

The Hermit



‘See the good in people and help them.’

Gandhi

Prologue



Always Welcome

An elegant hand flipped an old-fashioned lever and, with a satisfying sizzle, six lightbulbs flickered into life above six long tables. Cherry looked around at her almost-finished bakery. The wood of the tables was a warm, autumnal colour and there was an old, brassy till on the counter with buttons that *clickity clacked*. It had cost her a small fortune, but the sound of the *ding* when it opened made it worth every penny. Though she had wondered whether the room was *too* old-fashioned, the black slate floor, giant chalkboard and gold and turquoise wallpaper gave it a modern twist. Before Cherry opened the bakery doors to the town, it needed to be finished to her liking and she couldn't wait for the glass cabinet by the till to be filled with sweet treats for people to come in and enjoy.

It was ten o'clock at night. Cherry had an early start in the morning so had been tucked up in bed with her book, reading the same paragraph over and over again, her mind on tomorrow, when a familiar tingle in the back of her head and a faint moaning had brought her downstairs to the bakery. It wasn't the sound of someone hurt or in pain, nor did it sound sad. It didn't even sound like a person. It sounded like Loneliness – a sound Cherry knew only too well. Someone, somewhere, was feeling alone.



Rain was steadily falling from dark, night-time clouds in thick drops that could soak you to the bone in moments. The beginning of a storm. The sea didn't help as the waves mischievously whipped up, spraying over the railings and onto Margie as she walked home to her cramped and empty flat. A strong gale pulled furiously at her drab clothes and wrinkled skin. She nuzzled into her fur-lined coat collar, imagining warm arms surrounding her, hugging away the cold. Margie kept a dress shop in the village a little down the road from her house on the seafront, but business was bad. Money was tight and life behind the counter was as lonely and unfulfilling as life at home but she persevered nonetheless, staying later and later each night making dress after dress after dress. Margie didn't feel like life was one step forwards

and two steps back, she simply felt like all her steps were backwards, no matter how hard she pushed. So one day she had stopped pushing and let the tide of life carry her wherever it desired instead.

Little did Margie know that the reason she felt so empty and unfulfilled was because every step she took a shadow crept a few feet behind her. It was a tall, looming creature with a devilish grin, big black eyes, and the silver fur around its neck glimmered. Its long, spindly fingers were pierced through the hem of Margie's soul, like pins through fabric. It wiggled its digits and Margie shivered. Its name was Loneliness and it was mean.

Margie was no exception, of course. We're all followed by . . . something. It's not the poisonous voices that creep into our heads as we're drifting into sleep, or that prickling feeling we get when we think we're being watched. No, the things that follow us are literal; they're actual, and they're made up of entirely bad feeling. Loneliness, Anxiety, Aggression, Depression, Disappointment, Sadness, Hopelessness, Uselessness, Regret and many, *many* more make up the ranks of creatures that we mistakenly befriend. Unwittingly, we invite them to attach themselves to our souls, allowing them to dictate our lives, like a dreary puppet show in which we are the puppets and they are the puppet masters.

They're intelligent, too. When thousands of people across the planet feel the same awful feeling at the same awful moment, that creature splits and multiplies and

attaches itself to each person experiencing that feeling. With every split, they become stronger. They can't be seen and their voices can only be heard as our own voices in the back of our minds. Most people don't know their souls are being controlled by something else. The only way to get rid of them is to let light and love and happiness destroy them – as we feel better, they feel worse, and will shrink and shrink until there's nothing left. If only we could see these beings in their true form, with their soulless black eyes and the peculiar way they sit on their haunches ready to pounce – then we would try our hardest to be optimistic and look to the light, even when life has turned bleak. Instead, we ignore our bad feelings and inner demons because it's *easier*, which leaves these beings free to pull on the puppet strings.

Margie's soul had been lost to her ever since her husband had passed away thirteen years ago. At first, Grief took its hold, but Grief is temporary so Margie didn't dance with that particular feeling for long. Loneliness, though, lingers and it found a fast friend in Margie.

When she wanted to talk to those around her, it pinched her lips closed and whispered in her ear, telling her that no one cared about what she had to say. When Margie found herself by the phone, wanting to call someone just to hear another person's voice, Loneliness held her hands against her sides. It found ways to keep her to itself, and slowly but surely she'd stopped resisting altogether.

