



ST. MARY'S

AND THE

GREAT TOILET

ROLL CRISIS

JODI TAYLOR

**Dedicated to our amazing National Health Service  
and everyone who sails in her.**

A note from Jodi Taylor . . .

This started as a tiny idea when I should have been thinking about something else. This happens to me a lot. I have now officially lost control of my waistline, my hair, my bladder and my thought processes. There's not much left, is there? Anyway, as you've probably guessed, this was inspired by our recent ridiculous toilet roll behaviour.

If I might just take a moment to extol the virtues and advantages of near terminal constipation. Ha – in your face, medical profession.

And back to normal.

Originally it was just going to be a few lines – like *Markham and the Anal Probing* and *Desiccated Water* – but it just grew. I now have no control over my word count, either.

Anticipating my editor's first question – where does this occur in the St Mary's timeline? The answer is anytime. It's just something I wrote to stave off boredom.

At this point I should say that self-isolation has made very little difference to my lifestyle. I never have any food in the house. Or toilet rolls. And I rarely go out and people avoid me. So, no major changes there.

Anyway, here we are. Too long to be a snippet. Too short to be a short story – I shall leave my agent, my editor and my publisher to deal with this one.

Stay safe, everyone.

‘Have you heard?’ said Peterson, bursting through Max’s door. ‘There’s a national emergency.’

‘Oh God – what has our idiot government done this time?’

‘Dunno – but it’s got to be bad because you can’t get a toilet roll for love or money. Riots in Rushford . . . toilet rolls changing hands for their own bodyweight in gold . . . people buying them in multiples of ten thousand . . . old people selling their grandchildren . . . the usual thing.’

‘Not a problem for me,’ said Max, smugly. ‘I only go twice a year anyway.’

‘No, this is serious. Our own supplies are being requisitioned and carted off to London. Government bottoms for the use of, presumably.’

‘Are you sure? I’d have thought with the amount of arse-lick—’

‘Max!’

‘I would have thought toilet rolls would be redundant in Westminster. Just saying.’

‘According to the latest government guidelines, we lesser mortals must be content with one unit per one unit per month.’

‘What does that even mean?’

‘One roll per person per month.’

‘Still no problem here.’

‘Don’t be too sure, Max. The summer solstice approacheth . . .’

The door opened.

‘Ah,’ said Markham. ‘There you are.’

‘What do you want?’

He grinned at them. ‘I’ve had a Brilliant Idea.’

‘I cannot think,’ said Mrs Partridge, collecting up her papers, ‘how word got around St Mary’s so quickly.’

Dr Bairstow stared vaguely out of the window. ‘Nor I. Astonishing, isn’t it?’

‘I suspect there will be . . . a reaction.’

‘I have every confidence that St Mary’s will respond to this government directive in our traditional manner.’

Mrs Partridge regarded him with some amusement. ‘In that case, I assume you will want me to make the appropriate arrangements.’

‘If you could, please. Let me see, now . . . a thermos of tea, a torch and a comfortable chair.’

‘Two chairs,’ said Mrs Partridge firmly.

‘Really? You don’t normally . . .’

‘I am very tired of being relegated to a subordinate role while the rest of this unit revels in unrealistic, irresponsible and sometimes downright dangerous behaviour. If shenanigans are to occur then I do not wish to be the one sitting behind my desk, typing and occasionally waving people through to your office.’

‘As you wish,’ said Dr Bairstow, slightly taken aback. ‘I foresee an interesting evening.’

Later that night – well, early the next morning, in a downstairs storeroom situated at the heart of the St Mary’s Institute of Historical Research – anyone listening carefully might possibly have heard faint scratchings at the door. Punctuated by the occasional whispered argument. And then more faint scratchings.

Eventually, the door swung open and three traditionally black-clad, balaclava-wearing figures oozed silently into the storeroom. Well – no, actually. Faint moonlight revealed *two* traditionally black-clad, balaclava’d figures and one in an old-fashioned camel overcoat heavily stained with oil.

It became apparent the whispered argument had not stopped at the door. ‘Why are you wearing that old thing, Mavis?’

‘It’s my lucky coat. I wore this at the Barricades. I’m very attached it. Brings back so many memories.’

‘You can wear it as we’re all executed for treason,’ said Mrs Shaw, tartly.



