

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

THE

PRISON

DOCTOR

My time inside Britain's
most notorious jails.

DR AMANDA BROWN

DR AMANDA BROWN is a GP at the largest women-only prison in Europe, Bronzefield. She was a regular NHS GP for a number of years, until she gave up her practice to move into the prison service. She worked at a teenage detention centre, before moving on to Wormwood Scrubs and then finally to Bronzefield where she continues to practice to this day. *The Prison Doctor* is her first book.

THE PRISON DOCTOR

DR AMANDA BROWN

ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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‘The mind is its own place and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.’

— JOHN MILTON, *Paradise Lost*

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Prologue

HMP Bronzefield

I arrived to shouting and screaming. Prison officers were sprinting across the corridor and up the metal stairs.

‘What’s happening?’ I shouted, thinking a fight must have broken out.

I’ve seen and heard a lot during my fifteen years as a prison doctor, but the reply shocked me.

‘Someone’s having a baby!’ one of the officers yelled, repeating the news into his radio. He called for back-up, an ambulance, nurses, for all medical staff to come to House Block One.

‘Oh bloody hell!’

I followed the stampede. We sounded like a small army trampling up the metal stairs.

The deep stench of overcooked vegetables from lunch lingered in the air, green and ripe, sweet and rotten, mixed with sweat and cheap soap.

The prisoners heard us coming, thumping their fists on their cell doors. Metal thunder, filling the air.

Half a dozen officers were already crowded outside the entrance to the tiny cell at the end.

‘Coming through!’ I said, squeezing past them.

A shaft of light poured through the small barred window. Hiding in the shadows of the corner was a tiny young woman, standing and shaking. Her nightie was soaked in blood from the waist down. The walls were splattered too; violent red sprays, like protest graffiti.

She looked completely shell-shocked. In that moment, she didn’t know where or who she was. Her wiry black hair was drenched in sweat and glued across her face.

But where was the baby?

I tried to appear calm, stepping closer, trying to reassure her.

‘Hi, sweetheart, you’re going to be okay.’

Who knew if that were true? I suspected the prisoner was a heroin addict currently on methadone. The majority of prisoners on House Block One had a history of substance misuse.

The banging of the doors grew louder. Shouting and swearing, the air full of heat and sound and pressure. When the prison was like that it felt as if a spark could blow the place sky high.

The woman started screaming.

‘Get it out of me! Get it out of me!’

She must have meant her placenta because there, partially hidden by the bed, lying in a pool of blood on the cold prison floor, was a tiny baby girl.

I looked around, trying to see something I could use to wrap her up. The umbilical cord was torn, presumably ripped apart by her mother. The baby was so small I suspected she was a good few weeks premature. *But was she alive? Was this poor, poor girl ali—*

To my overwhelming relief she started to cry.

‘Has anyone got any clean towels?’ I asked.

‘Here you go, Doc.’ Becky, the prison officer, handed me the only clean thing she had to hand – a blue bed sheet.

I scooped her up into my arms, wrapped the prison sheets around her and held her close, desperately trying to warm up her fragile body. What a way to come into the world. She nestled into my chest and her crying settled a little.

I looked along the landing, desperately hoping for a sign of the ambulance. Both mother and baby needed to be transferred to hospital as soon as possible. The mother had clearly lost a lot of blood and as the placenta had not yet been delivered she was at risk of a postpartum haemorrhage, a major cause of maternal mortality.

While we waited, I checked for active bleeding. Thankfully there was no sign. But however relieved I felt, it was no comfort to her.

‘Get it out of me! Get it out of me!’ she continued to scream, over and over again, showing no interest at all in her baby. I worried she had not wanted the child, and wondered if she had been raped. I met so many women who had been the victims of gruesome sexual assaults.

The fear for the baby was that she may well have been subjected to drugs during the pregnancy. Any addictive substance that the mother may have used could also cause the foetus to become addicted. At birth the baby’s dependence continues, but as the drug is no longer available symptoms of withdrawal can occur. This is known as neonatal abstinence syndrome. Symptoms can begin within twenty-four to forty-eight hours and require very careful management.

‘Make room for the paramedics!’ someone shouted, and relief washed over me as I heard the thumping of boots.

They came into the cell and one of the officers handed me a white towel for the baby. It might seem trivial in such a horrific situation, but I found a great deal of comfort in knowing that beautiful creation – with a mop of dark hair plastered to her head, a mirror of her mother – would be wrapped in a soft, warm towel rather than prison sheets.

The paramedics placed a blanket around the mother's shoulders and gently guided her into a wheelchair. She was still screaming 'Get it out of me!' as they started wheeling her away. She stared briefly at her baby in disbelief and disappeared from view.

Two prison officers would be needed to escort her to hospital, with one officer cuffed to the prisoner, just in case she tried to make a run for it. I didn't think I'd ever get over the sight of that, however much I knew it was necessary. I'd been taught that no prisoner is ever too sick to make a dash for freedom. The story of a new mum who jumped from the first floor window of a hospital maternity ward still does the rounds.

One of the paramedics turned to me, opening her arms: it was time to hand over the baby.

I gave the little girl one last cuddle, gently stroking her cheek with my forefinger. She wrapped her whole hand around my little finger and I said a little prayer in my head, hoping for the best.

If she was allowed to stay with her mum they would be located on the Mother and Baby Unit, on return from hospital, for a maximum of eighteen months. If the mother's sentence was longer, the child would then be taken into care. However, if it was decided the mother wasn't fit to care for her baby they would be separated very soon after birth.

Being a mother myself, I can't imagine what it must feel like to have your baby taken from you. To spend the days and nights in prison, imagining how she is growing up, what she looks like, who is taking care of her when she cries.

What would happen to the baby? I could look into it, of course. I could ask. I could follow the case through. But could I bear to know?

My contribution to the prisoners' lives is limited. I can't rewrite history for them, but I can take the edge off their suffering. I can help wean them off their addictions. I can be a listening ear.

My job is not to judge them but to care for them, and helping people, regardless of who they are and what they have done, is what I live for.