Margie didn't know she was fighting Loneliness; she couldn't see it, and she had no idea it was controlling her every move. She had, in human terms, simply given up, just like everyone whose soul is no longer their own eventually does.

As a sob was about to escape Margie's throat, a noise cut through the whistle of the wind and she snapped her head around towards a light in the doorway to her right. The light hit Loneliness, burning it like a white-hot branding iron. In pain and panic, it lifted its hands to shield itself from the light and in doing so its fingers slid out of Margie's soul, tearing the fabric a little.

'You there!' called a voice above the gush of the sea.

'Me?' whimpered Margie, pointing to herself with a red raw hand.

'Come in!' The young lady in the doorway reached inside and pulled up the blind in the front window, revealing a warmly lit coffee shop with a bakery counter and lovely wooden furniture. Margie looked towards her journey home, grey and miserable, much like the evening she'd find when she got there, and hesitated.

'Quickly!' the woman shouted, looking over Margie's shoulder as though she had seen something in the darkness. Margie undeniably felt danger somewhere in the shadows and before she, and Loneliness, knew it, her feet were moving her towards the light.

Once Margie was safely inside, the young lady quickly closed the door and offered to take her coat. Margie

guessed that she couldn't have been more than twenty-five, almost half her own age, and she seemed to be wearing pyjamas under an oversized knitted burgundy jumper with grey slippers on her feet. She had a kind, heart-shaped face and her Afro hair was secured in bunches on the top of her head. The lady helped Margie out of her dripping coat and as she did Margie noticed how grey and blotched her own skin looked next to the lady's warm, dark arm. The young lady shook the worst of the rain from the coat and hung it on the coat stand next to the counter.

'Now,' said the lady, smiling. 'What can I get you? On the house.'

Margie didn't know what to say. She was sure she didn't know this young woman and yet she was talking to Margie like they were old friends.

'Erm ...'

'Wait, don't tell me.' The woman held up a finger and scrunched her eyes closed. Margie looked down at her sodden shoes and the wet footprints she'd left on the wooden floor and wondered if maybe she should take them off but when she looked up, the woman had disappeared. Margie could hear the clattering of plates and the tinkle of cutlery towards the back of the shop.

'You ... you really don't need to go to any trouble,' Margie called weakly towards the noise. She had found her voice but it was too feeble to be heard from wherever the woman had gone to.

Margie looked around and realised that the shop was only half finished. Cans of paint sat on the floor next to stripped skirting boards and the wires for the lighting were exposed. Margie felt awkward and out of place so before she made an even bigger fool of herself she dashed to the coat stand and grabbed her coat – putting her right arm through the left hole in a mad panic, but it didn't matter. She just needed to leave. She opened the door quickly, not noticing the old-fashioned bell above it, which rang out loudly.

'WAIT!' called the lady, reappearing with a small plate in one hand and a steaming mug in the other. 'Please don't go. I just . . . I want to help.'

Loneliness was sitting outside the shop – with its back against the wall, it was poised, ready to latch itself back onto Margie like a barnacle on the bottom of a ship the minute she walked outside. Standing on the threshold, Margie thought again of her pokey, cold flat and wondered what exactly it was she was running back to. The door swung shut.

'Sorry,' Margie said. 'I'm not very good with . . . people.' She shrugged off her coat again, which the lady hung back on the coat stand. She gently manoeuvred Margie by the shoulders to the table where she'd placed the plate and the mug. There was a large chunk of cake on the plate. *Marble, by the looks of it*, Margie thought.

'I wasn't very good with people either until recently,' said the lady, taking a seat across from Margie and

handing her a fork. Margie took it and separated a delicate sliver of the cake. ‘Turns out I just wasn’t very good with myself.’

That sentence bounced around the pit of Margie’s stomach and settled with a rumble. She looked down at the fluffy morsel on her fork and took a bite. The cake was moist but dense, and chocolate and vanilla flavours burst in her mouth. When Margie swallowed she could feel it warm her from the inside out, the kind of warm you feel when you snuggle into bed on a cold night with a hot water bottle tucked between the sheets. Margie took another bite. And another. And another. It wasn’t until she went to have yet another mouthful that she saw there were just crumbs left and she’d eaten the whole slice.