Mrs Mack shrugged. 'We got away with it the last time. We can do it again. Let's get a move on.'

They began to pile packs of toilet rolls into an illegally-obtained shopping trolley.

'I'm surprised at us,' said Mrs Shaw, comfortably. 'Truly, our depravity knows no bounds.'

'It rarely does with people our age,' said Mrs Enderby. 'Thank God the world hasn't yet worked out just how deadly old ladies can be. Do you know there are people out there who actually feel sorry for us?'

'More fool them,' said Mrs Mack. There was a slight sound at the window and immediately they extinguished their torches, whispering, 'What was that?'

'Someone's coming.'

'We've got enough. Let's go.'

They headed towards the door. 'Where are we taking them?'

'Old people's home outside Rushford. There's a midnight party going on. Should be good.'

'Oh yes,' said Mrs Enderby, happily. 'I remember the last one.'

'Everyone remembers the last one.'

Three old ladies melted away, and because they were professionals, remembered to relock the door behind them.

A moment later there was another faint scratching at the window. After a second, the sash was gently raised and three traditionally black-clad, balaclava-wearing figures scrambled inside. Well – no, actually. Faint moonlight revealed *two* traditionally black-clad, balaclava'd figures and one, for some reason, wearing a particularly eye-catching outfit in bright green.

For the purposes of reader clarification these are not the same three figures as the three figures who have just exited through the door. Just so everyone's on the same page.

The shortest of these three figures appeared to be experiencing some difficulties heaving herself through the window.

‘Bollocks,’ said a voice that even in the dark had redhead written all over it. She fell gracelessly to the floor.

‘Ssshhh,’ hissed the other two, achieving decibel levels considerably higher than those managed by the gravity-challenged redhead impacting the concrete floor.

She stood up and rubbed her elbow. ‘Are we in the right place? Don’t tell me I fell through the wrong window.’

Torches flashed around, briefly illuminating the truly colossal quantities of toilet rolls needed to cope with historian bottoms in any given month. And illuminating each other.

The tallest – Peterson, as if you haven’t already guessed – reeled back in horror.

‘Dear God . . . What . . . ? What are you wearing?’

The green figure assumed a superhero posture. ‘I’m Robin Hood. Or, as our American friends would probably say – RABINhood.’

Peterson, never famed for his attention span, abandoned grand larceny for the purposes of historical argument. ‘Robin Hood did not wear green tights or a feather in his hat.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘Yes, I bloody do. It was the 12th century. Do you know what they did to blokes who wore tights in the 12th century? I am not walking down the road with you looking like that.’

‘No one will see. It’s dark. That’s the whole point. We’ll be invisible.’

‘No one wearing green tights and a bloody feather in their bloody hat could ever be invisible.’

‘Do you want me to undress?’

Silence shouted ‘no’ far more loudly than physically shouting ‘no’ could ever have done.

‘Look,’ said Markham kindly. ‘Just trust me. If you ever want to be invisible – wear something outrageous. People – not that there will be anyone around at this hour – but people will be so busy looking at the tights and the hat they won’t have a clue what I look like. It’s you two who’ll be identified – not me. I’m invisible.’

*‘You’re wearing a green doublet, green tights and a stupid hat with a feather in it.’*

‘It’s compulsory. I’m Robin Hood. Stealing from the rich to give to the poor. Are we going to stand here all night?’

‘No. Max – you’ll pass them out and we’ll prepare to receive.’

They got to work, flinging toilet rolls around in a haphazard but historian-like fashion.

‘That’s enough,’ whispered Max. ‘These things are heavy. Let’s get loaded up, shall we?’

She stuck her head out of the window. ‘Shit. Shit, shit, shit.’

Markham grinned. ‘Is it that time of year already?’ He passed her a toilet roll. ‘There you go, Max. Use it in good health.’

Peterson ignored this, leaning out of the window in his turn and panicking. ‘He’s gone. I don’t believe it. Some bastard’s stolen our getaway vehicle.’

‘Where did you leave him?’

‘I tied him to the Bentley.’

‘Well, he’s not there now.’

‘I don’t understand it. How did this happen?’

Max intervened. ‘Well, obviously you’re rubbish at knots.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘Oh right – he untied himself and wandered off, did he?’

‘Don’t be silly, Max – he’s a bloody horse.’



‘He’s an invisible bloody horse.’

