

Chapter 1 - Marjorie Brownlow

Marjorie Brownlow sat staring at the bars of the cell door. She didn't seem overly concerned by them, or even particularly interested in them. They just existed and she was behind them. She was more concerned that the bench she was sitting on wasn't well padded and, these days, neither was she. Not that she'd give anyone who happened to be watching, the satisfaction of seeing her discomfort. She prided herself on maintaining an apparent calm, serene indifference to the world around her at all times. It had worked well for the last seventy-two years so she saw absolutely no reason to change tack now.

The prison uniform lay folded neatly on the right-hand edge of the bench. Marjorie was dressed in a warm hand-knitted cardigan in white and navy-blue wool over a plain white blouse, severe mid-length mid-blue skirt, thick tights and sensible hard-wearing shoes. Her clothes somehow managed to look more like a uniform than the prison uniform had. Her iron-grey hair was washed and brushed as well as she'd been able to manage, but recent circumstances had meant that she'd missed her last few appointments at Curl-up & Dye for a shampoo and set. Not that she cared much about it herself, she would have been quite happy looking like the wild woman of the west, but appearances were a useful tool in ensuring people treated you correctly.

Marjorie was looking particularly pale today. She was annoyed about that. It was probably the cold and the awful food. That and the fact she didn't even have the bare minimum amount of make-up that she usually found to be quite sufficient. She decided she would pinch and then vigorously rub her cheeks should the chance present itself. She couldn't at the moment, as she was handcuffed to the bench, but perhaps on the way to the dock. She didn't want to appear in court looking like a little old lady. She objected to that description, no matter how easily it trotted off the tongues of those to whom cliché was as welcome as an old friend. She objected because it was, in her view, completely inaccurate. She wasn't little, she had been five feet and ten inches in her prime, well above average. She wasn't old. Dorothy, her sister, was old but then she had been old most of her adult life. It was as if she'd been a baby, then a child, had reached maturity and then simply skipped forward to old age with barely a pause. There had been no such thing as a teenager back then, of course. No, it was Dorothy who was old. Dorothy

her sixty-eight-year-old younger sister. Marjorie still considered herself to be late middle-aged at seventy-two. But what she objected to most was “lady”, that would never do. She never had been and never would be a lady. Ladies lunched on cucumber sandwiches. Ladies cared about cushion covers and curtains. Ladies drove small insignificant pastel-coloured cars and gave them silly names like Marshmallow or Daisy. Ladies cared what other people thought of them. Marjorie liked a pie and chips for lunch, had preferred a Jag back in the day, before the DVLA took her licence away, and she’d always left the cushion covers and curtains decisions up to someone else. As for what people thought of her, that was only relevant if it prevented her from doing exactly what she wanted.

There was a distant noise of a key in a lock which was followed by the sound of footsteps on the hard linoleum which got louder. There wasn’t much wrong with Marjorie’s senses, although she did have to use spectacles these days, but thankfully only for reading.

The footsteps stopped outside her block of three cells. They must be here for her as there was no-one in the cells either side. The heavy metal door opened with a creak, one officer stepped inside and unlocked the cell door while the other stood alert, his right hand not straying far from his baton. They obviously knew who she was and were taking no chances. Marjorie allowed herself the smallest of smiles. The closest officer told her to stand then he unlocked the cuffs, pulled out the chain that was looped around the hoop on the bench and refastened the cuffs with her hands in front. She was waved forward by the second officer and like a small solemn conga line they trooped off down the corridor and up the stairs towards the dock. Marjorie took the opportunity during a brief pause, while a door was being unlocked, to pinch both of her cheeks and give them a rub. The door opened and she saw the courtroom for the first time. It was packed. She caught sight of her solicitor, Sara Masfield, who was as usual fussing over some paperwork before passing it to the large corpulent barrister who had been hired at great expense. He was Quentin Bristow-Jones QC and he was very nearly as good as he told everyone he was. Marjorie recognized some of the faces in the public gallery. There was at least one famous journalist; the one who had won awards reporting for the BBC from war zones all around the world. That was most gratifying. Sara glanced across at her, and smiled encouragingly, but Marjorie pretended not to notice.

