we were left with just the low light of the morning winter sun coming through the few clear windows. I waited as my eyes adjusted then I saw a very faint white glow around the stationary people. The glow extended upwards towards into what I'd assumed were CCTV cameras fastened to a large device on the ceiling.

'Those are the stasis field emitters,' said Professor Coverdale, 'The whole room is bathed constantly in a highly energetic quantum flux from a device hidden in that cupboard over there,' he pointed it out proudly. 'I assure you it's completely harmless, it interacts far less with matter than a neutrino does, if you could imagine such a thing.'

I couldn't imagine it; I had no idea what a neutrino was.

'But when we turn on the focussed beam as well, then anything denser than air that's caught in the two overlapping fields enters a kind of quantum stasis. Nothing can interact with it. Nothing at all. The AI that controls the SALF constantly monitors images from a LIDAR system and regular CCTV cameras. So, if a gun is fired, or some other lethal device wielded, then the emitters target everyone in the vicinity, puts them in stasis for their own safety and alerts the authorities.'

'This is like something out of Star Trek,' I said.

'No. It really isn't,' said Professor Coverdale. 'They never came up with anything as clever as this.'

'What about beaming?' I said.

'Oh, but that is just ridiculous. It's an unsolvable ethical nightmare if ever there was one. A device that instantly clones someone, at a distance, while it simultaneously disintegrates, thereby murdering, the original? The lawyers would have a field day.'

'If you two nerds could focus for a minute,' said Finn, glancing at his watch, 'we need to work out how to deal with this situation and we've got under an hour now.'

'Why is that?' I asked.

'Because the human brain can only survive undamaged for about an hour and a half in quantum stasis. The stasis isn't perfect. It's good enough to suspend bullets and explosions, in fact all solid and liquid matter, but there's something in brain cells, at the subatomic level, that degrades if all activity is frozen. The longer the brain is in stasis the worse the damage. We found that out the hard way.'

Professor Coverdale tailed off sadly.

Finn finished the thought for him.

'Larry, your predecessor, was working on some equipment for us in the lab. He stayed late one night and did a test firing of a gun not knowing the lab's emitters were on,' said Finn. 'He was caught in the beam and by the time the staff responded to the alert it was, well it was far too late. No one is allowed to work alone anymore.'

I finally found my voice.

'Okay, bearing in mind the pressing need for speed could one of you, quickly, explain what on earth I'm doing here. What is my role in this science-fiction wonderland?'

'You're the engineer. You need to find a way to stop those bullets there,' said Finn, pointed at them, 'from doing any damage when we turn the emitters off and they resume their journey at full speed.'

'Oh, is that all?' I said.

.

Chapter 3

Finn had arranged for there to be a large panel van outside the bank full of all the equipment and tools any half-decent engineer might need. There were also plenty of cops milling about to help with any heavy lifting.

I'd spent about five minutes with Finn determining what kind of guns and ammunition were being used in the bank. I used some software on the laptop to help me calculate the kinetic energy those bullets would have once unfrozen. The laptop was registered to a Larry Jones. They'd given me the dead guy's laptop! I felt slightly creeped out and tried very hard not to speculate what state Larry had been in when he'd finally been released from the stasis field.

Now with ten minutes remaining I had constructed some equipment that I hoped would work and we were getting ready to move it into position.

I'd made three frames from scaffolding pipes, shaped like a low ice-hockey goal but with long feet that were at right angles to the cross bar, they were height adjustable but only between about three and six feet. Mounted on the cross bar was a thick beam of soft wood and mounted on that were sandbags, two layers deep. Some of the police helped drag them to the door of the bank for me but they weren't allowed to see inside. That meant Finn, the Professor and myself had to manoeuvre them into their final positions.

'The best bullet stopper I know is a couple of sandbags, if a water barrel isn't an option,' I said. 'And it would take far too long to fill up barrels big enough to stop these bullets, assuming we even had such barrels, which we don't. So, let's get these frames into position and hope for the best.'

'It is extremely important that you don't get close to the beam and you must not touch it. The beam is somewhat mucilaginous,' said Professor Coverdale.

'It's what?'

'Sticky. He means sticky,' said Finn as we dragged the last frame inside the bank.

'The field responds to the electrical conductivity of skin. The same way your phone's touchscreen can tell the difference between your finger and a pen, the screen reacts to one and not the other. If you get too close the field will be conducted along your skin and within a few milliseconds you too will be in quantum stasis.'

'Good to know,' I said.

We positioned the first frame in front of the bank manager, (I'd been right in my assessment there). It took a couple of minutes to adjust the height so that it was directly in the path of the bullet. We then quickly placed sandbags on the feet to hold the frame still when the bullet hit.

The second and third frames were much harder. The falling security guard and the masked man were quite close together and we were running out of time. We got the second frame in by pushing it into position using some extra scaffolding poles. We didn't dare get too close to the faint white beams. We'd had to guess the height of the padded cross bar before we slid it into place but it looked pretty good. We edged the frame as close to the frozen bullet as we could get it.

'The problem with this last frame,' said Finn, 'is that I don't even know if the security guard has pulled the trigger or not yet. I can't get a good angle to see his finger. But even if he hasn't then once he's unfrozen he almost certainly will.'

With two minutes remaining we pushed the third and final frame into the best position we could manage. We threw as many sandbags onto the feet as possible in the time left. Then Finn made us all move outside the bank for safety. He took a stun grenade from one of the police officers then nodded to Professor Coverdale who took out a large tablet computer. He must have been linked to the bank's

CCTV as the top half of the screen showed several different views of the interior. The bottom half of the screen showed buttons, switches and gauges, the controls I presumed for the quantum stasis field. 'Everyone ready?' he asked.

Finn and I nodded, staring at the tablet.

He tapped away at the controls and moments later we saw the frozen bullets and their gas clouds vanish and the guard fall to the floor. At the same instant there came two loud overlapping bangs then a third one a fraction of a second later. The third bang was followed by a loud scream and on the tablet we saw one of the gunmen fall. Finn threw the grenade into the bank where it exploded with a massive thunderclap. Then he, and three or four other FBI agents, followed it in with guns drawn. I heard them shouting that they were FBI and for everyone to get down on the floor. A minute or two later the security guard was helped out by one agent, then Finn and the other agents dragged the two, now maskless, would-be robbers out in handcuffs. The one who'd been shooting at the security guard was bleeding and limping. They were followed by a very shaken looking bank manager along with the rest of the staff and customers.

'What happened to him?' I asked Finn pointing at the bleeding robber.