‘That may be the best cake I’ve ever had,’ Margie sighed. Then she chuckled and, remembering how good it felt, chuckled at the feeling of chuckling until Margie was laughing so hard she thought she’d never stop. The lady sat and laughed with her, seemingly enjoying the feeling of making someone happy. Eventually Margie wiped tears from her eyes and said tentatively, unsure of how to make conversation, ‘Are you new here?’

The lady nodded. ‘I am.’

‘Are you staying?’ Margie asked, gesturing to the shop that was clearly midway through renovation.

‘I am. I thought this town could do with a bakery.’

‘Oh . . . we already have one,’ said Margie quietly, torn between not wanting this lady to leave town but also not

wanting the bakery in the village to lose business. The townspeople were very fond of their spectacular Belgian buns.

‘Not one like mine,’ the lady said, smiling as she took the plate and placed it on the shop counter.

‘No, I suppose not,’ Margie said, still feeling warm.

A silence fell over them, one that didn’t feel awkward or that needed filling. It was a content silence that friends often share.

‘I suppose I should get home,’ Margie finally said, without moving.

‘All right,’ said the lady, reaching for Margie’s coat and holding it open for Margie to put her arms through. When her coat was on and she was at the open door, Margie turned without warning and hugged the lady, who hugged her back just as hard.

‘Thank you.’

‘Go on. Get yourself home before it gets too late.’ The lady gave her a gentle push out of the door.

As soon as Margie’s feet touched the ground outside, Loneliness hopped towards her but was surprised to find it was shorter than when Margie had entered the shop. It still latched its fingers onto Margie’s soul but as its fingers were smaller than before, they didn’t fit the holes it had made as well any more – it had a harder time keeping hold of her. Margie walked to the road, but before the shop door closed she turned in panic.

‘Wait! I didn’t catch your name!’

The lady was now only a silhouette against the warm yellow light. 'It's Cherry. Cherry Redgrave.'

'Nice to meet you, Cherry. I'm Margie.'

As she started to walk on, Cherry called, 'Margie?'

She turned to look again at Cherry and even though she was still just a silhouette, Margie was sure she was smiling.

'You're always welcome here.'

1



The Usuals

Cherry had never wanted to be a baker. As a child, she had wanted to be a firefighter. She had dreams of gushing water from snake-like hoses, pouring onto burning, crumbling houses; of reuniting children with their mothers after carrying them from the flames and sometimes of rescuing dogs from wells and kittens from trees. But baking? Never. However, as life often does, it dragged Cherry off in a direction she hadn't expected and she now found herself standing in her very own bakery, and it wasn't even her first one. It may not have been her childhood aspiration, but she couldn't imagine herself doing anything else now. When she unlocked the door at eight every morning, when she flipped the sign from CLOSED to OPEN and when her first customer of the

day made the bell above the door jingle, something deep within her hummed, *This is where you're meant to be*. Letting go of her firefighting dreams didn't seem all that painful when she'd found she had an inexplicable talent in something so delightfully delicious.

After meeting Margie, it had taken Cherry another two weeks to get her bakery by the seafront in working order. There was no sign outside, nothing to signify this was a place to buy cake and sip tea, yet Cherry knew people would come. They always did.

This was Cherry's eighth stop on what she called her 'Flour Power Tour'. She would move to a small town, find a shop with cheap rent and set to work. Once she felt her task was done, that she'd done all the good she could do, she would move on to somewhere else and do the same all over again.

Some visits were shorter than others. The longest had been a year and a half, surprisingly in the smallest town she'd visited. Cherry had found that the smaller the town the bigger the issues, and had a feeling that maybe this latest stop might be one of her longest stays yet.

Merely days into her stay, she knew this would be a difficult place to leave. Each morning, she came downstairs from her flat above the bakery, wearing a freshly ironed pair of pyjamas, ready for a busy day ahead. Cherry always wore pyjamas – she didn't understand why everybody didn't. When a previous next door neighbour had insisted she get dressed into something a little

more appropriate she had replied, ‘They’re the comfiest item of clothing known to man. Why anyone would choose to wear dresses you can’t breathe in and high heels you can’t walk in when pyjamas and slippers are readily available to everyone . . . well, it’s beyond me!’

