

## **Foreword**

Men make up 84% of the rough sleeper community and their average age at death is only 47 compared to the rest of society who live into their 70s and beyond. Rough sleeping is a harsh, unforgiving existence.

The homeless are more likely to be the victims of physical, verbal and sexual assaults, for example many describe waking up to find someone urinating on them and others have had their tents and sleeping bags set on fire. Being kicked or punched and unprovoked assaults are also reported and over 90% have experienced verbal abuse and threats.

The reasons that people become homeless are usually loss of a job or ill health changing their ability to work, the end of a relationship, an eviction or addiction issues.

Often this is a domino effect of one thing leading to another until the person finds themselves on the streets for the first time. Many others are the hidden homeless that often don't feature in headcounts, they sleep on the night bus or in cars, they exist in temporary accommodation, or they pitch up out of sight and out of mind.

Whilst my character, Bill, isn't based on one specific person he does represent a combination of the stories I've heard over the years. I hope that the book not only entertains you but also makes you think about how we can genuinely tackle homelessness, not just with rooves over heads but with the root causes that continue to drive people onto the streets day after day.

## **Prologue:**

### **A Fresh Start**

My name is Bill, well actually it's William Blake but I gave that up when I lost everything over 20 years ago. On the streets I'm known as "Big Bill", it's not an especially clever nickname, I'm a big man, tall and well-built so it fits me and to be honest I've grown to like it more than my given name.

Out there, sleeping rough, bedding down for the night where I could, I've built myself a life in the last two decades, I've become someone else, someone different from the man I was when my life imploded. They say that even the worst situation can create something worthwhile and sitting here now I think that might be true.

I'm 57 years old, ten years older than the usual life expectancy for male rough sleepers as I was once told by my outreach worker, I've got arthritis in my knees and a heart condition and after the last heart attack my doctor was clear that my life had to change.

No more rough sleeping for Big Bill, I'm going to be starting a new chapter of my life in a lovely flat in a sheltered housing scheme but before I do I want to share how this all started. My story isn't original or new, it's as old as homelessness itself, every day another Bill ends up with no-where to live and carries their sleeping bag out to find a safe doorway. Every day another Bill will learn the basics by trial and error, where's the safest place to bed down? What keeps the chill out of your bones on a winter night? How do you stay cool in a heatwave and warm in the winter months? Where do you go for a hot meal, shower and some human contact?

I wouldn't call my life before ordinary; I was one of the lucky ones for a while, a well-paid job, a beautiful wife, a cherished daughter and a luxury home. I don't know if losing it all is worse when you had more than the average bloke or if that loss hits just as hard, maybe it's the shock that it can happen to you? I don't know but I do know that I was arrogant,

foolhardy and that I hid my head in the sand not facing my problems, but I also know that rich or poor we're all the same in the end.

## **Chapter 1: William Blake**

William Blake downed the last of the wine in his glass and laughed at the slightly off colour joke the author he was courting told, loudly. so loudly in fact, that a few people had turned to glare in their direction. As a literary agent William represented some of the bigger name authors and was always hungry to sign more. This one in particular, had sent in a sample of his first piece of work, and it looked interesting enough to warrant a boozy lunch on the expenses account. Unfortunately, although his writing was interesting and witty the man himself was a bigoted bore, which was the excuse William was giving himself for the amount of alcohol he was consuming this lunchtime. Refilling his glass with a generous amount he took another swig and began the negotiations that would end with him adding this man to his stable. The author was currently sharing yet another inappropriate story, so William let his mind drift for a moment, coming back just at the right moment to laugh at the right place and nodding as though in agreement. By the time the bottle was finished William had him signed up with the promise of a second book in the next six months. Back at the office William's boss sat in his glass sided office poking at his laptop and chewing on a biscuit, when he saw William, he beckoned him in.

"How did it go?"

William grinned and gave him the thumbs up and his boss punched the air "you diamond! I knew if anyone could get him on board it would be you, what's he like?" William pulled a face "a bigot that could bore a hole in concrete." William's boss chuckled before turning back to his screen and the rest of his biscuit. In his own office William's PA had produced what looked like a tree's worth of call slips before leaving him to get through them. By the time he'd finished that and the rest of his work it was gone 7pm. After a struggle home through the commuter chaos, it was nearly 8pm by the time he put his key in the door and wearily kicked off his shoes and loosened his tie.