'A flesh wound, it missed the bone. The third frame wasn't quite in the right place. That guard's a pretty good shot though. He hit this guy in the leg while dropping out of the way of the shot aimed at him.

'Or he got lucky,' I said.

Finn smiled and nodded.

'Or he got lucky.'

I went into the bank to inspect my handiwork. Two of the frames had holes in the sandbags and a thin stream of sand was trickling out onto the floor. I got to work dismantling everything, taking care to mark the sandbags containing the bullets as I was sure the forensics people would want to examine them.

Chapter 4

Professor Coverdale entered the bank and opened the cupboard he'd pointed to earlier. Inside was a large thin metal box with a mesh grill and single green light. He pressed a button on the tablet's screen and the green light went out.

'The flux emitter is off, so we're safe,' he said.

'Let's hope no one fires a gun at us then,' I said. 'I'm curious as to how you knew this bank would be the one robbed.'

'Oh, I had no idea. There are ten banks in town and six of them agreed to have one installed about three months ago. We didn't tell them exactly what the SALF did, just that it was advanced anti-robbery technology. Only the chairman of each bank knows what it does and they're all sworn to secrecy. Then we just had to wait until someone tried to rob one of the banks.'

I continued dismantling the frames and stacking the parts ready for their return to the van.

'This has been an unqualified success in my book,' he said. 'I think we're ready for phase three now.'

'Phase three? What were one and two?'

'One was in the lab; this here is two and three will be orbiting satellites. The targeting cameras are accurate enough. The SALF beams from the emitters,' he pointed at the device on the ceiling, 'have plenty of range. I think we could completely eliminate shootings and maybe even bombings in the city's streets. We can install ceiling mounted SALFs in public buildings like banks, government offices, shopping malls, theatres and ... schools. We just need to convince the Federal Government to spend the money.'

'It'll blow people's minds when they hear about it. I've seen it in operation and I'm still not sure I believe it!'

Finn returned with a few police officers who started carrying out the parts I'd dismantled. Finn picked up the marked sandbags and placed them into evidence bags.

'Well done,' he said to me. 'I'm impressed. Now you know what you're dealing with are you ready to recruit and train a team to build similar things? You could be very busy if this project goes national.'

'I'm ready and willing. But hopefully I won't be building anything similar. Those we're on-the-fly quick and dirty stop-gaps at best, I've ideas for much better devices. Ready-built reusable ones in various shapes and sizes and all adjustable. I'll also need to work closely with the Professor to design something to contain an explosion if that's part of what you're doing?'

'Excellent!' Finn said.

As he left he called over his shoulder to the Professor.

'And I've told you before, stop calling it the SALF. We're the QSF Department, call it the QSF please, or we could have a public relations nightmare on our hands.'

'What did he mean?' I asked the Professor. 'What do QSF and SALF stand for?'

'QSF stands for Quantum Stasis Field. An imprecise but appropriate enough name. I prefer SALF though.'

'What does SALF mean?'

'Second Amendment Loophole Field,' he said. 'My daughter Emily was killed in a school shooting fifteen years ago. My wife and I, along with other parents, tried getting an assault rifle ban in place but we failed. So instead, I put my research into stasis fields, that I'd initially hoped would make deep space travel practical, to a different purpose. Last year, in the lab, I finally managed to get the phase one prototypes to react quickly enough to stop a bullet fired from a real hand gun. Phase two has been a success and so with luck, the right spin, and a good spokes-person we can move on to phase three.'

The Professor stopped for a moment. I could see tears beginning to form in the corner of his eyes. 'The gun lobby can keep their precious assault rifles, shotguns and pistols but I'm going to do everything in my power to make damn sure they'll never kill another innocent person with one ever again.'

THE END

The Post Office

Marjorie Brownlow risked a surreptitious glance at her watch. She was going to be late. It was already half-past three and she ought to be at her friend's house by four at the latest. She hated being late. She also hated sitting on a cold, hard floor. But most particularly she hated being held up at gunpoint. This last item was currently the most pressing.

Marjorie was sitting on the floor, with three other people, in a small rural general-store-cum-post-office. The three other people on the floor with her were two elderly men and a woman who looked to be in her early fifties. All were clearly terrified and had the glazed far-away look of people who simply can't believe what's happening to them and are expecting to wake up at any moment.

They were in their current predicament thanks to the obstinate balding middle-aged man behind the post office counter pressing a panic button which sealed him into the small booth at the end of the store's counter. The three masked men holding shotguns had taken the customers hostage in retaliation, to try to force him to unlock it and hand over the money.

'Open the door,' shouted the tall heavysset man, for about the third time, pointing his double-barrel shotgun through the screen, level with the postmaster's face.

'I won't. The police are on their way. I suggest you bugger off sharpish. There's no point in shooting. The glass is bullet proof. It'd stop a round from a rifle so it'll withstand a cartridge of buckshot with nowt but scratches,' said the postmaster defiantly.

The heavysset man slammed the barrels of the shotgun against the screen and swore profusely.

All three were in old military-style jackets, camouflage pants and had black balaclavas concealing their faces. A slightly shorter, thinner man was standing close to the door keeping a lookout. His shotgun was steady and pointed at the group sitting on the floor. He'd flipped the sign to closed and locked the door as soon as they'd entered and he'd not moved or spoken since. The third man was clearly nervous or possibly in dire need of the toilet as he was fidgeting and moving constantly. His shotgun hung slackly at his side, as if he were embarrassed by it. He kicked the outstretched foot of one of the old men.

'You. Yes you. You'd better tell him I'm going to shoot you if he don't open the door,' he said.

The old man swallowed nervously and looked up at the postmaster.

'Ralph. Perhaps you'd better do as he says.'

'Sorry Graham. No can do. If I give in to these clowns I'll be held up every other week.'

The nervous man hitched up his shotgun and pointed it towards the man called Graham. It was clearly far too heavy for him as the end of the barrel swerved about alarmingly.

Amateurs, thought Marjorie. Or at least the nervous one was, and so too was the one threatening the postmaster. She wasn't yet sure about the one by the door.

'I mean it,' shouted the nervous one. 'I'll shoot him, won't I Dave?'

The man in front of the counter whirled around.

'No effing names you pillock!'

'Sorry Dave...if that really is your name. Maybe it's...erm...Paul or Clive or ... Barry.'

Marjorie saw the man by the door stiffen. It seemed he might be called Barry and the nervous man might be extremely stupid. She risked another glance at her watch.

'You got somewhere to be grandma?' said the man who seemed to be called Dave.

