

## Chapter one

### Herman

*“Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night...”*

All he needed was another fall and that would be the bloody end of him, which is why he left St Paul's before the service ended. It was later than he intended. He had meant to leave before the crowds; London pavements got so busy in the early evenings. Now, as he descended steep steps at dusk, he couldn't quite see his way and nearly fell, worse, he nearly cussed out loud. Fortunately, checking himself in time, he didn't do either. Thank the Lord for that.

The cathedral being so empty was a disgrace. What would mother say? Godless, heathen lot, Herman, not like those back home with Sunday service, Sunday suits, Sunday sitting out the porch shelling pigeon peas for Sunday lunch. Not that it was a Sunday, but still. I hope you polished your shoes for the service at St Paul's Cathedral, Herman? I did, Ma, I did.

That was what they all needed nowadays: a bit of God-fearing, a bit of religion to stiffen the backbone, respecting your elders and betters: praise, penitence, prayer. Blessed is the man who does not walk with the wicked. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, turn to them the other cheek, suffer little children to come unto me, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Amen.

Past Queen Anne's statue on the corner of St Paul's Churchyard a blade of wind cut through

his overcoat, his woollen waistcoat, his just-ironed-that-morning cotton shirt, right through to his paper bag flesh where it caught and rattled between his ribs. It also caught the brim of his fedora, threatening to de-hat him. He lifted an arm to catch it, the left one, the one he momentarily forgot still moaned each blessed time he used it, since carrying that heavy suitcase at Christmas, all the way from the station to the flat. He winced. But the hat was rescued. And that was another thing: no one wore hats no more. All their bloody brains leeching out their heads into those earphones, always listening to God-knows what. If they dressed proper, wore a hat, a decent overcoat, a shirt and tie, tuned into to fellow man, or better still to God, instead of tuning Him out, perhaps then the world would be a better place without all this litter and graffiti and all these people sleeping rough like they no better than rats in a sewer?

Rain began to fall as he crossed Ave Maria Lane on Ludgate Hill heading towards the Circus. Now it was dark, or getting dark, and wet to boot. The pavement beneath his feet took on a shiny threatening sheen. There was something about central London pavements he didn't like, even dry ones: a different material, smoother. And why was he always walking against the flow? There was an endless stream of people coming at him. So many. He studied their faces, looking for something. Warmth. Recognition. A nod. Nothing. They were zombies. No, not zombies, devils. They were Godless devils. He passed a young man with a beard - a huge woolly beard, like a sailor's - and a gaggle of girls with earrings in their noses, one with a ring in her stomach, through her belly button, showing it off above her trousers. In this weather! Brazen, Herman, said his mother. Look at the brazen hussies! He was looking. He was definitely looking. He was also moving too slowly for the flow of commuters and being buffeted, as he had feared, front and back. This made his heart beat faster and his neck grow clammy against his shirt collar. Something nasty began to rise from the pit of his stomach. He

became conscious of his feet pinching in his too-tight new shoes and that there wasn't enough phlegm in his mouth. He wanted a cup of tea, and to be home.

He crossed the road, heading west, and a boy overtook him, turning too soon into an alley ahead, thumping him hard on the shoulder with his giant rucksack. A woman and a man, clutching huge takeaway coffee cups, came hurtling towards him out of nowhere. He thought they might collide with him, knock him to the ground and scald him into the bargain. If he hadn't taken averting action they would have done. He backed against a wall to get out of their way, pressing hard against brick. The rough face of the wall scratched his overcoat. Don't lean against that wall, Herman, you'll spoil that coat. People dashed past. They didn't notice him. If he fell down dead right here no one would notice him. They would pick their way over his carcass and catch the no. 26 bus to Waterloo. He realised what it was rising from his stomach: it was fear. He hated himself for it. All his life he had been strong. Think of the jobs he done when he came here, physical jobs. A welder, when they said he could do the welding straight away but then made him wait and load a wheel barrow instead, for months, until his arms ached. The army. The Royal Green Jackets. That was no picnic by the seaside. The Ram Brewery. Lugging massive casks. The milk round, getting up at three in the morning, that wasn't for the faint-hearted neither. Strength of mind over matter. You had to be strong to lift them glass bottles. But now, now he was weak for sure: diminished, reduced, shrunk. He felt angry for it. Angry with himself. Angry with everyone else.