"Daddy!" Pounding footsteps belied the small size of his 6-year-old daughter as she flew down the stairs before throwing her little, skinny arms around his legs. Sweeping her up in the air and onto his shoulders William marched her through to the kitchen, where his wife was nursing a large glass of wine. The table was set for one so apparently everyone else had already eaten, hardly a surprise considering how late it was. His wife was engrossed in a book but on hearing them come in she closed it and stood up to greet him with a dry peck on his cheek before starting to plate up his dinner. "Cara, you should be asleep love, you've got school in the morning." Cara bounced on his shoulders making him wince "Daddy take me up!" William chuckled "okay pickle, let's go, all aboard the Daddy express" making choo choo noises on the way. Cara was soon tucked back in her small double bed, he put on the rotating stars that danced across the ceiling and kissed her tenderly on the head. "I love you Daddy" she mumbled as she snuggled down and her eyes grew heavy "and I love you more" William replied as he did every time, he was privileged enough to put her to bed.

In the kitchen his wife had re-heated his meal and laid it up at the table with a large glass of wine, she sat opposite him and resting her chin on her steepled hands listened to him tell her about his day.

She laughed at his description of the boorish author and shared his frustration with an author who had writers block and was in danger of missing her deadline to produce her next book. Lillian was the perfect wife as far as he was concerned, beautiful, funny, attentive and

patient. She rarely complained about how late he got home or when he had to work through the weekend. His life in general was pretty, damn good even if it hadn't turned out the way he'd expected. Back when he was a youngster, he'd wanted to write himself. He'd sent manuscripts to every agent and publisher he could find the contact details of but rejection after rejection had eventually ground him down and he'd settled for a junior post in a literary agency where he helped others get the foothold, he couldn't get for himself. Eventually he'd been noticed as someone who was good at spotting talent and his climb up the ladder had started, he was now in a comfortable position and earning a substantial sum that allowed them to live a very privileged life.

"Bill?" his wife queried "I was thinking of redecorating the study, I know it's more your room but it's starting to look quite tired compared to the rest of the house."

Bill sighed, he was happy with the room the way it was, but he could see his wife's point, while the rest of the house looked as though it belonged in a perfect housekeeping magazine his study was the room that always let it down. The solid wood floor was scuffed, and the furniture had seen better days, the walls were lined with tall shelving units that overflowed with books hiding the paintwork and peeling wallpaper that hadn't been touched since they'd moved in.

"Could we compromise and just make some improvements? You know, shabby chic" Lillian laughed "good one Bill, makes your tired old study into something trendy with just a name change! Fair enough, how about I just get the floor re-polished, and the walls done and then we can both look at what furniture you can bear to replace?"

Bill chuckled "you've got a deal" he splashed some more wine into his glass and as he leaned towards her's she put her hand over the top "no more for me, I've had two already."

Bill was probably well into his second bottle if you added on the drinks, he'd had at lunchtime, but he didn't consider that to be a barrier to another glass if he fancied one. Bill leaned back in his chair, comfortably full and enjoying the buzz from the alcohol as he watched his beautiful wife telling him her plans for his study.

The week raced past as always, Bill was the first in the office in the mornings and one of the last to leave at night, as he'd explained to a new starter who wanted to know how to work his way up, it was all about dedication to the job. The new author from earlier in the week had a book signing lined up, despite it being a Saturday Bill would of course be there supporting him and potentially moderating his behaviour if it looked as though he was about to offend his entire readership at any point. It all started off as planned, Bill and the author, Vince Hart, had arrived early enough to supervise the set-up. Bill had made sure Vince's books were positioned where they'd get the maximum number of sales from the attending customers and Vince was already hitting the complimentary wine. Taking a sweeping look around the store Bill was satisfied that it was as it should be.

Already fans were lining up outside some clutching books already purchased and others clearly in line to get one as they passed through to the author. Vince needed prompting to go and sit at the table set up for him at the back of the store and Bill had to listen to him gripe all the way over there.

"It doesn't look very comfortable Bill; I would prefer a softer seat if I'm going to be sat there for hours. Are you sure that table is at the right height? It looks a little low to me."

Bill cajoled and fussed his author into place, fetching a cushion for him to sit on and promising as many breaks as he needed, until eventually Vince settled into place.

Bill noticed that his wine glass was full to the brim and resisted the urge to move it out of reach. He could do with a drink himself actually, he'd definitely earned one, a young female member of staff was passing, and she eagerly fetched him his drink with a flirty smile. Bill stored it away to share with his wife later, they'd have a chuckle together at how Bill still had "it".

The store manager had ushered in the line of fans with a flourish and was now watching with a happy smile as his staff rang up sale after sale of the author's book. Everything appeared to be going smoothly so Bill stepped back and refilled his glass, nice wine he mused. After four glasses Bill felt relaxed and he started poking through the shelves checking out a few books that he hadn't read yet. Just as he was contemplating purchasing a couple he heard raised voices, one female and one that sounded suspiciously like Vince, Bill sighed, put down his books and glass and headed towards them.