'Yes, I have as a matter of fact. I'm late for an appointment with a very old, very dear friend and I only stopped here to buy a packet of biscuits,' she showed the man the packet of bourbons she held in her left hand. 'Could we please hurry this along?'

The nervous robber laughed.

'Sure thing grandma. We'll get cracking. Wouldn't want you to be late for your hot date. Perhaps I'll shoot you instead of this old fart here. Get up.'

Marjorie bridled at the 'grandma' comment. She conceded that she might be nearing six-six years of age and her hair had gone grey but she wasn't so old she was ready to be put out to pasture just yet. Not that these fools needed to know that. She used the edge of the shelves to clamber theatrically to her feet and made use of the distraction to surreptitiously slip a tin of SPAM into the left pocket of her coat. Graham gave her a look that was equal parts guilt and relief that he was no longer in the cross-hairs. The other two hostages still just looked frightened and numb. The nervous man grabbed Marjorie's coat and bundled her towards the post office booth. The man called Dave pointed his shotgun at her.

'Open up, right now,' he said.

Ralph, the postmaster, shook his head but didn't look quite so defiant as he had.

'I don't think he can,' said Marjorie confidently. 'I think once the panic button has been pressed he's locked in there until someone unlocks it from the outside.'

Ralph looked momentarily confused but rallied well.

'Yeah, she's right. The police have to cancel the alert and release the door.'

'Oh, bloody hell,' said Dave.

'Shit,' said the nervous man. 'Let's get going. I'm not sticking around 'til the old-bill get here.'

He started to head towards the door.

The man at the door raised his shotgun until it pointed it at the fidgeter, and finally spoke.

'Get back there and keep your eyes on those two on the floor. They're talking rubbish. He can open the door if he wants to. He just needs a reason.'

He turned to address Ralph, but his gun swivelled smoothly round to point at Marjorie.

'This has got a hair trigger, so I'm going to count to three and if you don't open it in time this old woman is getting shot.'

Finally, a professional, thought Marjorie, with mixed feelings.

'One...two...'

There was a click just before the three and the counter-side door opened a crack.

'Good decision,' the counting man said to Ralph. 'Since you think you're so goddam clever grandma, you can get in there and load up the cash for us.'

The three robbers pulled canvas holdalls out from under their jackets and threw them to Marjorie. She picked them up and stepped around the counter to the booth. She held the first one open and Ralph started to scoop bundles of cash out of the safe and drop them into the bag.

'Hurry up,' snapped the man at the door. 'And don't forget the foreign money.'

'Yeah, we might want to go abroad...on holiday,' said the nervous man.

The third bag was now nearly full too.

'That's it,' said Ralph. 'You've got it all.'

'Out, and lie down with the others,' said Dave. 'Bring the bags.'

Ralph shuffled out of the booth then he and Marjorie rounded the counter back into the main part of the shop. Dave took the bags then gave Ralph a hard shove that sent him sprawling onto the floor.

'Tie them up,' said the man at the door that Marjorie thought of as Barry.

'What with?' asked the nervous man. 'I haven't got anything to tie 'em up with.'

Dave pointed to the rolls of tape for sale in the stationary section.

'Duck tape. Use that.'

The nervous man grabbed a roll of silver tape but failed to get it open with one hand. He started to pass Marjorie his shotgun to hold for him but stopped himself just in time. He gave her the tape instead.

'You can duck tape them. Get on with it.'

Marjorie took the tape out of its packet.

'It's duct tape,' she said wearily, 'not duck tape.'

'Whatever.'

She quietly apologised to each of the hostages, and to Ralph, as she taped up their hands and feet. She was careful not to make the bindings too tight. They ought to be able to wriggle free within a few minutes.

Dave and the nervous man had a holdall each. Dave held the third out towards Barry.

'She can carry it,' he said. 'She coming with us.'

'You didn't say nothing about taking hostages,' said Dave. His protests petered out when Barry's shotgun swung up to point at him.

Barry unlocked the door, opened it enough to stick his head out and glanced outside.

'All clear. Let's go.'

The nervous man shoved Marjorie towards the door.

Outside the peace and tranquillity of a rural village in England was completely at odds with the tension and stress of the last ten minutes inside the post office. There was nobody out and about, most of the shops were shut for half-day closing and the pub hadn't yet opened.

There was a rusting elderly builder's van haphazardly parked outside the post office and in front of it a beautiful racing green Jaguar XJS.

'That your car?' asked Barry.

'No.' lied Marjorie.

'It bloody well must be, 'cos you said you stopped here to get a packet of biscuits. We'll take your car. It's better than his crappy van. Give me the keys.'

Marjorie reluctantly handed them over and Barry opened the boot of the XJS. The three bags of money were dropped in.

'Put your guns in the boot,' said Barry to Dave and the nervous man. 'I don't want you accidentally shooting me. You can get in the back.'

Barry kept his shotgun pointed at Marjorie over the roof of the car as he unlocked the passenger door. Marjorie got into the driver's seat and then Barry slid into the passenger seat. He handed her the keys. In the distance there came the faint sound of police sirens.

'The filth are on their way. Let's hustle. Remember I've got my gun right here so don't try anything.'

Marjorie fastened her seat belt, started the car and pulled away from the kerb vigorously. She headed away from the sirens and took the first country lane she saw and headed down it at speed.

'You don't hang about for an old bird, do you?' said Barry approvingly.

'Where to?' she asked.

'This'll do. Just keep driving for now, I need somewhere quiet and out of the way to think.'

'What about my van?' asked Dave.

'Did you report it stolen like I said?'

There was a pause then Dave said that he had. Marjorie was certain he was lying. She didn't like Barry's need for somewhere quiet; that spelled danger to her. She speeded up. The car was now starting to

bounce and roll a little on the narrow sharply cambered road. Marjorie gripped the wheel tightly and focussed on the road ahead.

'All right grandma, not too fast,' said Barry.

'You wanted to get away from the police. The further away you are the better I would have thought. Who knows? They might have a helicopter. You don't want to be anywhere near here if one shows up.' She sped up some more. The XJS was now nudging seventy miles per hour on the straights.

'We've got a regular Michael Schumacher here! You're a dark horse old lady,' shouted the nervous man from the back seat.

A few minutes later Marjorie saw far ahead of her something she'd been hoping for, a tractor. This one was extra slow as it was towing some farm machinery. She accelerated some more.

'Slow down, you stupid old fool!' shouted Barry.