This had happened to him once before, this panic. He was frightened of the crowd and frightened of the fact he was frightened. He had to get off this street. He was almost at Shoe Lane. There was a bus at the stop up ahead. He didn't wait to look at the number. He launched himself across the rapid flow of pedestrians, was rocked, swayed, jostled, but made

it to the door and got on. He tried to find a seat quickly before it moved off but didn't make it in time. It lurched forward and bumped the bony promontory of his hip against the metal frame of a seat. He winced again. It would bruise. He bruised so easily now. Gingerly he slid along the seat towards the window and peered out. A relief to sit. Between raindrop lines on glass passing shop fronts bled together, then disappeared in a fog of condensation. He wanted to open the window for air but knew this new kind didn't. He couldn't make out a single landmark. Was this right? He needed to go straight and then south. It went straight.

He must have nodded off - this kept happening to him now - and when he woke, with a start, his mouth dryer than it was before, he knew he had been dribbling. For shame. There was someone sitting next to him - a woman - the bus was full of people now, most of them standing. Two black boys in school uniform in the aisle, ties loose at the neck, shirts tails hanging from trousers, talking loudly with no respect or consideration for their elders around them, slapping each other on the back, calling each other "fam", laughing. One noticed him. "What you staring at, man?" His partner followed his gaze. "Leave him, fam. He's an old boy, init" They laughed. He looked away.

When he was a boy their age he tipped his cap at older gentlemen. When he was smaller still he didn't dare look one in the eye. Not having a father, at least not having a father who was around - he had a father, of course, once, but he had absconded, ran off when he was four with that woman from the Rae Town post office, leaving his mother to bring up all seven of them (God alone knows how I did it, Herman) - it meant he didn't have much confidence around men, certainly never went around disrespecting them, then or now. And that was another thing he told that woman on the phone yesterday, the busybody nosy parker who rang him for a chit-chat, about his father running away. Why did he tell her that? He regretted that

now. Ringing him to get information out of him. Like that one they sent that time, and only one time, the mealy mouthed one who said he was a racist and never came back. So, he didn't like Poles and Romanians drinking in the park at the end of the road. Is that racist? They are Poles and Romanians. They do sit in the park at the end of the road, on that bench by the gates. They make it a no-go zone when it had been one of the few places he could go. It was free for a start when everywhere else he went cost him a king's ransom, except for the Autumn Rose Lunch Club. Thank the Lord for the Autumn Rose Lunch Club, even if it was full of widows with too much lipstick giving him the glad eye.

The bus lurched to a stop. People got on and got off, but mostly they got on. How was he going to get up and off the bus with all these people in the way? And how would he know where to get off? Where was he? He turned back to the window, straining to see through the sleet. Had they crossed the river? Maybe they were at Battersea Park already?

"Excuse me."

His voice out loud sounded feeble. The woman next to him didn't look up from her book. He coughed a dry throated cough and tried again. "Erm, excuse me, miss." He was being polite: she was no miss. She placed a finger on a page, pointedly, turned her head, neither spoke nor smiled. He thought pity, perhaps even disgust, flashed in her eyes. He knew what she saw: an elderly man in a worn coat and hat, tired eyes, droopy jowls, yellow teeth.

"Excuse me but have we crossed the river yet?"

"The river? No. Where are you going?"

He wasn't going to tell her that in front of a bus full of people, get followed off the bus, have his pension taken off him. Did she think he was stupid?

"South of the river."

"I'm going to Highgate, so I know it goes there. Not sure what it does after that." She looked back at her book.

"Thank you, miss."