"No fucking sense of humour you feminist bitches" Vince slurred loudly and the young woman in front of him stepped backwards clutching the hardback copy of Vince's book "Travels around Europe".

Bill plastered a smile on his face as he approached, the young woman's face was tight with anger and Vince was smirking at her "you got no sense of humour, the snowflake generation"

Bill cringed. The young woman indigently retorted "why would I find jokes about my breasts funny? I'm young enough to be your daughter, you're disgusting."

Bill took a deep breath, great, Vince strikes again, he thought. By now another member of the public had stepped up next to the young woman, the man in his mid 20s got out a notebook "I heard exactly what he said, terrible. I'm from the Brow Town Gazette" as he said that another man stepped up and snapped a photo of Vince who was leering unpleasantly at the young woman by now.

Great photo that'll make, thought Bill grimly, don't think we'll be using it on the back of his books though.

When he reached the table Vince started gesturing to him urgently "this stupid young woman is insulting me Bill" he pouted petulantly and then announced to his audience "this is my agent, if you have any issues take them to him."

The young woman, the journalist and the photographer all turned to him at once, Bill managed a tight smile as he gestured for them to follow him where they could talk away from the rest of the line. He looked back, too late, those that had overheard were now placing their unpaid for books back on the display and moving out of line, he could also see from the urgent whispering that the story was making its way round everyone waiting. "Is it usual for your authors to get that drunk at signings?" the journalist asked, Bill shook his head "Vince isn't drunk, he's on some very strong medication, he shouldn't have come today but he didn't want to let his readers down." It was the best he could come up with on the spot, the wine had affected his sharp wits, but even to his ears it sounded weak and ridiculous.

To his credit the journalist didn't laugh out loud but his wrinkled brow and shaking head did express his incredulity. Bill stumbled through the interview, his prepared Q&A now useless and put on the spot and worse for wear himself he knew he'd done a piss poor job of explaining anything. The young woman, quite rightly, remained very put out and didn't take well to Bill's attempts to smooth things over, it seemed he was coming across a little pervy himself from her responses to him which wasn't his intention at all.

Finally, she stalked away, followed by the journalist and the photographer who he saw had her set up outside the store where the shop's name could clearly be seen and wearing a disgruntled look on her face.

"Compo face" muttered Bill to himself and was unfortunately overheard by the young woman who'd fetched his wine earlier, the look she shot him wasn't at all flirty this time round. A few die hard fans and those who were equally as bigoted as Vince hung about but most of the queue dispersed back off into the high street some clutching books unsigned, and others empty handed where they'd put their potential purchases back on the display. From the unhappy look on the store manager's face Bill was pretty sure none of his authors were getting a gig here in the near future.....

Bill's boss was incandescent, he was waving the newspaper when Bill got in on Monday morning his finger poking the offending article "for fucks sake Bill. I thought I'd read a nice little piece about the signing hidden on a page towards the middle and instead I get a front-page assassination. Apparently not only is Vince a sexist pig but so is his agent, the young woman he insulted said you were disgusting and inappropriate and a member of staff is anonymously quoted as saying you called her a "compo face" and saying you were as drunk as he was."

Bill rubbed his face "sorry Boss, I did try and smooth things over as soon as I realised that it was getting out of hand, but Vince just wouldn't stop with the mouth."

His boss shook his head "I expect better of you Bill, letting him drink that much and not staying close by so you could have headed it off at the pass before it got to this point. It's rookie stuff." His boss eyed him up "were you drinking Bill?"

Bill frowned "only a complimentary glass like we all do at those things." His boss didn't look convinced but moved on anyway "I'm going to pass Vince on to Beth, having a female agent might help with the image Vince currently has of hating women."

Bill shook his head "come on. It was me that dug his manuscript out of the pile and bothered to read enough of it to know it was destined to do well. It was me that had to wine and dine him and got him signed up, you can't take him off me and give him to a newbie like Beth."

His boss studied him for a moment "sorry Bill it's a done deal" he turned away clearly ending the conversation and started tapping at his keyboard.

In his own office his PA, Marg, was shooting him dirty looks and he assumed she'd also read the article and wasn't best pleased at the parts credited to him. She slammed his call slips down on his desk and marched out without a word.

Bill did what he did best and emersed himself in his work, making calls, reassuring and supporting his authors, reading sample manuscripts and marking up the ones that needed a follow up. By 12 his stomach was rumbling, and his mouth was dry, he grabbed his coat and bag and headed out planning to grab a bit of lunch.