Marjorie heard the two men in the back yanking on their seat belts, their excitement rapidly turning to panic, as they finally clicked shut. Barry struggled to manoeuvre the shotgun out of the footwell. This would have been difficult enough, given the length of the barrels, if the car had been stationary. In a car doing almost ninety on a bumpy country road it was virtually impossible.

'Slow down!' he screamed.

Marjorie slammed on the brakes as hard, and as late, as she dared. The car's nose dipped and the steering bucked in her hands but she held on tight. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Barry hit the dashboard with some force. The XJS skidded to a stop half a car's length from the back of the tractor. She whipped the tin of SPAM out of her left coat pocket and smashed Barry across the back of the head as hard as she could with it. If he hadn't been knocked out cold by the impact with the dashboard he was most certainly out now. A small patch of blood seeped through the fabric of the balaclava. Marjorie opened her door, and went quickly around to the passenger side. She opened the door and pulled the unconscious man out on the road. She retrieved the shotgun, and pointed it at the two dazed and shaken men in the back.

'Out of my car. Now,' she said sternly.

The doors opened and the two men struggled out, their legs seeming to be made mostly of jelly.

'Balaclavas off please. And you. Yes you Dave. Take Barry's off too. Come on. Chop chop. Now kneel down here next to him.'

The tractor, oblivious to the drama behind, had continued on its way as the two men did as they'd been told.

With the balaclavas off Marjorie realised the two must be related. They looked so alike kneeling next to the unconscious Barry.

'What are your names?'

'Dave and Jim Parsons,' said Dave. 'He's my nephew.'

'Got any ID on you?'

They both shook their heads.

'Give me your addresses and your dates of birth.'

The pair told her.

'I'll remember those. Don't you ever doubt it. So, who's he and why are you working for him?'

'Barry Talbot. We were building the extension on his house. We heard stories, rumours really, while we were working for him that he's a wrong 'un but we were in too deep to back out. Then he refused to pay us. When I told him we were facing bankruptcy he told us we could help him with this job and if it went well we would do maybe three or four more. He said we'd be set after that. No one was supposed to get hurt. The shotguns weren't even supposed to be loaded.'

Dave sounded thoroughly miserable. Marjorie checked her gun with practiced ease.

'Well, this one certainly is,' she said. 'Am I going to get any trouble from you two?'

'No missus,' said Jim, who had begun fidgeting again.

Dave shook his head. Marjorie took the roll of duct tape from her right pocket and dropped it in front of him.

'Bind his hands and feet. Make sure they're tight. Oh, and before you get any silly ideas I do know how to shoot and I'm very very good at it.'

Dave bound Barry up tightly. Marjorie opened the boot of the XJS. She checked the other two guns. They were both replicas; completely incapable of firing.

'Put him in the boot,' said Marjorie.

Dave and Jim picked Barry up. He groaned and mumbled something inaudible. They dropped him, none too gently, into the boot.

'Dave, you will now bind Jim's hands behind his back. Very securely please.'

Marjorie waggled the shotgun for emphasis. Dave used more duct tape to bind Jim's wrists.

'You're not going to shoot him are you?' asked Dave. 'He's only a kid. All he did wrong was listen to his stupid desperate uncle.'

'Get in the car Jim,' said Marjorie. 'No Dave, I'm not going to shoot him. I'm not getting blood all over my car. Throw me the tape, then turn around.'

Marjorie taped Dave's wrists and told him to get in the back next to Jim. Some muffled and slurred threats were now coming from the boot of the car. Marjorie walked around to the back put a finger on her lips and told Barry that if he knew what was good for him he had better be quiet. She then put tape over his mouth to ensure he had no other choice. She scooped up the three discarded balaclavas

and threw them in the boot. She then unloaded the shotgun and threw that in too. She hurled the shells into the nearby field then got into the car.

'This is what's going to happen. I'm going to drive you two home, to check you weren't lying. You're going to phone the police and report that when you woke after lunchtime following a heavy night on the booze you noticed your van had been stolen. I'd suggest washing your mouths out with whiskey and slopping some on your clothes too in case they pay you a visit. Then you two are going to be as good as gold for the rest of your lives. If I ever get even a whiff that you're up to no good I'll come looking for you. Understand?'

'Yes missus,' they chorused.

'What's going to happen to Barry? He knows where we live. I don't want him coming looking for us neither,' said Dave after they'd got moving again.

'Don't you worry about that,' said Marjorie. 'But you might want keep an eye on the local news over the next few days.'

An hour later than planned Marjorie knocked on the door of her friend's house. An elderly man with an upright military bearing answered the door with a beaming smile.

'I was starting to get worried Marjorie. You're never late.'

Marjorie handed over the bourbon biscuits.

'Before we have our tea and a nice chat, there is something in the boot of the car only you can help me with.'

The elderly man suddenly had a twinkle in his eye.

'Oh really? How exciting,' he said as he followed her back down the drive to her car.

About a week later the local news featured an item about the police receiving an anonymous tip that had taken them to the unfinished extension of a smart local house. There they found money stolen in a recent post office robbery, the homeowner, a Mr. Barry Talbot, bound and gagged along with a file detailing his extensive criminal activities. The man was unable to account for his whereabouts for the previous week but made a full confession in regard to the robbery and the contents of the file. The only other curious thing, as far as the police were concerned, was that he flatly refused to reveal who his accomplices had been.

THE END

Smuggler

Albania, some miles north of the port of Durras, March 1991

Marjorie Brownlow looked down at the crumpled shape in the ditch at the side of road. She was fairly sure it was a body. The moon was presently behind clouds and as there was no other light source nearby the visibility was extremely poor. She looked around, but couldn't see or hear anybody. She clambered down into the soggy, smelly ditch for a closer look. It was a body. It was lying face down in the shallow stagnant water. Marjorie hauled it over onto it's back. It was her contact. That was most annoying. She searched the body thoroughly. There was an empty sheath for a combat knife strapped to the upper thigh of his left leg. There was a small waterproof pouch taped in his right armpit, which Marjorie took. There was also a jagged stomach wound that was almost certainly the cause of death. Where was the man's missing knife? Where was his assailant? As the area wasn't already swarming with soldiers she assumed if she found one, she'd probably also find the other.

The clouds parted briefly and Marjorie took the opportunity for a look around. She could see the half dozen familiar low domed shapes of the bunkers to her left, towards the coast, and nothing but fields on the opposite side of the road. Her contact had lived in the nearby village; from his position in the ditch, it looked like he'd been trying to make it back there when he'd succumbed to his injuries.

