

Doing Time Outside (novel excerpt)

by Ginnah Howard

FAMILY GUIDE (opening epigraph)

If you are a family member or friend of a person incarcerated in a correctional facility, your life has changed in many ways. Some call this “doing time outside.”

Whatever you may call it, this time can be painful and difficult for you. Changes have to be made in order to maintain the relationship with your loved one.

This handbook was designed to help you better understand the correctional system. We hope it will guide you as you cope with these changes in your life.

—Onango County Corrections, 2003
State of New York

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Commence Lockdown

Carla pokes her daughter's thigh and grabs Queenie's collar. "There it is. You better slow ..."

Tess swings wide and makes the turn. The truck skids to a stop in front of the sign:

Public Safety Building
Onango County Correctional Facility
State of New York

"Any faster you'd have put me through the windshield." Carla stops clutching the door, lets go of Queenie's collar, and gives Tess a hard look. "Me, your own dear mother." She leans forward and squints at the sign. "Correctional Facility: You know I hate that, but it's better than parking by the razor wire." She gropes around in her pockets for loose change and dumps a fistful into the ashtray. "You might as well get rid of anything metal out here."

Tess does not move.

Carla shrugs out of her jacket and takes her driver's license from her wallet. "Got to have photo ID," she says. She pulls off both Velcro wrist braces and stuffs them and her purse under the seat. "I'm not putting anything in those lockers."

She darts a glance at Tess. "They won't let you in there in that sweatshirt. No sweatshirts with pockets."

Still no response.

Carla brushes the dog hairs from her good black pants and opens the door. "Those guards—I don't let them look at *me* through their bulletproof glass like I'm some ... welfare person."

She takes a deep breath and then turns to face Tess, unmoving behind the wheel. "You mean it? Are you still saying you aren't going in?"

Tess puts an arm around Queenie and cozies the dog up against her thigh. She pulls her duffle over the seat and slides her *Comparative Anatomy* book out. "I'm still saying, 'Why are you stepping into the path of a tornado?'"

"Tess, Rudy is your brother."

"I'm saying, 'The siren is screaming ... screeeeeamng. Time to take cover.'"

"You forget how he pulled you out of the brook when you went under."

"I know you can hear the warning blasts: 'Hit the ditch.'"

"How he wired you money when your truck broke down in Texas. We've all made bad decisions. You, too, Tess."

"I was seventeen. Rudy is thirty-five."

"Who else does he have? We're his only family."

Maybe the jut of Tess's jaw gives an inch on that plea. Maybe.

Carla takes hold of Tess's sleeve, tugs on it. "He sounded good on the phone. They've even made him a trusty for being so cooperative. Got him fixing their broken-down equipment."

Tess grips the wheel. No blast of any kind will eject her from this truck.

Carla leans over so she can look Tess in the eye. "It's like he finally gets it."

"Mamo, you know what he wants."

"What?"

"He wants you to come up with the money for the bail bondsman. He wants you to get him out."

Carla pulls a tissue from her sweater sleeve, blows her nose. She gets out of the truck. She swallows and draws herself up. "I'm his mother," she says, and closes the door.