She felt an unwelcome hand on her shoulder pushing her onto the chair in the dock. She couldn't imagine why. Everyone, including her, would only have to stand once the judge deigned to appear.

'All rise,' called the clerk from down amongst a sea of robes and wigs.

There was the usual staggered shuffle as people got, unevenly, to their feet then His Honour Judge Frood swept into the court and took up his throne-like seat.

Well, this was it. The most covered trial of 2010 was about to start. Marjorie timed things neatly so that she sat down fractionally before being given permission to do so. Sometimes the little victories were the only ones you had.

Chapter 2 - Bon Repose

Two years before Marjorie's court debut she had laid eyes on Bon Repose for the very first time. Her vantage point was from the back seat of a minibus, which is never the ideal place to see anything, even something spectacular. It was a very poor place indeed to see a run-down row of terraced houses, on the edge of Liverpool city centre. Houses that had, decades before, been knocked together and converted into a squalid budget hotel and then left to rot. Bon Repose, thought Marjorie, was almost the exact opposite of spectacular. As they left the main road to park round the back, next to the bins, Marjorie noted the drooping TV aerial, the odd missing tile, the grubby windows, the cheap peeling paint and worst of all the complete lack of a garden.

'Here we are ladies and gentlemen,' called the driver, a jovial red-faced Londoner called Dennis. 'Give me a moment to get the step out, then I'll open the door.'

Dennis was very nearly seventy himself, and had spent over fifty years as a professional driver of one sort or another. Until fairly recently he'd had his own taxi but once he'd retired he'd missed driving so much that he offered to drive the retirement home's minibus for free. The management had jumped at the chance, it saved them losing a member of staff during outings plus Dennis' clean licence and advanced driving qualifications kept the insurance relatively low.

Marjorie watched Dennis with interest as he opened the front passenger door, lifted down the step he'd made himself, and fastened it to the edge of the now open side door. He held the hands of the passengers who looked like they needed a little help, but most were quite sprightly. Marjorie waited her turn patiently then, ignoring Dennis' outstretched hand, and his home-made step, stepped confidently straight down to the floor.

'Always showing off ain't you, Marge?'

Marjorie winced slightly at 'Marge' but try as she might Dennis would not refer to her, or indeed anyone else, by their full given name except for Joy. If anyone ever came up with a contraction for Joy, then she was sure he'd switch to that immediately. She allowed it to continue because Den, as he repeatedly tried to insist she call him, had proved a useful and often interesting person to know.

‘Thank you for driving us today, Dennis,’ she said.

She may have been happy to sit at the back on the minibus but she soon made her way to the front of the group of slightly uncertain and hesitant senior citizens. She marched briskly towards the doors marked ‘Reception’ in faded red lettering. There was a large brand-new Porsche parked in the disabled bay right next to the door. She recognised the licence plate. It was a personal one that required you to squint and use a hefty dose of imagination to work out what it was meant to say. In her experience only small insecure people needed a personalised plate with their name on it. Why draw attention to yourself? Wasn’t the fifty-thousand-pound car enough of a statement all on its own? It belonged to Marcus Blackmore, the owner of Bon Repose and several other retirement properties scattered across the North West of England. Bon Repose was the latest and by far and away the worst if the interior lived up to the exterior.

Still, it was only temporary. You could cope with anything for three months, couldn’t you?

She sensed Dennis stepping up to stand next to her.

‘We going in then, Marge?’ he asked.

‘Indeed we are Dennis,’ she pushed open the door and stepped inside.

She heard the others follow them.

The inside was, if anything, worse than the outside. There was a sour-faced thirty-something woman in a nurse’s uniform standing behind the reception desk. Her name badge, which was twisted almost sideways by her more than ample bosom, said Sister Angela. Marjorie took an instant dislike to her.

‘Good morning Angela,’ she said. ‘Where is Marcus?’

The woman in the nurse’s uniform said ‘Sister Angela, if you please,’ without looking up.

Marjorie doubted she was a qualified nurse, but until she could prove it one way or the other she decided to allow the courtesy, on a provisional basis.

‘Sister Angela, would you please let Marcus know we’ve arrived.’

‘Mr. Blackmore is busy presently’, she emphasises the mister most emphatically.