Marjorie waited until the clouds were completely obscuring the moon again before she crawled out of the ditch and headed towards the right-hand bunker as quietly as she could. Most of these types of small mushroom shaped bunkers were unoccupied, as they'd been built for show. But every now and again some poor conscripts were assigned to them for a few nights under the watchful eye of a sergeant.

She reached the bunker. There was a simple rectangular slot facing away from the coast that was the entrance. The other side would have a couple of machine gun slots. Inside they had no facilities, amenities or comforts. Just bare concrete. She listened intently. There were no sounds of any kind coming from within. No shuffling feet, no chatter, nothing at all. She risked a glance inside. She couldn't see anything. She went inside, there was only room for two or three people. There was no one there. She moved on to the next one in the line, keeping out of sight of the entrance. It was as deserted as the first. So were the next two. The fifth bunker announced its occupancy before she got within thirty yards of it. There was stentorian snoring coming from inside. She crept closer to the entrance and risked a look inside. There was a small guttering candle that had burned down to a tiny stump. By its light she could see two young privates passed out with a couple of almost empty clear glass bottles next to them. She picked one up and sniffed it. Rakki. Homemade, probably. She imagined you could run a car on it, it was so strong. She checked the sixth and last bunker, it was unoccupied too. On her way back to the sleeping recruits she literally stumbled across her contact's missing knife. It was sticking out of the neck of the sergeant who'd been in charge of the sleeping beauties. He was lying on his back, quite dead. He was holding a bloody knife of his own in his right hand. This presented Marjorie with a problem. She couldn't leave him where he was, his army comrades would take a dim view of the murder of one of their own. If he was found stabbed the whole district would be swarming with troops by mid-morning tomorrow. She headed to the shore and watched the water for five minutes. To her great relief the tide seemed to be going out. Dragging the sergeant down to the shore line was hard work and took Marjorie over ten minutes. She stripped him and left his clothes in a messy pile at the edge of the beach, after doing her best to wash the blood off his shirt in the sea. She then stripped off to her underwear and towed the dead body as far out as she could before letting it go. By the time

she returned to the shore she was exhausted and frozen. She dressed clumsily, her numb fingers making it very difficult to fasten the buttons and zips. She rested for a few minutes before heading back to the sole occupied bunker. The snoring was worse if anything. She slipped inside and took a swig of the Rakki. It was as vile as she'd expected but she needed something, anything, to warm her up from the inside. Now came the difficult part. She needed to get back to the village and tell her contact's family what had happened to him.

A few hours later dawn was just insinuating itself into the night sky and Marjorie was sitting with her contact's mother, a dark eyed, black haired impassive woman. She was dressed head to toe in black and could have been any age between about fifty and a hundred. They were in her home, a crude brick cube with a roof of corrugated iron. There had been no tears, no overt emotion at all when Marjorie had told her about her son and where to find him, just a sigh of resignation and a look of steely determination. Her two younger sons had been summoned and had been dispatched to retrieve his body.

'Mrs. Kelmendi I am so sorry to ask anything of you,' said Marjorie in passable Albanian, 'but I need your help to find these people.'

She held out the contents of the waterproof pouch, a small piece of paper with two British names written on it.

'Your son was supposed to take me to where they are hiding. If I don't get them out of the country very soon, they will be great danger. Do you have any idea where Marko might have hidden them?'

Mrs. Kelmendi glanced at the paper then shook her head. She explained that she didn't involve herself with Marko's activities. Marjorie asked if maybe one of the other boys might know. Mrs. Kelmendi informed her reluctantly that her youngest son had been very close to Marko, so he may know something, but that she wouldn't allow him to accompany Marjorie anywhere, the risks were too great now the army was involved.

Marjorie left her and went to wait outside in the very early morning light. She was still bone tired and now very hungry. She was just finishing a bland, but calorific, field ration when she heard Marko's younger brothers returning. She'd not met them before but knew they were called Mentor and Drillon. She stood up to show respect and went over to intercept them before they entered their mother's house.

'Mentor, Drillon, I'm so sorry for what happened to Marko. But do either of you know where he might be hiding the people I'm meant to be meeting?'

Mentor looked blank. He appeared to be in shock. Drillon showed a flash of guilt before regaining his composure. He looked about sixteen. There was no way Marjorie would let him be involved other than to tell her what he knew. The family had lost their father in one of Enver Hoxa, the late president's, regular roundups of critics. Now they'd lost the oldest son. They didn't need some random fifty-three-year-old woman from Britain putting them in more danger.

'Drillon, please just tell me where you think they are. I'll leave you and your family alone and we won't bother you again.'

He shuffled his feet and looked away. His mother appeared and barked a long angry sentence at him. It was in a heavily accented dialect of Albanian only used high up in the North. Marjorie caught most of it and it wasn't complimentary about her. But she did instruct Drillon to tell the truth and to then go with his brother to finish the funeral preparations.

Drillon explained that some of the students in Tirana that had been demonstrating against the communist government had some secret safe locations prepared where they could hide from the police. Marko had been friendly with some of them and the British people might be there. He

described the building and gave directions to it. Marjorie thanked him, and handed him a sizeable bundle of Lek, the Albanian currency, telling him this was money she owed Marko and now it was the family's. She also asked which of the local police officers were the most corrupt.

She set off through the village towards the main road on foot. The sun was now up but it was too early for most people to be up and about. The nearest police checkpoint was about a mile away on the main road. Ostensibly it was there to prevent smuggling in and out of Durrës but in reality, Drillon had said, it was the main source of revenue for the local officers, the government often forgot to pay its employees. Everyone going through paid a bribe. The size determined by the value of their cargo.

Marjorie approached the roadside tin hut attached to the large cantilevered barrier with her arms held out at her sides. She wanted to appear as non-threatening as possible. As she drew closer, she realised her precautions were unnecessary. The man inside was fast asleep. She pulled her sidearm out and pressed it into the snoring man's crotch. He woke up with a start.

'Officer Dibra, now that I have your undivided attention,' she said pleasantly, 'I'm going to give you a choice. You can earn more money than you usually do in three months by helping me with one small job today or I can shoot your privates off. Which is it? I don't have time to mess around, so I'll give you half the money now and half when we're done.'

Dibra looked down at the gun, then up at Marjorie. She was impressed that he didn't look particularly scared. More wary and thoughtful and definitely as if this wasn't the first time someone had pointed a gun at him.

'Depends on what the job is,' he replied cautiously.

'Get me a spare uniform, drive me to Tirana, then drive me, and two other people, to the village over there by the coast.'

She produced a large bundle of bills with her free hand.

Dibra nodded and took the cash.

'When do you want to go?'

'Now.'