Highgate! Drat. Damn. Bugger. Completely the wrong way. He would have to get off, preferably at the next stop. Would she mind pressing the bell? He asked her. She did it. Not looking at him. He had to ask her to move. The bus bumped and rattled. He inched down the seat. She stood. He stood. He pushed his way through the throng towards the door. He was afraid of missing his footing. The bus lurched and braked with a horrible screech, he lost his balance and was thrown forward on to a woman reading one of those electronic books. His face met with her bosom and stayed there. He was so close he could smell her perfume and the sweat in her armpits. For a second it reminded him of Ellen. It was so long since he'd been this close to a female, the yielding feel of her body beneath his face, the humiliation of being thrown off balance in public, it meant for one horrifying moment he thought he might actually shed tears. Thankfully he didn't. She helped him back to his feet. "You alright?" She was kind. She didn't mind. "You hurt?" He wasn't hurt. He was mortified.

Thumping down, like he was a heavy newspaper thrown by a careless paperboy, he stood on the pavement collecting the pieces of himself back together, taking in his bearings as the bus pulled away. Raining hard. Dark. Late. Somewhere in north London. That was about the measure of it. Gradually his eyes got used to his new surroundings. There was a pub opposite. He walked to the nearby crossing, pressed the button for the lights to change, kept his eyes all the while on the bright yellow glow of the pub. He was forming a plan, or the semblance of a plan. A pint. A sit down. Maybe even a packet of salt and vinegar crisps or a pickled egg. Before tackling the problem of how to get home.

## **Chapter ten**

### **Ned**

*Word of the day: precipitation – noun, the action or process of precipitating a substance from a solution. Rain, snow, sleet, or hail that falls to or condenses on the ground. Archaic - the fact or quality of acting suddenly and rashly.*

“So, I’ve briefed Lynda, she’s read all your Melvin/Loneliness pieces and she’s totally up to speed with it.”

Emma was walking briskly along the corridor in front of him holding a clipboard. He was right about the jeans: they were tight. He was trying not to look but each one of Emma’s buttocks was moving so quickly and seemingly independently of the other it was hard not to. Also, he was out of breath trying to keep up.

“Oh, great! Thanks. That’s good. Are we going straight to the Green Room or is there hair and make-up?”

He was worried about what getting up before dawn had done to the bags under his eyes, probably morphed them into hamster pouches, and he hadn’t had time to wash his hair.

She stopped abruptly and turned to look at him. He nearly collided with her. “Hair and make-up?” She studied him for a moment through over-sized glasses. “Okay.”

He found himself in a room off the corridor full of mirrors and chairs, like at the barbers except bigger, like the barbers on stilts. The chairs were on stilts, too, at least they were high off the ground. He had to take a running jump at one and then there he was, facing a mirror surrounded by round opaque lightbulbs, like he was a movie star. Christ alive! Not quite a movie star, then, unless it was Charles Laughton, as Quasimodo.

“O-kaaaay!” A camp gentleman with a make-up brush appeared as if from nowhere to his right. “I’m Gary. What have we got here, then?”

“Ned,” said Ned.

“*It’s Lynda!?*” said Gary.

"Ned," said Ned.



"Yes," said Emma, standing behind them. "He's on *It's Lynda!*"

"Oh, right," said Ned.

"Great," said Gary. "What time?"

"About half an hour," said Emma.

"Cool," said Gary. "You're a bit pale, Ned. Okay with a bit of foundation? Warm things up a bit?"

"Sure."

It was fine. He had worn foundation on television before. It was all going to be fine.

Gary wielded a make-up brush and he watched himself turn orange in the movie star mirror.

An orange Charles Laughton, then.

"Um," he said.

It seemed the only thing he could say under the circumstances.

"It might show up a little magenta under these lights, Ned, but believe me it will fade to nothing in front of the cameras. Nothing."

He very much wanted to believe him.

“So, the hair,” Gary went on, after he had finished applying the foundation. “Needs a bit of a joosh, yes?”

“Maybe something.”

“Mmm,” said Gary. “Matt Clay?”

For a moment, he thought he was being introduced to another person, a hairdresser perhaps, until he realized Matt Clay was the name of a product in a blue tin.