Marg appeared to have softened during the morning as she reminded him that he had to meet Harvey Win at 2pm at the wine bar to talk him through the offer he'd had on making his books into a series. Then he had to be back at the office by 4pm latest to meet with a new author.

Bill decided that he'd go straight to meet Harvey after his lunch and settled on a small pub not far from the wine bar. After a quick look at the basic menu the pub offered, he settled on a vodka tonic and a chicken salad sandwich on brown bread. The pub was one of the more traditional ones and he enjoyed sitting and watching the variety of clientele that came

in and out. There were the older men who spent most afternoons propping up the bar, reading the form in the racing papers and making calls to place bets. The races were shown here all afternoon on a large tele mounted on the wall. The old men stared at the screen silently, their faces running the gambit of emotions from excitement to fear and sometimes anger and despair. Addiction, thought Bill, a mugs game.

Other customers included a young couple who sat in a quiet corner of the pub drinking pints and sharing a plate of chips, they made him smile, so young and in love he thought watching the young girl feed her partner a chip.

In the other corner a group of middle-aged men were playing a lively game of darts which seemed to include them shouting insults at each other whenever someone missed. By now Bill had finished his sandwich and ordered another vodka and tonic, it wouldn't take long to get to the wine bar, and he had plenty of time.

An hour later and Bill had joined the game of darts, laughing as he missed the target to the shouts of "useless wanker" from the rest of the team. It wasn't until one of the other players called out "it's 2.30 already, I better be off" that Bill realised he'd lost track of time. "Me too" he announced handing his darts to the man next to him he grabbed his coat and ran down the street to the wine bar.

Harvey was sat at a table near the back, he was scrolling through his phone and when Bill hurried over making his excuses shook his head at him. "Half an hour I've been here. I called your office, and they said you were on your way but that was ages ago." The waiter appeared and Bill put in an order for a vodka and tonic and Harvey asked for another mineral water.

"I think you'll cheer up when you see what I've got on offer for you!" Bill took out his bag and began rummaging through trying to find the offer and Harvey waited expectantly. The waiter appeared with their drinks and a menu and Harvey started leafing through it while he waited.

Bill could feel himself getting more and more flustered as he searched the bag as though it would miraculously jump into his hand.

"Is this what you're looking for?"

Bill turned to see Marg stood next to him holding a folder

"I realised after you left that it was still on your desk."

Her face was a picture of disapproval and as he took it, he felt a little like a scolded child.

"Thanks Marg, I was in such a hurry when I left."

Marg nodded and stalked off as Bill opened the file and started passing its contents to Harvey.

"I think you'll find it's a great deal, they'll make one season per book and with the five books you currently have in the series that's a long-term deal for you."

Bill paused while Harvey read it and gulped down his drink, he motioned to the waiter to fetch him another and flicked through the menu himself while he waited.

Harvey pushed the documents back to him.

"Looks all in order, yes, I'll sign up for that. Thanks Bill, should keep me in clover for some time."

Bill grinned "we should celebrate" he waved the waiter over "can we get a bottle of champagne please?"

The waiter nodded "is that instead of the vodka tonic sir?"

Bill shook his head "no I'll have both."

The waiter was expressionless "very good sir."

Harvey and Bill decided to share some tapas dishes and by the second bottle of champagne were talking about a future where Harvey had several movie deals.

It wasn't until Harvey said he had to be off that Bill took a look at the time, nearly 5pm, he made the universal sign of an air signature to indicate they needed the bill.

Harvey slurred "get the bill, Bill," finding this overly hilarious Harvey bent over the table snorting with laughter.

By the time he'd made it back to the office it was gone 5.30, Marg had packed up for the day, but his boss was sitting in his office still. As soon as he spotted Bill he marched over to the door.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

Bill frowned, puzzled, had he forgotten something?

His boss read his expression "you don't remember at all do you? Mercy Grey was here waiting for you at 4pm, luckily Beth had an empty slot and she saw to her otherwise she'd have walked."

Bill winced, he'd totally forgotten that appointment "sorry Boss, I was helping Harvey celebrate his good news, he had a lot of questions and I got so involved I lost track of everything else."

His boss narrowed his eyes "I've got concerns Bill, you're drinking too much, and your head isn't in the job like it used to be. Is everything okay at home?"

Bill felt affronted "not that it's your business but yes, everything is fine in my personal life."

His boss sighed "Bill, you've been one of the best agents in the company, I don't like to see you slipping like this, sort yourself out. Now I suggest you get off home, get an early one and start fresh tomorrow."