Chapter 1

I know that I'm with God.

He's with me in the darkness. He's close to me.

Not real close.

But close enough I know He's there.

Somewhere.

I can feel Him – so I know He must be.

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It was Him that brought me here.

At least, I think He did. Only it ain't what I was expecting.

I never thought it'd be dark here – but it is. It's real dark. Pitch-dark. And it can't be night-time cos there's birds singing. There's a blackbird and a sparrow. There's all sorts. And them birds don't sing at night.

'Cept maybe they do in heaven. Maybe they sing here all the time.

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If I shift my head, it hurts me inside and out. So I don't try to move. I stay as still as I can.

My Names Not Friday.indd 9 13/04/2015 14:46

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It's kinda damp here in the darkness. I got it up inside my nose. A musky smell. Like fur. Like rabbit. Yeah, maybe it's like a rabbit.

And there's another smell, a whiff of old shoes, like when you wear 'em for too long after they get wet. But I ain't wearing shoes. I left 'em in the Sunday box and they ain't no good to me there. Not any more.

I can feel the dust beneath my toes.

And there's a bag on my head. The cloth's against my cheek. That's the reason I can't see my feet. I got a bag on my head that's been used to carry rabbits.

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I still don't move a muscle. But in my skin, in my head and my heart, I panic. I feel like a cornered rat, scrambling up against the wall of a deep, dark cellar, breathing fast enough I could've run a mile.

So I say to slow down, Samuel.

Slow down now and calm yourself. Take one step at a time. Give yourself the time to think this thing through.

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I know I'm lying down. I got a sense of me stretched out upon the ground and it feels like I'm lying on twigs and stuff. Yeah, I'm sure I am. I got one sticking in my side and my hands are forced around behind my back and my wrists are sore cos of the rope that's tying 'em close together. My arms ache too, all up around the shoulders.

My Names Not Friday.indd 10 13/04/2015 14:46

I try to move an arm – start to wriggle and twist.

And that's when I hear the footsteps, coming over to me on the hard ground, making me freeze like a rabbit in a trap, cos all I can think is that God's coming, that it's the foot of God upon the ground and He's coming for me. He's coming. And He's wearing big boots.

Well, He lifts me up. My Lord, He lifts me up. He's got big hands. He's got strong arms. He flips me on my back and then flips me again, laying me over a mule like I'm some big ol' bag of potatoes. I know it's a mule cos it snorts when He lays me down upon its back, like it's tired of me already. That's mules for you. Always complaining. Even in heaven.

When He walks away, He don't go far. I hear Him moseying about in the bushes, shuffling around like He's collecting things together, putting pots inside of other pots, that sort of thing. There's the creak of a leather strap being tightened on a saddlebag.

I'm finding it difficult to breathe now I'm slung over a mule with my hands behind my back. My chest begins to hurt and I have to take tiny little breaths that don't fill me up with enough good air.

Why's God want to put me on a mule? And why'd He need to tie me up? We made a deal, Him and me, but this ain't what I expected.

I can't ask Him. That's the last thing I can do. It'd show a lack of faith, and I can't show any weakness. Not now. I won't show any doubt in my darkest hour. And so I don't say a thing. I just lie where I am, listening to him walk about in the bushes, the twigs all snapping under His big clomping boots. One time He stops, stands still a while and relieves Himself upon the ground.

My Names Not Friday.indd 11 13/04/2015 14:46

I try to wriggle a bit, try to slide down one side of the mule to get myself more comfortable, and I hope God's not watching me cos I must look like a worm that's just been unearthed, what with my ass in the air and wriggling for all I'm worth. He sees me though. Comes and stands nearby. And I stop wriggling.

God sucks His teeth. He slaps the saddlebag over the back of the mule, close enough that the thick leather edge pushes up into the top of my arm, and then He leads the mule on and the bones in its back begin to shift as it walks and that makes me even more uncomfortable. In fact, it's just about the most uncomfortable thing I can remember – that mule's bones on my bones, the both of us grinding each other up the wrong way and getting on each other's nerves. If the mules here in heaven are as stubborn as the mules back at home, then this one'll spit in my eye if he ever gets a chance. My Lord he will. He'll try and kick me to kingdom come.

We walk like that for a long time. I don't know where we're going.

I'd always assumed that when you got to heaven you'd turn up right where you're supposed to be. I hadn't figured on having to travel nowhere and I'm wondering how long it'll be before we stop. But we don't ever stop. We just keep on walking till I'm hurting so much that I lift myself up to ease the aching in my bones.

And that's when I fall off the back of the mule.

I hit the ground hard and that mule sees his chance and he kicks out, catching me in the stomach so that all the air rushes out of me.

'Damn you, mule,' I curse him. 'Damn you to kingdom come.'

Straightaway I hear them boots. They walk right up to me

My Names Not Friday.indd 12 13/04/2015 14:46

and I sit up quickly, turning my head first one way then the other, trying to get a sense of where God is, cos I'm afraid of Him more than ever on account of having just cussed His mule.

God sucks at his teeth again. I can sense He's real close, probably crouching right down beside me with His face up close to mine. and He lays His hands upon my head and takes hold of the sack, intending to lift it up, I'm sure, and I quickly shut my eyes because I'm afraid to look upon the face of God, and we're about to be right up close, my eyes looking into His eyes, and that don't seem right to me. That don't seem right at all.

I hold my breath. I squeeze my face so tight it's as small as I can get it.

Two pink discs appear on the lids of my eyes. I feel the warmth of the sun on my face and I have the breath of the Lord in my nostrils, all smelling of bacon like he's just had breakfast.

'Open your eyes,' He tells me.

He ain't got the kind of voice you might imagine. He's all high-pitched and squeaky. A bit like a girl only not a girl.

I shake my head.

I know it doesn't do to disagree with the Lord, but I'm full of the fear of Him, full of the fear it's not Him, and I try to look away.

He don't sound pleased. 'I said, open your eyes.'

My eyelids are like two heavy doors that I pull up on a chain, all creaking and stubborn. I lift my head to look at Him.

God is smiling at me.

Only not in a loving way.

He has a tooth missing. A half-chewed stick of liquorice

My Names Not Friday.indd 13 13/04/2015 14:46

sits in the gap between His teeth, and His mouth has got a wicked smile, kinda lopsided, like He's gonna laugh in my face at any moment.

Truth be told, He looks more like the Devil himself.

And I'm asking myself, How could this be? How could it have come to this?

But I know it only too well.

And it wasn't my fault. Not none of it.

My Names Not Friday.indd 14 13/04/2015 14:46