'OK. Follow me.'

He stood up. Raised the barrier blocking the dusty road and pushed a large wooden pin into the pivot to stop it dropping back down.

His ancient police car was parked facing toward Durrës. Marjorie got into the back behind the driver's seat.

'Until I know I can trust you I'll keep this pointed at you, if you don't mind.'

Dibra shrugged and got into the front. He took off at speed and headed into town. There was no other traffic on the roads, well no cars. Marjorie saw lots of people with donkey carts loaded up with produce and hand made goods heading to market.

'How come you speak Albanian? You're a foreigner. Are you American? CIA?'

'I lived here for a year a long time ago. I'm not American and I'm certainly not CIA. I'm just trying to help some people who are in danger. No more questions.'

The car pulled up outside a dilapidated police station on the outskirts of Durrës.

'I'll get a uniform,' he said.

'Not on your own you won't,' said Marjorie.

'There's no one else here, my deputy doesn't relieve me until noon.'

Ten minutes later they were heading towards Tirana. Marjorie sitting in the front passenger seat now, in the worst fitting uniform she'd ever worn. The roads were so bad it took an hour and half to cover

the twenty odd miles. Dibra was constantly weaving around pot holes as well as avoiding as many puddles as he could. Sometime he was moving at barely a snail's pace.

'Looks like a little puddle but could be a massive hole. I could lose a wheel,' he explained.

As they neared the capital Marjorie gave him directions to the place Drillon had described.

'You've been here before?' asked Dibra.

Marjorie said she had, but not for a number of years. When Hoxa had still been alive.

Dibra swore.

'Hoxa was a bad man. I will be voting for the opposition in the elections this month,' he said proudly.

Marjorie wasn't convinced Albania's first elections since before the second world war would solve its problems. As far as she could tell the opposition was as full of villains and crooks as the communists were. She hoped she was wrong but it seemed unlikely that power would peacefully transfer away from the old regime.

As they neared the student district, she saw a road block manned by three police officers.

'Can you get us through that?' she asked.

'Of course,' he said contemptuously. 'But it'll be expensive.'

Marjorie peeled off a dozen notes from her bundle and handed them over.

'Will that do?'

'It should.'

Dibra slowed the car and wound down his window. The nearest officer, approached.

Dibra rattled off a tale about a senior party worker's son having fallen in with a bad crowd and he having been tasked with retrieving him before the son got arrested at the student protests and there was embarrassment and shame brought down upon a good family. It all had to happen without a fuss and would the small token he offered keep things quiet? He showed the policeman half the money Marjorie had just handed over. There was a nod of the head, so Dibra added a couple more notes. Another, smaller more hesitant nod. One more note was added. There was a reluctant shake and the barrier was raised as Dibra handed over the money.

They drove slowly through and Marjorie continued guiding him down the quiet back streets. She remembered her Albanian lessons fondly; she'd taken quite a liking to her instructor. The hardest part of all was getting used to the Albanian's reversal of the meaning of a nod or shake of a head. A nod meaning yes was so ingrained in the western psyche that it took her six months to get used to doing it the other way around.

'This looks like the place,' she said.

There was a small bar at the end of the street. Marjorie got out of the car. She told Dibra to wait or he wouldn't get the other half of the money but to be on the safe side she took his car key. She walked to the bar's delivery entrance and knocked. There was no answer. She knocked again louder. Thirty seconds later she heard a voice on the other side of the door respond.

She quickly explained she was a friend of Marko's and was here to help. The door opened a crack. A pale nervous face looked out. The eyes widened for a moment and then the door slammed shut. There was the sound of panicked voices from inside.

'I'm not police. I'm British. I'm here to help,' she said urgently first in Albanian then in English.

There was silence then the door opened cautiously.

'English?' said the nervous face.

'Yes. I'm Mrs. Marjorie Brownlow. Marko was meant to bring me here but he's been, erm... unavoidably, detained.'

The nervous face belonged to a very nervous young man. Presumably one of the students who had been protesting against the government. He beckoned her inside and shut the door. Marjorie followed him down to the cellar. There were a couple in their early thirties sitting on an upturned crate. They looked dishevelled and exhausted.

'Mr. and Mrs. Andrews? Roger and Lucy Andrews?'

The couple nodded.

'I'm here to take you home.'

'Where's Marko?' said Mr. Andrews. 'He promised he'd come himself.'

'There was a change of plan. You need to come with me. It's my plan and I know it'll work. Let's get going.'

Marjorie turned to the nervous young man who'd let them in and spoke rapidly to him in Albanian advising him to wait for thirty minutes after they'd left, then to leave and not return; and to certainly not take part in any more protests. The government was going to try a brutal crackdown and lives would certainly be lost. He nodded his thanks but said that he wasn't afraid.

'You should be,' said Marjorie. 'Fear helps keep you alive.'

Marjorie and the British couple climbed the cellar stairs then cracked open the door to the street. There was no one about, so Marjorie opened it fully and they stepped outside shutting the door behind them. It was then that Marjorie noticed the police car with Dibra in it was gone.

She set off walking, hoping the police uniform would give her enough of an advantage to bluster her way out of any problems. Her Albanian was fairly good, but she knew she wouldn't fool anyone for long. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews followed. Glancing around nervously.

'Act natural. Walk like you're out for a stroll,' said Marjorie under her breath. 'If you look furtive or guilty, you'll only attract attention.'

'Out for a stroll?' said Mr. Andrews indignantly. 'Two dirty people in tattered clothes just out for a stroll with a policewoman?'

'In that case I'll walk behind you and make it look like you're under arrest. Don't speak to anyone. Just head down this street and turn left at the end.'

As they neared the junction, they heard a car coming. It was moving slowly towards them. It was a police car.

'Don't panic!' said Marjorie.

As the car drew near, she saw it was Dibra behind the wheel and he was alone. He pulled up next to them.

'Get in, quick. I had to move. A patrol came up the street moments after you went inside. I didn't want to explain my presence so I drove around the block a few times.'

'How did you start the car,' asked Marjorie. 'I took the key.'

Dibra pointed to the screwdriver sticking out of the ignition.

'It's a very basic Russian car. You could start it with a spoon.'

Marjorie handed the key back.

'We need somewhere to hide until dusk. What do you suggest?'

'The cells at my jail are pretty good. There's no one in them. I can send my deputy up to the road block where you met me. It'll cost extra though.'

'Agreed.'

'Who are they?' he said pointing to Mr. & Mrs. Andrews who were sitting in the back.