“Well, I...”

“I think so, Ned. Needs a bit of a lift, I’m thinking.”

Ned said okay to the Matt Clay and instantly regretted it the moment he saw what it did to his hair, but by then it was too late, of course, so now he looked like someone out of a boy band... except with Charles Laughton’s face, as Quasimodo.

This was turning out worse than he’d feared and he hadn’t even had to face Lynda-with-a-y-and-an-exclamation-mark yet.

“That’s great!” Gushed Emma, checking her watch. “Green Room!”

There were five people in the Green Room already, all exhibiting varying signs of stress. A young man in black standing by the bar introduced himself as Simon-something, a music journalist, then turned back to continue a heated conversation with the person tending the bar, dissecting exactly what constitutes a cocktail: “Three ingredients, but then on the other hand a champagne cocktail usually only has two...”

A woman Ned recognized as a celebrity children’s author, all sticky-up hair and patterned tights (he couldn’t remember her name) was sitting on one of two sofas, highlighting passages of a weighty page proof with a pink pen. She looked up to smile, briefly, as Emma introduced her (Cressida Morgan, of course!) before turning back anxiously to the proof. Another woman, much younger, tight dress, plunging neckline, much too much make-up, briefly stopped talking on her mobile and proffered a hand. “Hi-Stacey-from-*Babydoll*-you-know-the-band-we-won-*X-Factor*-yeah?”

He didn’t know. He didn’t watch it. He was meant to be up on these things but just read the press releases when he had to and watched the relevant clips on YouTube. After greeting him with this quick precis of herself she continued to talk on her phone. “Yeah! It’s been totally mentaaal, the whole week!”

Emma showed him his to his seat on the end of the sofa where Stacey from *Babydoll* was sitting, then she left. This was when the regrets really took hold and he started to think about ways to escape. He could feign illness. He could pretend to be drunk, like Oliver Reid on *Parkinson* back in the 1970’s, the Dark Ages. He could actually get drunk, on a champagne cocktail perhaps. He could get up and nip off back down that corridor and through those revolving glass doors to the outside world and freedom. But he didn’t do any of these things,

of course. His sense of obligation, his professionalism, his cowardice, all of it had him stuck to the faux suede sofa like a clothes moth to a pheromone trap. Instead of making a bid for freedom he began to gently perspire. He worried the foundation would run. He didn't have much time to worry, however, because Emma was back.

“Change of plan, Ned, you're on now.”

“What!”

“Sorry, slight mishap with the dog-handler, we need to go straight to the loneliness at Christmas segment.”

Emma's perfectly pert buttocks now bounced up and down before him along the corridor alarmingly quickly, like apples in a cloth bag. He had to break into a trot to keep up. They reached the double doors, with the word TRANSMISSION illuminated in red above them, much too quickly. A hushed sanctity blew out as Emma pulled them open. She indicated he should remain silent. Now he was in the studio, standing behind a piece of flimsy set. He could hear a woman's voice: fake, loud, breezy.

“And Ned Warner will be here in a moment to talk about loneliness at Christmas and in particular his encounter with a pensioner called Melvin who has become something of a poster boy for our Christmas: *Are You Alone at Christmas?* campaign.”

What?

He could see a monitor broadcasting a series of stills: his articles and pictures of him from years back. What did she mean Melvin was a poster boy for their Christmas campaign?

Melvin didn't exist. He created him.

He was delivered to a floor manager who was wearing headphones covering one of his ears and not the other, and who was holding a clipboard like Emma's. Emma left. It turned out he would never see Emma again. He didn't know this at the time, of course, but from here on in, time condensed into a sort of speeding *Doctor Who* tunnel from which he didn't emerge until several hours later when he was in the bath at home and it all came flooding back, sadly. He had to have a hot bath the minute he got in, even though it was barely lunchtime, because his body temperature had plummeted. Shock, maybe. He wasn't invited back to the Green Room after his appearance. The minute he was finished with he was swiftly escorted to reception by another researcher - male this time - who talked excitedly the whole way about how great he had been and how it had all gone "brilliantly", which pretty much confirmed what he was suspecting: it had all gone terribly. It had been an unmitigated disaster. There were some bits he did remember with dreadful clarity. The bit when he was waiting for Lynda to ask him the first question when she took an age about it and he had to sit there, a rictus grin on his face, like a lemon, being scrutinized, no doubt, by hundreds and thousands of people at home munching shredded marmalade on toast. Eventually she formulated something resembling a question:

"So, yes, Ned, this is why you're so drawn to the subject of loneliness, isn't it? It's a theme you've come back to repeatedly."

Was it? Not really.

“Well, um, yes, we’re in the middle of a loneliness epidemic right now in this country. I think a recent study found it’s as harmful to health as smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.”

“Is it really? How awful. And how is it affecting Melvin?”

This was when Lynda-with-a-y-and-an-exclamation-mark first made him lose his stride.

“Well, um, the thing *generally* about being lonely is...”

She frowned.

“... about being lonely is... I believe it can have an adverse effect on mental health. It’s linked to depression. People who are socially isolated often sleep badly, then they can’t function. They might lose their, um...”

There was a floor manager in his eye-line frantically waving his arms at Lynda, who was holding her ear and listening to instructions from the gallery while the camera was on him. She nodded urgently in his direction.

“So, yes, um, they might lose their concentration, make mistakes, and...”

“Like with Melvin?”

“He’s not called Melvin.”

“He’s not?”

“No. Melvin is the name I gave him, you know, for the piece. He's actually a construct.”

"A construct?"

“Yes.”

“Just to fill viewers in at home,” said Lynda, turning to the camera, “this is the gentleman who got the wrong bus from St Paul’s Cathedral one evening and had a bit of a panic attack. He got off the bus near your home, didn’t he, Ned?”

She didn’t actually stop at this point so he could answer.

“You bumped into him in your local, you spilt beer down him, then you bought him dinner and gave him a lift to the station. Yes?”

There was something rather accusatory about the way she was saying ‘yes’.

“Well, um. Loosely.”

Lynda frowned again.

“Loosely?”

“There is some artistic license. Not everything I write is entirely, you know... true.”

Lynda-with-a-y-and-an-exclamation-mark gave him daggers and folded her arms across her chest.

“It is fair to say, Ned, that as a society we fail our elderly? We just leave them to fend for themselves, don't we? Isolated. Millions of them, up and down the country. Alone.

Vulnerable. Suffering ill health. Possibly suffering from depression as well if they've been bereaved. Melvin recently lost his wife, is that right?”

This wasn't going at all well. He thought he was here to talk about the subject of loneliness generally, not about Melvin specifically. He didn't answer.

“But we can all make a difference, can't we? We can all do our bit, check on an elderly neighbour, perhaps, pop in next door to say 'hello'. It's fantastic that you've set an example and taken this vulnerable old man under your wing.”

“Well, I, you know...”

“How is he now?”

“Pardon?”



“The lonely gentleman you wrote about in your piece, who isn’t called Melvin. What *is* he called, by the way?”

Again, she didn’t pause so he could answer actually this, not that he wanted to.

“I think we, your readers and the viewers watching at home, would really like to know what happened to him after your encounter. How is he?”

Jesus Christ.

“He’s a totem isn’t he, emblematic of the whole problem, the way we as a society treat our ageing population: out of sight out of mind...”

She flared her eyes in his direction and he realised the camera wasn’t on her, it was on him. He was going to have to lie, on television.

“He, um... he’s fine. He’s really well. I went round to see him last week, did a few odd jobs for him in his flat.”

Lynda-with-a-y-and-an-exclamation-mark raised her eyebrows, then beamed.

“That’s lovely, Ned. I do hope you’ll be able to come back on the programme soon to tell us how he’s getting on. Perhaps you could come together, with Melvin next time?”

“Sure.”

“Are you having him over for Christmas?”

He paused for a fraction of a second before answering.

“Of course.”

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