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BREAKFAST AT BRONZEFIELD

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An Extract From Breakfast At Bronzefield

{BEGINNING OF} CHAPTER 1 – NON-DISCLOSURE

I don't think I was the first person to arrive at HMP Bronzefield who had to ask more than once where on earth they were. The female officer sitting in front of me, who'd been halfway through taking my fingerprints and creating my ID card, simply repeated the same name that the magistrate had said when I was told I'd be held on remand until my trial in the Crown Court: HMP Bronzefield.

Perhaps if I'd still lived in London or been clued up about the latest goings-ons in the Criminal Justice System I'd have known immediately what sort of place I'd been thrown into: the largest women's prison in the UK, which since its opening in 2004 had become infamous for women, and even babies, dying there. Bronzefield also suffered from the usual prison scandals, such as drug misuse, prostitution and out-of-control lifers, and housed transwomen who, before their transition, had been sentenced for rape. I was blithely ignorant of all this. The only prison I knew anything about was HMP Holloway, and that was only because I'd been told, at the girls' school I'd attended, about the number of suffragettes who had been sent there in their struggle for female equality. Later I was surprised to learn that Holloway had closed in July 2016, a good few months prior to my arrival at Bronzefield.

The officer paused from her duties to hand over a document for me to sign. On closer inspection, it appeared to be a non-disclosure agreement,

forbidding me from contacting the media about anything that happened in Bronzefield, at the risk of having extra days added on to my sentence. I wondered how the 'extra days' penalty worked if someone was being held on remand. I could say that since it's privately run, Bronzefield doesn't do public scrutiny, but that code applies to all prisons more or less, as I'd later learn for myself. The female officer stared at me impatiently, making it clear that unless I signed, my processing couldn't continue. I have no idea what would have happened had I refused to sign. No doubt I'd have been taken to Seg (the Segregation Unit) until I changed my mind. Eager to get on with things, I signed my name unwillingly, even though I knew it wouldn't make a blind bit of difference. No one has ever been able to stop me from doing something if I put my mind to it. Besides, at the time I had greater things to worry about than what I assumed originally was massive paranoia on the part of the prison.

Finding out I'd be held on remand for two counts of GBH – GBH without intent and GBH with intent – and multiple charges of assault against police had come as a blow seeing I was not, as the prosecutor had said, 'homeless', nor did I have a history of violence. When the prosecutor had stated this aloud in open court, I thought it made me sound like a female version of Al Capone minus the pinstripes and fedora hat. I should have said something. My duty solicitor should have spoken up, but he hadn't. When we'd been given a brief window to speak in private prior to the court hearing, he had made it clear that now was not the time to correct any inaccurate statements that

the prosecution intended to rely on; statements that they had drafted on a Monday morning, seeing as I had spent the whole weekend in a police cell.

I suppose the reason why my solicitor wasn't bothered about correcting inaccuracies was because he knew my case was bound for the Crown Court anyway due to the nature of the charges. However, just because my case had to be held in Crown Court, it wouldn't necessarily have meant bail would have been out of the question, had he made an effort to prove I wasn't itinerant. But the address printed on my driver's licence was based in the north of England. Perhaps that meant the same to the police and the judiciary as being without a home. It also didn't help that when I was arrested down in London, I had two brightly coloured suitcases with me. One transport officer responsible for loading women's belongings onto the prison van joked that it looked like I was off to Ibiza, and he hadn't been far off. In any case, it seemed to me that the courts rarely asked for a prosecutor to prove that a defendant was homeless, probably because the impression most of us have of people who end up in court is that they struggle with various forms of homelessness, from sleeping rough to sofa surfing.

Surprisingly, in 2014, a study was carried out that examined the accommodation status of roughly 2,169 newly arrived prisoners in England and Wales: 16 per cent of them owned or part-owned their property; 59 per cent of them were renters, 12 per cent lived rent-free; 7 per cent were either homeless or living in temporary accommodation;

while the remaining 6 per cent refused to disclose.6

I again tried, questioning the prison officer as to where exactly I was.

'Ashford,' she finally answered. I tried hard to picture the place on a map, but my mind was blank. I knew I was somewhere in between a Tesco, situated near a busy roundabout, and Heathrow Airport. When I'd been brought here from the court in the 'Sweatbox', the nickname given to the white Serco prison vans, I'd muttered 'For Christ's sake' under my breath when my eyes had fallen upon a brightly coloured plane bound for some place in Europe. I should have been on a plane like that two days before – the day I'd been arrested. I still had my plane ticket hidden inside my suitcase. At the time I'd considered myself lucky that the police hadn't found it, back when I'd assumed I'd make bail and have the chance to leave the UK for good.