‘As are we all Sister Angela, and some of us require the use of your facilities, after a lengthy drive. Go and fetch him.’

Sister Angela looked up for the first time and hesitated just for a moment before she pressed some buttons on the desk phone. A man's voice came through the loudspeaker.

'What is it Angela? I'm busy.'

'The residents from Somerside have arrived Mr. Blackmore,' said Angela.

There was no answer from the loudspeaker but after a short pause a door along the corridor opened and a tall man with an atrocious wig appeared. Marjorie couldn't conceive of any reason why anyone would wear it. She'd always found bald men rather attractive, but if you must wear one you should at least ensure it was impossible to spot it. Blackmore's looked like a medium sized black guinea pig had fallen asleep on his head. When he turned his head she always expected the wig to remain stationary, facing the same direction. Marjorie took him to be around fifty-five years of age, and he could have been reasonably attractive if it weren't for three things; the aforementioned wig, the extremely large pot belly and his entire personality.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' he boomed, as if welcoming them to a ballroom in a stately home. 'Welcome to Bon Repose. Now I know it's not quite what you're used to, coming from Somerside, but it is only temporary. In these tough economic times, we all have to do the best we can and I'm afraid it was all that was available at short notice. I'm sure together we can muck in and make the best of it. Eh?'

'You'll be livin' 'ere too, will you?' asked Dennis.

'Good Lord...erm...I mean I'm afraid not. Mrs. Blackmore insisted on somewhere closer to Somerside as it was too far for her to commute from here.'

'Commute? To her Pilates class? It's not like she has an actual job,' muttered Dennis under his breath.

'Don't be downcast. We have a team of skilled decorators due later this week to smarten the place up and before you know it it'll be like home. Isn't that right Sister Angela?'

Sister Angela shrugged and carried on doing whatever it was she was doing behind the reception desk. Marjorie couldn't tell if it was work or if she was playing Solitaire on the computer or perhaps doing her on-line shopping.

A few more people in nursing uniforms appeared. They started to escort the minibus passengers to their rooms, one at a time. Marjorie and Dennis stared at Blackmore, until he started to look uncomfortable.

‘Exactly how long will the builders be in Somerside, Marcus? Are they starting work today?’ asked Marjorie.

‘They couldn’t give me an exact date I’m afraid *Mrs. Brownlow*, the problem with the roof is quite extensive and they suspect there could be asbestos involved which requires special handling, as I explained before. That’s why everyone had to move out. I’m doing my very best to ensure it’s for as short a time as possible. And while you’re not able to enjoy all the marvellous facilities of Somerside I am charging a reduced rate. This is going to cost me a fortune you know. I had to buy this place as they refused to rent it to me. I’m inconvenienced too. We’ve had to leave our lovely ground floor flat and *Mrs. Blackmore* is not happy about it at all.’

He looked pained but neither Marjorie nor Dennis cared one jot for his troubles. They both knew he’d sell Bon Repose for a profit once he was done with it, and they doubted *Mrs. Blackmore* was ever happy. She was married to Marcus Blackmore after all.

‘I’ll show you to your rooms myself. The dining room is just through there,’ he said, pointing back past the door out of which he’d come. ‘Lunch will be served at twelve thirty sharp and I expect the lorry with your personal belongings will arrive later this afternoon which will give you plenty of time to get settled in before dinner.’

He headed upstairs slowly, his vast gut hampering his progress as he climbed the stairs. Marjorie, Dennis and the other three remaining residents followed him. Marjorie noted the threadbare carpets, the peeling wallpaper and worst of all the faint smell of damp and boiled cabbage that no amount of recently deployed air-freshener and carpet shampoo could hide. It’s only temporary, she reminded herself. Soon they would all be back at Somerside, with its tastefully appointed generous sized rooms, its beautiful views out over the Cheshire plains, its stunning landscaped gardens and best of all its sauna, steam room and tennis court.

‘Chin up, Marge,’ said Dennis, ‘I’m sure we’ve all seen worse. We don’t have to spend every hour in here. Liverpool city centre’s not far away and I’m sure there’s plenty to see and do there. Time will fly by and then we’ll be home.’

‘Thank you Dennis, you’re quite right,’ she replied.