So she tied her hair into two Minnie Mouse-esque bunches, donned a pair of flannel pyjamas, skidded across the shop floor in her matching slippers and unlatched the door. Within moments, her Usuals started to arrive.

Sally Lightbody, aged seventy-two and retired, was always the first person to show up. She’d breeze in at 8:15 every morning, swathed in layers of floaty silk. Her silver hair was tangled and matted into dreadlocks which she tied tight above her head with a purple and green patchwork scarf, a scarf that perfectly matched the satchel in which she kept a black box of Tarot cards. Sally had been drawn to Cherry’s shop one day not by fate but by a desperate need to relieve her bladder.

‘Go on,’ Sally had said, waving her box of cards at Cherry until she nodded. Sally shuffled and drew the first card, and her lips curled at the corners. Immediately, she swept her cards back into their black box and sipped her tea. Sally refused to tell Cherry what the card had revealed, but every day since, she arrived at 8:15 and would sit in her usual spot by the window until closing time. Throughout the day, customers would come to Sally to have their fortunes and futures

laid out before them. She never asked for money for her services and she always bought her first slice of cake herself, but it had become customary to buy Sally a slice of something sweet in return for a reading. Her usual treat(ment) was a Will-Power Walnut Whip first thing, and from then on Cherry served her Victoria sponge, Sally's favourite.

Sally looked calm but beneath the bundles of silk and crystal necklaces, she had an obsessive streak. She'd had many fixations over the years: food, alcohol, Dickens, Laurel and Hardy, obscure inventions no one ever heard about and now fortune-telling. One by one, each thing had consumed her and she would live, sleep and breathe them until there was nothing more of them to consume. Fortune-telling had kept her obsessed for almost thirty years now, however, and when Cherry asked why she'd stuck with it for so long, Sally had replied, 'It's the future, love. It's always changing.'

At 10:30 Margie would pop in for a chunk of marble cake to keep her going in her empty shop, and then at 12:45 George Partridge, the thirty-four-year-old miserable librarian, would show up for a coffee. George's mother had been the town's librarian; her mother in turn had been a librarian, and her mother before *her* had also been a librarian, but George hated reading. Growing up with books shoved into his hands, being forced to recite prose and quizzed on great writers had instilled in George a resentment for all kinds of literature.

And then at five o'clock on the dot, Cherry's final Usual of the day would arrive.

'The usual please, Miss Redgrave,' said a voice.

Cherry couldn't see its owner but she knew exactly who it belonged to. 'And which usual would that be today, Bruce?' she said, wiping her hands on a tea towel as Bruce clambered onto a tall stool at the counter. His hands grasped the brown leather seat and as he heaved himself up, his size-four feet came off the ground. He swung his legs around like a gymnast on a pommel horse and with a breath of relief he replied, 'Whatever you say it is.'

Cherry gave him a smile but as she ducked to reach for his treat in the display counter, her eyes welled with tears. Her gaze drifted past the cakes to the large front windows of the shop and there, standing with its forehead slumped against the glass, peering in with its long drooping eyes and gangly limbs hanging lifeless by its sides . . . was Worthlessness.

Cherry looked around the tables, at all her usual customers sitting in their usual spots with their usual orders on their usual plates, wearing their usual masks in an attempt to hide what Cherry could plainly see: their bad feelings. The feelings formed a disorderly queue outside the bakery when their souls were inside, grumbling and gurgling, writhing and wrestling: Sally's Obsessiveness, Margie's Loneliness, George's Depression, Orla's Exhaustion and Bruce's Worthlessness.

They howled and moaned to be let inside, to take control of their humans once more, but Cherry's bakery was a safe place for her Usuals. She didn't know why but she had realised a long time ago that no matter where she opened up her bakeries, some kind of line was always drawn at the doorway, a line that no bad feeling could cross. Maybe it was because of all the good feeling she'd contained inside her shop. But they would still thump against the woodwork and bang on the windows, unheard by the townspeople and desperate to get in.

Cherry's bakery was a safe haven, a place where people could forget their troubles for an hour or two. And when their bad feelings latched back onto them as they left, Cherry noticed that their troubles seemed a little smaller than before.