'Idiots. That's who they are. They're political advisors. Very naïve political advisors. They came to Albania illegally six months ago across a weak point on the Greek border. They've been advising the

opposition, working with the student leaders and generally getting on the wrong side of the regime. A few weeks ago, an inside man in the government let them know they were going to be arrested and probably executed, so they went into hiding. Someone managed to get word out to their organization and I was hired to get them out of the country.'

'Hey, we're not idiots,' protested Mr. Andrews in English. 'I may not speak fluent Albanian but I understood that bit!'

'Mr. Andrews you illegally entered a closed country, helped stir up an insurrection, and you had no exit strategy. I'd call that fairly idiotic.'

'Don't you believe we should do all we can to spread democracy to authoritarian states Mrs. Brownlow?' said Mrs. Andrews.

'No,' she said. 'Outside interference will always be resented. If the society isn't ready and you don't carefully manage the dismantling of a strong-man regime then criminals and extremists will fill the void leaving the country worse off than before. But I'm not here to give you an education in realpolitik just get you out of the county alive.'

Marjorie turned back to face the front then span angrily back.

'Also your naivety, and recklessness has indirectly got a nice young man killed. Marko, was intercepted by an army patrol last night and was killed in the struggle.'

The Andrews lapsed into guilty silence.

'What was all that?' asked Dibra, who hadn't understood a word of the English conversation.

'Nothing,' said Marjorie curtly. 'Just get us to the police station.'

Dibra's cocky self-assuredness got them through the checkpoints without a problem and an hour or so later they were nearing the outskirts of Durres.

'I'm back in radio range, so I'll order my deputy up to the customs post. I don't want anyone seeing you three.'

He unclipped the microphone from the dash and made the call. The deputy sounded puzzled but happy to earn the extra bribe money. If the boss had a bigger scheme in hand that kept him away for the day he wasn't going to turn down some unexpected cash.

Dibra pulled the car into the police station's yard and escorted the Andrews to the cells. He didn't lock them in, but he shut the door.

'Can you find out if there's any unusual army activity near here today?' asked Marjorie as innocently as she could.

'I probably can. Why and where exactly?'

Marjorie named Marko's village and asked Dibra to check.

He picked up the ancient rotary dial telephone and make a couple of calls.

'There's a missing sergeant near that village. Two privates are under arrest for dereliction of duty and their sergeant's clothes were found on the beach. It's assumed he went swimming while drunk and has drowned.'

Marjorie didn't react.

'Okay. That's sad but it shouldn't affect my plans too much. We'll head to the beach at about eight o'clock tonight.'

'You're going to be here a long time. If you want food you'll need to give me some money. I can get some meals brought in, and drink,' said Dibra.

'No alcohol. We need to stay sharp. But food and some sleep would be welcome.'

She handed over some more money.

'I can trust you, can't I? You're not going to turn us in?'

‘You’re paying me a lot more than the government would for your capture. It’s in my own interest to help you.’

‘Good. I’ve been straight with you; I expect you to be straight with me.’

He went out for ten minutes to make the arrangements for the food.

The day dragged by but Dibra was as good as his word and around lunch time two young women appeared at the police station with baskets of food, coffee and two bottles of rakki.

Marjorie sent the rakki away but they all ate a decent meal of bread, figs and cheese, washed down with strong Turkish style coffee.

Everyone made themselves as comfortable as possible and tried to sleep. As the light started to fade Marjorie left Dibra snoozing on the cot in his office and headed for the cells.

‘Come on. And keep quiet,’ she hissed to the Andrews. ‘We’re leaving.’

‘But it’s only four thirty,’ said Mrs. Andrews.

Marjorie glared and she lapsed into silence. Outside the police car was where they’d left it. The Andrews got in the back as before. Marjorie pulled out her pocket knife and used it to start the engine. She quickly reversed out of the police station, did a ragged J-turn in the dust and sped off.

‘Why isn’t Mr. Dibra coming with us? Won’t we need him?’ said Mr. Andrews.

‘I don’t trust him. I’ve left him his money. I’m not swindling him but I don’t want him with us now in case he gets greedy.’

The car bumped and skidded on the dusty road towards Marko’s village. Up ahead Marjorie saw the custom’s hut and barrier. She slowed down so Dibra’s deputy would recognise the car. The man got lazily to his feet and headed towards them waving a hand in greeting. Marjorie slowed some more, then stopped. The officer approached the driver’s door and when he bent down to look inside Marjorie opened the door suddenly, knocking him flat on his back. She leapt out and made sure he was unconscious in the quickest way she could. She heard Mrs. Andrews scream. She raised the barrier, got back in the car and drove off.

‘Did you have to kick him in the head?’ asked Mr. Andrews.

‘Oh I’m sorry. Did you want me to let him shoot you or hand you over to the government?’ said Marjorie sarcastically. ‘It was merely a tap. He’ll have a headache but I doubt any permanent damage will be done.’

Five minutes later the dark bunkers came into sight in the headlights of the car.

‘Wait here,’ said Marjorie. I need to check there’s no one around.’

She walked straight towards the bunkers. Confident her police uniform and walking around as if she owned the place would be enough to reassure any lurking soldiers that she posed no threat.

The bunkers were deserted. The army had moved on.

As she returned to the car she saw Mr. and Mrs. Andrews were standing by the bonnet with their hands up. Dibra was sitting astride a small motorbike pointing his gun at them. The weak light from its headlight illuminating the scene dramatically.

‘Come on out English woman,’ shouted Dibra. ‘I heard you coming back from the bunkers.’

‘I didn’t know you had a motorbike,’ said Marjorie moving to stand directly behind Dibra. ‘I should have checked.’

‘Yes, you should. Now hand over all of the rest of the Lek you have and any other money or I’ll shoot them both.’

Marjorie rummaged in her pockets for the remainder of her Lek. She still had a sizeable amount. She wrapped it around a small hard object then moved carefully around Dibra until she was standing to his left. She held out the bundle. He reached his left hand out and snatched it from her.

‘Thank you.’

He raised the gun and pointed it at Marjorie. Then the flash-bang she’d hidden in the wad went off. Dibra screamed as it burned his hand and the gun fired. Marjorie charged him and crashed into him knocking him and the motorbike down. She took the gun from his unresisting hand.

‘Are you alright?’ she asked the Andrews.

‘I think so,’ they answered. ‘Are you?’

Marjorie wondered what they meant. Then she looked where Mrs. Andrews was pointing and noticed the hole in her left trouser leg. She checked and saw the bullet had just grazed her thigh.

‘I’m okay,’ she said. ‘It’s just a scratch.’