They all peered back out of the window into the horse-free car park.

‘I can’t believe you tied him to the boss’s Bentley. Why would you do such a thing?’

‘Well, we couldn’t have him wandering off before we’d loaded him up, could we?’

‘Yeah? And how did that work out for you?’

Peterson was staring up and down the car park. ‘He’s just vanished. Where could he be? I swear that horse has the attention span of a . . .’

He stopped while the universe silently supplied the missing word.

Markham scrambled back over the sill. ‘Never mind that. Give me a hand here.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Breaking into this car.’

Peterson’s voice was high with panic. ‘You can’t— Oh, you already have.’

‘Quick, shove everything into the boot and let’s get out of here before Turk comes back and eats us.’

Massive quantities of toilet rolls were hurled from the window and stuffed any old how into a vintage Bentley which had done nothing to deserve such a dreadful fate. Shortly followed by two historians who scrambled into the back.

Max leaned over the seat to see what Markham was doing. ‘Are you hot-rodding the boss’s car?’

‘No, I keep telling you – it’s hot-wiring. *Hot-wiring*. Do you want me to write it down for you?’

The engine purred into life.

‘OK,’ said Markham, letting in the clutch. ‘Where to?’

‘Food bank in Rushford. Behind the library.’

Seconds later, a hot-wired Bentley rolled silently out of the car park. It is the mark of a quality car that the engine noise is considerably quieter than the

occupants. Bickering historians and a member of the Security Section dopplered down the drive.

Peace and quiet fell. The moon shone serenely on a rural landscape. Somewhere, a nightingale, presumably confusing St Mary's with Berkeley Square, trilled a lilting melody.

The rhododendron bushes rustled, then parted, and out stepped an elderly gentleman, together with his PA, from whom we really expected better, and a giant bony horse wearing panniers and the expression of one not prepared to put up with this for very much longer.

'They tied him to my car.' It was hard to tell which of them – horse or man – had been most outraged by this *lese-majesty*. 'And then they stole my car.'

Mrs Partridge was soothing. 'It's for charity, Director.'

Dr Bairstow sighed and then turned towards the window. 'Not as professional as the last lot. They've left the window open.'

The words 'historians' and 'typical' hung unspoken in the night air.

'And we have stolen their getaway horse,' said Mrs Partridge, not without the air of someone enjoying long-awaited and completely justified revenge. 'Shall we make a start?'

Hopping over the windowsill in a manner not usually associated with Greek deities, she began to pass out packs of toilet rolls which Dr Bairstow stored neatly and methodically in the panniers.

Turk eyed him balefully.

'Don't even think about it,' said Dr Bairstow, stuffing in another pack. 'I sign your feed bill.'

Turk subsided.

'Well,' said Dr Bairstow, after ten minutes of quite strenuous effort, 'I don't think we can get any more in. Shall we depart?'

Mrs Partridge hopped back over the windowsill again. Twice in one night. To underline her superiority over mere mortals, however, she remembered to secure the window afterwards.

‘Across the fields, I think,’ she said. ‘Quicker and more discreet.’

Dr Bairstow led Turk through a gate. ‘Yes – I can’t help feeling there’s something about encountering a giant, toilet roll-laden horse in the middle of the night that would arouse people’s suspicions, don’t you think?’

They set off across the fields. The night was warm and pleasant. It is possible that even Turk might be brought to admit he was enjoying this bout of nocturnal naughtiness.

Dr Bairstow enquired whether Mrs Partridge had brought the list.

Mrs Partridge pulled out her scratchpad. ‘Of course. One pack each for the elderly. Two packs for the day-care centre. Two packs for the village hall. Five packs for the vicar to dispose of as he thinks fit. The remainder to Major Guthrie for fair and equitable distribution.’

They plodded on in silence for a while. The moon smiled down on their endeavours.

‘And how is Mrs De Winter these days?’

‘Bolivia,’ she said shortly.

‘Again?’

‘It would seem so.’

‘She just doesn’t seem able to stay away, does she?’

Silence indicated this was not a subject to be pursued.

Entering the village, they proceeded with their mission of mercy. Only one in three street lights were operating and they ghosted – as much as a seventeen-hand horse with iron shoes the size of dustbin lids can ghost – tucking each precious pack out of sight in front porches.

