

## Flavor of the Month

By Anonymous Corrections Professional

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How did my career in corrections destroy my home life? It happened in a flash. Really, it took almost no time at all. And to this day, I regret the price I paid for my naivety.

After my first three days working in MAX (a maximum security prison), I called my sister. "It is pretty exciting!" I told her. "I feel like I am visiting a totally different culture. Training was okay but getting to work in the prison is exciting!"

"Are you getting to know people?" She asked.

"Not really" my voice fell "I am eating alone in the lunch room and that feels weird after years of having lunch with the girls in my old office. I do get lonely."

She said. "Don't worry, Jenny. You'll get to know people. You are outgoing and fun. People are always drawn to you. I remember what Skip said on your wedding day. 'I married Jenny because she is sweet, generous, and she brightens up any room. I know I want to spend the rest of my life with this beautiful woman who shines from the inside out.' In no time, people at that prison will get to know you and you will be having lunch with a crowd.

I remember smiling with pride as my sister talked about Skip and his attraction to me. At age 39, we had been married 15 years. We were having fun raising two rambunctious boys, ages ten and twelve. We loved our chocolate lab: Loyal. We enjoyed the same things: skiing, camping, and being active in our church. In fact, we were small group leaders for the marriage class and people often told us that our small group had a big impact on their marriages.

When my sister assured me that I would be making friends, I imagined that I would soon meet some women whom I could relate with. I looked forward to having someone say "How was your weekend?"

The problem with being new in that prison, staff weren't very friendly at first. The inmates were the ones trying to be friendly. But, I knew the rules and inmates didn't get away with making personal comments.

But, there was one inmate who kept looking me up and down when he passed by my workstation. I knew what to say if an inmate said something inappropriate. I was confused about what to do if their eye contact was inappropriate. I wasn't sure what to do, so I asked a fellow officer. I chose Benny. Benny had worked there at MAX for 22 years. He seemed to be well liked by many of the other officers. He was always upbeat and was one of the only people who had been somewhat friendly to me in my new job at MAX.

When I mentioned the situation to Benny, his happy demeanor changed. He suddenly looked stern. "Let's go talk to that inmate." He said. We walked down the hallway and he called the inmate out of his cell. We took him to a counseling office and Benny shut the door. "Hey Dipshit!" he yelled in the inmate's face, "Officer Bosemma is going to be a good female officer. She doesn't need any of your shenanigans. When you look at her..." he stared at the inmate and let silence fall in the room. "You--look ---at--- her ---face. Now, get back in your cell. You are celled-in for 24 hours while you think about how to respect an officer."

After the inmate left the room, he searched my eyes to see how I had responded to the situation. "You okay, Jenny?" he asked with a familiarity that surprised me.

"Wow." I responded. "Thank you. You did that well" He chuckled and patted my arm as we left the counseling office. I felt warm and I felt protected. It was kind of cool at the time.

When I got home that night, I sat on the couch and petted Loyal as I told Skip all about the event. Skip's first question was, "How were you sure that inmate was being inappropriate?"

"I just knew," I responded. I had always told Skip a lot about my work in the office downtown. He enjoyed hearing about the funny stories about the women who worked there and their varying personalities. But, Skip had no understanding of prison culture. So, I quit talking about work.

Going to work started to become exciting. There were fights in the yard and war stories in the lunchroom. The days flew by in minutes and I wondered why I hadn't started my career in corrections years before. Benny was often there to chat and ask me about my weekend. I told him about our family outings and about getting to go jogging with loyal Loyal. He told me about the movies that he and his wife went to see. He brought coffee to my post almost every day. Sometimes, he would wait and walk me to my car.

An attractive older female officer stopped by my post one day and said "Officer Bossema. It appears you are the flavor of the month with Benny."

“What do you mean?” I asked

“Oh, I was his flavor of the month about ten years back. He and I had to go to training out of town and he got me to meet him in the hot tub. Nothing happened! But, he had intentions. He wouldn’t talk to me after we got home. He is civil to me now. He is worried that I am telling people about what he tried.”

“He must not have been married then. He is different now.” I responded

She laughed quite loud and an inmate across the way looked over at her.

“I need to keep my voice down. Sorry about that.” She whispered “He was married then too. His wife has no idea how he is. He always goes after the most attractive woman in the prison. That’s you for this month.”

My mind was reeling with a multitude of thoughts: This is scary. This is exciting. Benny’s a “player”. I never had a “player” pursue me. They had ignored me in high school. I’m a mom now. She just said that I’m the most attractive woman in the prison. Why does that matter to me? I’m a wife now. Why is a married man acting like that? Maybe I should stop being his friend? What would Skip think about all of this? I won’t have any friends here if I don’t have Benny. Why do I feel happy about this?

She was waiting for my response. “Well, I’m happily married. I’m not interested in Benny. We are just friends.” I said emphatically. I continued to say that same statement to myself over the next few months. I even had to say it to a supervisor who pulled me aside and asked if I was being sexually harassed.

Meanwhile, work continued to get more and more exciting. I weighed what the officer had said about Benny but in my mind, I had found one of the best friends a person could ask for. He was respectful and fun. He was popular at the prison and I liked having such a friend. I even enjoyed being the flavor of the month. I couldn’t wait to debrief with Benny on the way to the parking lot every evening. And then there was the day that he had to leave his car in the shop to get new tires. He asked for my phone number so he could call me in the morning to get a ride from the shop. I picked him up and we came strolling in to work together. I didn’t worry what people thought because nothing was going on. I was just helping a friend.

After Benny had my phone number, he found reasons to call me now and then. And then one evening, he called me from Safeway and asked me to drive over. He said it was an emergency. I will never forget what he said when I walked up to his sporty little car.

“You are beautiful and I think I love you.” I was stunned. I told myself to run away and save my marriage.

“You are married” I said. “I am married.” I turned away and got in my car. I went home to Skip. I hugged my wonderful husband and hugged my kids. But, that is the last warm hug that ever happened between Skip and I.

Because, the next day, I had to go to work and Benny was there. He was popular and handsome and he wanted me! I ignored him at first but he was relentless. Yes, he was relentless and he knew what he wanted.

I had a two-year affair with Benny. I became addicted to his attention. I was addicted to vanity. I was demoralized. I was consumed by guilt. The sweetness of my marriage took wings and flew away never to be seen again. It ruined my reputation at that prison and among my friends in the community. I worked there for many years but many people knew me as the Benny’s fourth flavor of the month. Several years later, Skip and I signed divorce papers in a law office. We both sat in a darkened room and cried.

Benny is still married to the same woman and continues to look for new flavors.

Although financially ok, I lost my home, my garden, family outings, family prayers, many friends, Christmas mornings with my family, and thousands of other cherished valuables. I did get to keep Loyal, my chocolate lab.

After my boys graduated from high school, Loyal and I lived alone in a house 90 minutes from my ex-husband Skip. One weekend, my boys were visiting Skip at his home. I was walking the aging and graying Loyal when his hip gave out. I called the Veterinarian and she said “Jenny. Loyal is an old dog now and this is going to keep happening. I think you need to bring him in and it is time to put him down.”

I tearfully called Skip (who had embarked on a new relationship with a good woman) and he drove all the way out to my house to get Loyal and lift him into the back of the pick-up. I drove behind the pick up as we made our way down that sad road to the Vet where Loyal would be

put to sleep and then buried in Skip's backyard. The boys rode in the pick-up next to their dad. It felt secure just to be driving along behind him and our boys.

Loyal was looking over the edge of the pick up at me. He was smiling the way that dogs smile when they see all their loved ones together where they belong.

And I was asking myself: Why didn't I put my family first?