He wasn’t right though. Not at all.

Chapter 3 - Malcolm Timms

Six months later Marjorie sat on the edge of her bed, her recently closed laptop beside her. She was angry but she was also feeling something else, something she was struggling to put a name to. An unfamiliar feeling. It took her a while but eventually she had to admit to herself that it was likely to be shame. She felt ashamed that someone had managed to take her for a fool and she'd let it happen. That would never do. She gave herself a talking to and before long the shame had migrated over to join the anger, which was now not far away from boiling point. She looked around her room. It had been the top floor bedroom in one of the terraced houses before the conversion, so at least it was a good size. Her queen-sized bed was expertly made. Her prized possession, a small bureau that had once belonged to her grandmother that stored her few items of jewellery, was next to the draughty sash window that looked out over the main road to the pizza parlour opposite. A cheap self-assembly wardrobe and combined chest of drawers, that had been brought in at her insistence a few days after her arrival, completed the furniture. There was no desk to work at, no easy chair to sit in, and the Bon Repose Wi-Fi was terrible. She'd put up with that for a few days before working out that the solicitor's office next door to the Pizza Parlour had publicly accessible Wi-Fi that worked far better.

She needed to channel the anger. Do something with it. That was what she'd always done before. She wasn't one to allow things to fester unanswered. She needed to talk to someone. The most likely candidates were Dennis, Joy or Malcolm. Dennis would be out in the minibus at the moment. He always took a small party into Liverpool to see the sights and get their hair done on Monday mornings. Joy would be writing, or doing a crossword if she was stuck. She'd written four novels in the time Marjorie had known her. They were terrific crime thrillers but she wouldn't send them to any publishers no matter how much Dennis and the others encouraged her to. She wrote them for her own pleasure and that of her friends, she said. Marjorie secretly thought she was simply frightened of possible rejection. They were better plotted and paced than anything on the best seller list as far as Dennis was concerned, and he had read everything all the major American crime writers had produced. That left Malcolm, the retired doctor. He wrote too, but he wrote medical histories. He'd had two books published and was

working on a third. They weren't to Marjorie's taste but she'd read them for friendship's sake and could admire the work he'd put into them. The new one was a history of rickets in the working-class communities of Britain's inner-cities and how it had finally been eradicated. She marvelled that there was even a market for a book like that.

Five minutes later she was knocking on the door of Malcolm's room. He was writing, she could hear the typewriter, but she was sure he'd want to hear her news. The typing continued but she didn't knock again. She knew he always finished the paragraph he was working on. At his age, he said, he didn't dare interrupt the train of thought or he might never find out where it had been heading. The typing finally stopped, there was the creak of a floorboard and the door opened.

'Marjorie, to what do I owe the pleasure?' asked Malcolm, ever courteous even when interrupted.

'I have some disturbing news Malcolm, and I needed to share it with someone I trust.'

'Well you'd better come in, I'll put the kettle on.'

Marjorie followed him into his room, shutting the door behind her.

Malcolm was tall. Easily six feet, even at almost eighty years old. He must have been a strapping and handsome man in his heyday, thought Marjorie. Although she'd never seen a single photo of him from back then. His civil partner, David, had passed away a few years earlier and he'd coped by throwing himself into the research for and the writing of his first book. His nose and ears were large and the snow-white hair was now thin, but spread evenly over his head. He wore thick glasses with tortoise-shell frames and claimed to be as blind as a bat without them. Next to his bed he had a side table containing a kettle, a teapot and strainer, four china cups with saucers and a small biscuit tin. Under it was a tiny mini-fridge, the sort usually used for beer cans, held the milk. He drank so much tea, he'd said, that he couldn't possibly keep going downstairs to the common room to get it.

'Tea or coffee?' he asked.

'Tea please,' said Marjorie.

Malcolm didn't approve of coffee but always offered his guests the choice.

His typewriter was on a small table near the window, its power lead carefully arranged to avoid creating a trip hazard. He had a straight-backed chair to sit in while typing and a single comfortable

easy chair opposite the bed. There was, just as in Marjorie's room, a sliding door to the microscopic ensuite. Marjorie took the easy chair. She knew he would insist.