‘Although night-time is not without hazards,’ said Dr Bairstow, neatly sidestepping an enormous rural dollop as they turned towards home, ‘I find I am quite enjoying myself.’

Mrs Partridge agreed that it did one good to get out.

‘With the added *frisson* of breaking the law as well. I must say I had forgotten how enjoyable that is. To say nothing of imagining all those potentially unwiped government posteriors.’

Mrs Partridge remarked that the way the pound was tumbling these days banknotes might prove a readily available substitute. ‘Or, according to Dr Maxwell, broad-leaved plants are always acceptable.’

Dr Bairstow doubted there would be that many broad-leaved plants in Westminster and discussion on this point was proceeding in an interesting manner when a familiar blue light hove into view. The police car slowed, blinked in disbelief, and then stopped.

Dr Bairstow sighed. ‘Well, at least neither of us is wearing green tights and feathers.’

Two policemen climbed out. Turk, like the rest of St Mary’s, was never at his best dealing with the forces of law and order, and showed signs of objecting to this unscheduled addition to their party.

‘Good evening, sir. And madam.’

‘Good evening, officer,’ said Dr Bairstow.

There was a pause while the officer considered the phrasing of his first question, eventually abandoning the tactful approach in favour of, ‘What exactly is going on here?’

As Dr Bairstow himself had once said – he had learned the Black Arts of Arguing, Distracting and Obscuring the Point from the master. He drew himself up and gestured at the seventeen-hand equine WMD behind him. ‘We are taking our horse for a walk.’

The officer blinked. ‘That seems quite . . . an unusual thing to do. It’s ten past three in the morning.’

‘Oh, we don’t mind.’

The other officer, by sheer force of habit, was circling Turk, presumably looking for broken reversing lights or dodgy number plates.

Turk signified his non-consent to this stop-and-search initiative by rolling his eyes and laying back his ears. Familiar signs to the initiated.

‘Er, if I might just interrupt you for one moment,’ said Dr Bairstow. ‘I do not advocate lingering in close proximity to his nether regions. Or, indeed, any regions at all. He is generally reckoned to be carnivorous, you know.’

The first officer frowned. ‘Are you in possession of a dangerous animal?’

‘No, no, no, all my staff are safely in their beds.’

The officer visibly took a breath. ‘What *are* you doing, sir?’

‘I told you. Taking our horse for a walk.’

‘And I’m asking you, sir. Why?’

‘He’s a big horse. He needs exercise.’

‘Sir – it’s ten past three in the morning.’

‘Yes? I’m sorry, I’m not grasping your point.’

‘It’s dark, sir.’

‘Well, yes, that’s why.’

‘What is?’

‘What?’

‘Why what?’

The obvious solution occurred to both officers simultaneously. ‘Excuse me, sir, but are you perhaps from some kind of institution and . . . ?’

‘My dear officer, how perceptive of you. We are indeed.’

‘You are indeed what?’

‘From the Institute. Of Historical Research. About half a mile in that direction.’ Dr Bairstow gestured with his stick.

There was a significant pause. ‘You’re St Mary’s?’

‘Yes indeed.’

To their credit, neither officer followed their first inclination which was to arrest everyone, up to and including the horse. Nor their second which was to return to their car and drive away as fast as they could. Possibly not even stopping for the traditional bacon buttie at the greasy spoon on the Rushford bypass.

‘Sir, if we could just return to the beginning. You are, at three o’clock in the morning, walking your horse.’

‘Allow me to congratulate you on the rapidity with which you have grasped the salient points. Now, if you’ll excuse us . . .’

‘In a moment, sir. Again – why?’

‘Why what?’

He gritted his teeth. ‘Why are you walking your horse at ten past three in the morning?’

Dr Bairstow had had time to think. ‘Equine photosensitivity. And photophobia. He has that too. That’s why he doesn’t like your torches.’

‘What?’

‘He’s sensitive to light. So, we walk him at night.’

‘Why don’t you ride him?’

‘Alas, my riding days are done. Gammy leg, you know.’

The officer turned to Mrs Partridge, realised he wasn’t paid enough to ask the question and turned back to Dr Bairstow.

‘You can’t take him out in daylight at all?’

‘Not unless we smother him in factor fifty and persuade him to wear his hat and sunglasses, and then people tend to laugh at him and he’s quite a sensitive animal so that never ends well. Quicker and easier just to take him out at night, don’t you think?’

