

## DOUBLE JEOPARDY

By

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“Now what?” Corrections Sergeant Frieda Ferguson muttered as she entered Unit Five to begin her work shift. Angry shouts were coming from upstairs. It was five minutes before eleven o’clock on Friday night and the curfew in this minimum security prison demanded quiet after ten o’clock every night, with no exception for weekends. It looked as if her night was off to a bad start.

Frieda tried the office door. Locked. She shifted her backpack, which hung over one shoulder, and slid her other arm into its strap to secure the pack and free her arms and hands. She ran swiftly up the stairs toward the voices.

At the other end of the hall Derrick O’Neill, the second shift sergeant, was telling Inmate Greene that if he went into his room this minute he would get a conduct report, and if he didn’t, he would go straight to the detention unit as well.

Frieda stopped at the top of the stairs out of their sight, waiting while Greene made his decision. A door opened across the hall from where she stood and Inmate Willis looked out. Frieda put her finger to her lips and shook her head. Willis stepped back and stood inside his room watching Frieda.

Green’s door slammed with a resounding bang, and Sergeant O’Neill came down the hallway toward Frieda. “What’s his problem now?” she asked.

O'Neill swung quickly toward Willis, who stood quietly in his doorway. "Get inside, Willis, and keep the door closed." He hissed. Willis backed farther inside, quickly closing the door.

Together Frieda and Derrick walked down the stairs to the office. "I'll write these reports, and then I'm outta here," Derrick said. He leafed through a stack of forms in a wire basket on the corner of the desk. "Greene's pulling the same old crap. He taunts Willis until Willis gets mad and swings or throws something. Greene sees that as a go-ahead to torment him further. This time he decided to argue with me about it." Derrick finished one report and started on the other. "They're both on room confinement until the first-shift lieutenant sees them. Wish I knew what Greene is after. This is the first time he's started something this late. And the first time he's mouthed off to me, far as that goes." Derrick finished the reports and made a note of the disturbance in the logbook.

"Maybe he wants to be shipped out," Frieda said.

That would make everyone happy. I've written reports suggesting that he doesn't belong here, isn't ready for minimum security," Derrick said. "Ray's been trying as well. We haven't even been able to get him sent up to detention. Maybe they're keeping him here to test our patience."

"Ray's opinion usually counts, since he's the exalted first-shift officer," Frieda said. "Maybe Greene's related to someone."

"If he was white, I'd think so."

"Oh well, maybe we can still civilize him."

“If you’ll cover my shift tomorrow and Sunday, you can work on him,” Derrick said hopefully.

Frieda made a face.

It’s short notice I know, but one of my kids was in an accident. I just got the call about eight. They’re with my ex. In Chicago.”

“Is he okay?” She?”

“She. Just banged up a little, but bad enough to be admitted to the hospital.”

Derrick looked at his watch. “I’ll be there before she wakes up in the morning. Will you cover?”

“Why not? Maybe sixteen hours of me for a couple of days will be more than Greene can stand, and he’ll beg to get out of here.” Frieda dug the work-exchange form out of the pile and signed her agreement to work Derrick’s shift on the weekend.

“I’ll turn the request in to security along with the conduct reports and hope for the best.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem. I’m here anyway.” Frieda locked the office behind them and entered the television room as Derrick left the building. It was already a quarter past eleven. Her initial count would be late, but when Derrick stopped at the security office with the paperwork, he could explain.

The usual three men were watching television. Frieda noted their presence on the roster she carried on a clipboard.

“Uh, hi-ya, Fred.”

“Evenin’, Miss Frieda.”

“Yo!”

“Hi, guys,” Frieda said, then moved down the hall checking the six inmate rooms on the ground floor. The door was open at number six. Otis was one of the three in the television room. He always called her Fred, Fred Fergustone, in his best Barney Rubble voice. Frieda checked the basement door and the back exit to be sure they were locked and climbed the stairs silently in her rubber-soled jogging shoes.

All quiet. She started down the hall, stopping at each door and raising the privacy curtain. It was Friday night, and everyone was awake with the lights on. She raised the curtain at Green’s room. He glared at her.

She knocked on Willis’s door and looked in through the small rectangle of glass. Willis looked up, and Frieda opened the door.

“I ain’t done nuthin’, Miss Frieda, Willis whined, sadness and bewilderment in his dark eyes.

“I know, Willis,” Frieda assured him. “But you know the rules. When there’s a fight, everyone who’s involved gets room confinement.” Room confinement in this minimum security prison operated on the honor system, since none of the rooms had toilet facilities and the inmate could not be locked in his room.

Willis’s radio emitted a screech of static. He wheeled around and grabbed it. Cradling it against his body, he turned the sound down to silence. An inmate on room confinement was not allowed to play his television or radio. Willis looked frightened. “O’Neill say I can play the radio, Miss Frieda. He tell me I can.”

“I know, Willis. You can always play your radio, even on room confinement. Don’t worry about it.” Frieda smiled encouragement. “Willis, why do you think Greene always fights with you?”

“Because I be slow. He call me a ree-tard. I ain’t no ree-tard, Miss Frieda. An’ I aint no queer neither.”

“No, you’re not a queer, Willis. And you’re not a ree-tard. You’re a kind and gentle man. And it’s okay to play your music—quietly. Goodnight, now. Frieda pulled his door closed and continued her count.

Back in the office she called the numbers in to the security office.

“Hey, Ferguson, if you can’t climax any faster than this, we’ll get a real man in there to help you,” Officer Aiken grouched.

“And if you can’t give birth, you’re taking up far too much space on the planet, Ron.”

“Doctor, doctor,” he screeched. “I’m already at three centimeters.”

“Well, keep tickling it, Ron. Maybe you’ll get it up to three inches.” Frieda said, flinching when Ron slammed his phone into the cradle.