Malcolm's only visible concession to his age was the beginning of a very slight stoop but otherwise he seemed physically very fit. He filled the kettle with enough water for several cups of tea, then rinsed out the tea pot, popped two cups onto their saucers and added a dash of milk from the bottle in the fridge. Marjorie waited, the tea had to come first then she could talk to him about her news without distractions. Malcolm warmed the pot, added two large spoons of loose-leaf tea, poured on the boiling water and let it brew for four minutes.

The tea, when it arrived, was excellent.

'Now Marjorie, what news do you have? It concerns Somerside and our temporary banishment to Bon Repose I take it?' he said, sitting back down in front of his typewriter.

'Indeed it does Malcolm,' she was pleased she didn't have to lead him by the nose. 'To get straight to the point, Somerside has been sold. I keep an eye on matters concerning the residents, as you know, and one of my regular checks of Her Majesty's Land Registry revealed the sale went through a few weeks ago. Initially I thought it was Marcus trying to operate some kind of tax-dodging shell game with the place but further investigations at Companies House reveal that the owner of the holding company, that owns the company that owns the company that bought it is none other than Sir Gareth Pomeroy.'

'The banker? Interesting,' said Malcolm.

He didn't find it surprising that Marjorie considered checking the Land Registry and Companies House routine. He wouldn't have been surprised to discover that she had access to the minutes of the Prime Minister's cabinet meetings. He'd stopped being surprised by Marjorie some time ago.

'Now unless Pomeroy is going into the Retirement Community business I smell a rat. It does explain the delay in our return to Somerside doesn't it? Shall I tackle Blackmore alone or do you think this news merits a deputation?'

'While I have absolutely no doubts whatsoever about your ability to tackle Marcus Blackmore I think a deputation is in order. Not least because Dennis and Joy will enjoy watching him squirm as much as I will.'

‘He’s due in tomorrow morning. Let’s meet after dinner tonight and I’ll brief the others before we discuss our war plans. Have no fear my dear Malcolm, if he plans to keep us here in Bon Repose, that means war and it’s a war I intend to win.’

Marjorie felt her anger settle into a manageable simmer. She wouldn’t let it cool, nor would she be provoked and allow it to boil over.

‘We have contracts with Blackmore Estates, Marjorie,’ said Malcolm. ‘We all had them checked, or at least I did, before signing. They can’t move us into inferior accommodation then sell Somerside behind our backs. It’s a breach of contract. Blackmore’s firm would be legally liable.’

Marjorie wished at least one of the residents had had an illustrious career as a barrister or in private legal practice but sadly none did. Of the retirees currently languishing in Bon Repose there were two airline pilots, three surgeons, two head teachers, a university professor (English Lit. at Durham she thought), a bank manager, a Brigadier, two senior civil servants, Dennis - the taxi driver, Joy - something in insurance, Malcolm - the GP, and herself. The Brigadier was physically the frailest and was borderline for needing nursing care which would immediately get him moved to one of the Blackmore nursing homes. He was hiding his ailments well at present but Marjorie was sure he wouldn’t be with them for much longer. She wondered if the nursing homes were more like Somerside than Bon Repose, it seemed unlikely.

‘Did Dougal or Nagma ever do legal work for the civil service?’ she asked.

‘I don’t think so. Dougal was something in the foreign office and I’m fairly sure Nagma worked in payroll. Why?’

‘We need someone with a good legal brain to look at our contracts and see if we missed something. I’m happy to take Blackmore on, right or wrong, but it’s so much easier to win a fight when you already know you’re in the right and so does your opponent.’

Malcolm smiled. He admired Marjorie and knew with her going in to bat for them things were bound to work out. He missed Somerside but so long as his ancient electric typewriter kept working he would manage at Bon Repose. His writing was a great distraction from the grimness of the property.

‘If I see Dennis before you do I shall keep mum. I wouldn’t want to steal your thunder.’

‘If you did I imagine I’d hear it, Dennis will no doubt go off like a rocket when he finds out. Thank you again for the tea, Malcolm.’

She finished the last sip of tea and left Malcolm to his typing. She headed back to her room to get her copy of the contract. She was going to the solicitor over the road, to see if she could get an expert opinion.