Dibra was whimpering on the floor. His right leg was pinned under the bike and his left hand looked badly burned. There were bank notes stuck to the burned flesh.

‘You can keep the money,’ said Marjorie. ‘I don’t want it back. It’s counterfeit anyway.’

She led the Andrews down to the beach. She pulled a small torch from her pocket and flashed a complex pattern out to sea several times. After a couple of minutes there was an answering flash. A few minutes after that there came the sound of an outboard motor.

A boat appeared out of the darkness and two large men jumped down into the shallows and steadied the boat to help Marjorie and Mr. and Mrs. Andrews aboard.

‘Next stop Bari in Italy,’ said one of the men.

‘It’s good to see you gentlemen, but I need you to hang on a moment. Where do you keep the first aid kit and the whiskey Angus? I need a drink and a bandage,’ said Marjorie. ‘It’s been an eventful few days.’

Angus passed the kit to Marjorie, she dropped her uniform trousers and quickly cleaned and bandaged the wound.

‘I’ve got to get back,’ Marjorie said to Angus. ‘This little rescue mission has interrupted my work here. I’ll keep in touch and let you know when I need you again.’

She jumped out of the boat and waded ashore then watched as the motor roared, the boat turned around and powered off into the night across the Adriatic.

Marjorie walked back to where Dibra was lying unconscious under his motorbike. She stole it and set off towards the North of the country, back to the job that’d been so rudely interrupted.

THE END

Christmas

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 rosily 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.

~

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 sped 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.

~

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

Blofeld's Diary (A little humorous bonus)

Today has seen the culmination of many months of hard work. I never realised just how difficult the construction would be. It's not the big things that get you down it's the little things. Have you ever tried buying 300 orange jumpsuits in assorted sizes from the 'Army and Navy' stores without people getting suspicious; and there's always someone who doesn't want to wear orange.

"Does my bum look bigger with the tool belt or without?"

"Can't I wear some slimming stripes",

"Do you operate a casual day on Fridays?" - Honestly!

Recruitment's tough too. It took weeks to interview all the applicants. Most of them were a waste of time; the people the job centre sent round were almost universally unsuitable. It should have been easy; the advert was very specific...

"Wanted. Minions. Needed for construction and operation of underground lair. Must panic easily when attacked by solitary intruder and take turns fighting him one at a time, must not rush all at once. Excellent tax-free salary, private medical cover, three months short-term contract. Previous experience of monorails an advantage."

Some of the people they sent were almost capable of thinking for themselves! Some said their consciences wouldn't allow them work for an employer bent on world domination. Others were unhappy about relocating to a remote island in the South-China seas. One said he had concerns about the environmental impact of the job – I explained we were only threatening Birmingham and it wasn't like the nerve gas would drift all the way to the rain forests or anything. Don't these people want gainful employment? Bring back National Service – that's what I say.

We've had three piranha keepers since we started the project. The first one turned out to be a vegetarian so he'd bought fruit eating piranhas. I had him covered in jam and thrown in the pool, but once the piranha's had licked off the jam, we ended up having to throw him a life-belt, pull him out and then shoot him. His replacement bought meat eating piranhas but had previously looked after Dolphins at a Florida theme park, forgot where he now worked and went swimming with them, briefly. But the third fellow seems to have got the hang of it.

Also, I must remember to phone the sodding estate agent who sold me this volcano. She assured me that it was extinct but I'm sure the Goldfingers left early last night because of the distinct smell of sulphur about the place.

"Oh yes Mr. Blofeld I've found just the thing" she said when she phoned me about it. "It's a roomy hollowed out volcano on its own private island. The previous megalomaniac had central heating installed; the windows are double-glazed and the main lounge opens onto a charming patio. Plus, there's a twin-submarine underwater garage."

Well, the central heating appears to be molten lava, there are no windows to be double-glazed and the patio has appalling 70's crazy paving all over it and no barbeque! It'll have to go. Don't even get me started on the garage. Two submarines? Ha! It'll just about hold my mini-submarine and the emergency escape pod.

Oh, and the island isn't even private! There's a Mr. Scaramaga in the hideout next door who's a gun collector or something and he's always banging away night and day at something or other. I'm sure that midget of his has been pilfering our building supplies. If he doesn't stop it soon the piranha's will be having a starter before their next meal.

'Tiddles' the cat doesn't like here. She hates moving and with my job I never get to settle in one place very long. Still, I've bought her a new scratching post and rubber secret agent so it won't be long before she settles in. I must make sure a minion fixes the fence between our firing range and Mr. Scaramanga's. If Tiddles wandered over there I know he'd have a 'View to a Kill'. He's invited me over to dinner a few times now, I don't really want to go but I might as well, after all 'You Only Live Twice'. Tiddles isn't invited, he says he's allergic to cats but I've only brought the one, it's not as if there's 'Pussies Galore'.

We're about ready to fire the first rocket tonight. I'd better go and make sure that the minions have pointed it at the right city. I still need to record my menacing ransom demands. Putting on that sinister voice is tiresome but the world's governments just won't take you seriously unless you sound the part.

All this evil plotting exhausts me; I think I deserve a short break. Skiing in the Alps possibly or that trip to Japan I've been promising myself for years.

Oh, hell there's the intruder alarm. I suppose I'd better go and supervise things; this bunch of losers couldn't take over the local Meals-on-Wheels without me telling them what to do every step of the way. I just hope it's not that fellow Bond again. I'm getting sick and tired of him and his cocky one-liners. I've a good mind to just shoot him in the head this time instead of tying him up with string in a room with a convenient air-vent guarded by a half-asleep minion who won't notice the laser hidden in his shoe.

I knew I should have been a lawyer like my brother....

THE END

More Information...

*If you enjoyed the stories *The Post Office*, *Smuggler* and *Christmas* you can get the full-length novel, *Gran Raid*, detailing how Marjorie ends up on remand from Amazon as a paperback and a Kindle eBook. It's also available on Apple Books.*

UK Paperback & Kindle - <https://amzn.to/3MI4QAd>

USA Paperback & Kindle – <https://a.co/d/h34u21i>

Apple Books - <https://bitly.co/Ma6e>

*If you enjoyed the sci-fi story, *The SALF*, then you can get my full-length sci-fi novel, *Coronnol*, which is set in a hopeful and optimistic version of the far future where the unnamed mysterious protagonist is involved in a fascinating and intriguing mystery adventure.*

UK Paperback & Kindle - <https://amzn.to/3P6knbu>

USA Paperback & Kindle - <https://a.co/d/9OgffvX>

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