The officer changed the subject. ‘Why is he wearing giant baskets?’

A very good question and one to which Dr Bairstow could not, just at that precise moment, think of a very good answer. Fortunately, he didn't have to.

A familiar car drew up. Familiar to Dr Bairstow, that is.

Robin Hood was at the wheel. His two accomplices had fortunately remembered to remove their balaclavas.

Grinning, Markham enquired whether there was a problem, officer.

The officer glanced at the driver's current clothing of choice and drew the inevitable conclusion. 'St Mary's.'

'No,' said Markham, seriously. 'Robin Hood.'

The words 'Protect and Serve' had, at the Chief Constable's insistence, been painted on the police car as a demonstration and reassurance to the public. The officer wondered briefly who protected and served hard-working police officers who had done nothing to deserve this. He'd transferred out from the big city, expecting, in this rural backwater, nothing more strenuous than a bit of sheep rustling or illegal cider-making. He now began to perceive his error.

Peering into the back of the car, he said, 'And you two?'

'SAS,' said the man.

'I was going to say that,' said the redhead.

'Well, you can't,' said the man. 'I said it first.'

'Milk Tray,' said the redhead.

The officer stared from one group to the other. 'Let me guess – you're all together.'

'Sadly,' said Dr Bairstow. 'We are.'

'Is anyone in charge here?'

Everyone looked at Turk, who curled his lip, showing a mouthful of what looked like dirty piano keys.

The officer returned to his original question. 'Why is that horse wearing baskets?'



Time for the master to save the day. Redhaired innocence rebounded off the landscape.

‘He finds them soothing.’ She beamed at the officer. As did Peterson. Even Markham beamed at him, moonlight sparkling off his teeth in true superhero style.

‘We could take them off if you like,’ he said, preparing to get out of the car, ‘and give you an insight into the nightmare of his . . . unsoothingness. It’s no trouble.’

For a second, matters hung in the balance but the call of the bacon buttie is strong and not easily resisted.

With a stern admonition to move along now, the officers returned to their car and drove off into the night.

Silently, everyone else regarded everyone else.

Markham, Max and Peterson, in full possession of a TWOCCED car, beamed at its owner.

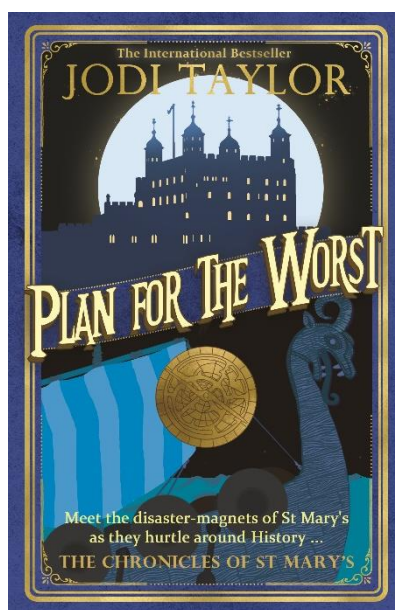
Dr Bairstow, in full possession of a TWOCCED horse, stared frostily back again.

The silence stretched on and on as all parties searched for a face-saving way out of this tricky social situation. Yes, it’s embarrassing to be caught in your boss’s car. Especially by your boss. On the other hand, he’s stolen your horse. The legal, philosophical and social ramifications were enormous and wide-ranging. Society trembled on the brink . . .

The problem was solved by the most intelligent person present. Turk yawned, displaying his unspeakable teeth and orange gums, turned away and headed for home. Markham put the car in gear. Dr Bairstow and Mrs Partridge followed their getaway horse into the night. Markham pulled smoothly away.

Within seconds there was no sign that any of them had ever been there.

The St Mary's crew are back on Thursday 16 April. Join them as they hurtle their way around History in . . .



*I would have trusted this man with my life. Until a couple of days ago, anyway.*

You know what they say – hope for the best, but plan for the worst.

Max is quite accustomed to everything going wrong. She's St Mary's, after all. Disaster is her default state. But with her family reunited and a jump to Bronze Age Crete in the works, life is getting back to normal. Well, normal for St Mary's.

And then, following one fateful night at the Tower of London, everything Max thought she knew comes crashing down around her.

Too late for plans. The worst has happened. And who can Max trust now?

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