

Scratch Planet

Chapter One

Sinewy strands tangled in his frantic fingers. Roots! He changed direction – towards the roots – *upwards*. In his head, the counter went back down to zero. He started again, focusing, counting each scratch he made. One, two, three . . . six . . . ten . . . twenty . . . loose soil and tiny clumps of grass dropped onto his face. He pushed hard with his right hand and broke through into cool, fresh air. A stream of it filtered into his cramped tunnel. The boy sucked in some delicious deep breaths. Almost there. He pulled his hand back inside and stared through the gap. The night sky gave a sinister wink. *Come out if you dare.*

Squeezing his head through first, he wriggled free like a caterpillar emerging from a chrysalis. Born again. His first thought was for his family. Their house . . . *his* house . . . crushed. It wasn't the only one. The whole street had been levelled . . . the road, the pavement, shattered. No one could have survived that. And yet, as he gazed around, he didn't feel sad, he didn't feel a sense of loss. In fact, quite the reverse, he felt . . . *in good spirits*. There had to be survivors. Not everyone could have been caught inside buildings.

He scanned his murky surroundings for movement. At the base of the hillside, something caught his eye. A shadowy silhouette emerged from behind a hedgerow. He recognised the gait. 'Buggy . . . HEY, BUGGY!' No response. Too far away. The boy got to his feet and began stumbling down the slope. He called out again, 'Buggy! Hey, Bug! You OK? What happened? Another sinkhole? A quake? You seen anyone else?'

Buggy turned and raised a finger to his lips. He pointed towards a construction site portaloo. It was pretty much the only thing left standing amongst the rubble. A continuous muffled drone carried over the silence.

It was coming from inside. The two boys crept forwards. An arm's length from the door, they paused. With a nod from his friend, Buggy reached for the latch.

There was a sudden metallic screech as the door burst open. An old woman shot out, holding a small leather-bound bible in front of her like a shield. She screamed as she moved, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!'

Buggy reeled backwards, cradling the hand that had been smashed by the opening door. 'JESUS CHRIST, MRS MAGNER!'

The old woman froze, her eyes wide and wild. She turned her face towards Buggy, tilting her head slightly. 'Don't you blaspheme! He was here!' She drew the bible to her chest. The silver embossed cross glinted in the moonlight. 'You, young Simeone . . . Simeoney . . . what is it they call you?'

'Buggy.'

'That's right. I remember you. He came in the night. Did you hear him, Bugger, you and your friend?'

Buggy bent over, hands on knees, taking a moment to recover. 'It's Buggy, Mrs Magner. People call me Buggy. And this is my friend . . . erm . . .' he paused, 'my friend . . . Muddy. Muddy, this is Mrs Magner. She delivers leaflets for the church.' He leaned towards his friend and lowered his voice, 'She's a bit . . . cuckoo, only remembers nicknames. So, I made one up for you.'

'What? Fourteen years and that's the best you could come up with?'

'Have you seen yourself recently?'

'Muddy,' interrupted Mrs Magner. She gave a slight introductory nod of her head.

'Mrs Magner,' acknowledged Muddy. He tried not to stare at the old lady's left eye. It was almost white, like a thick fog had drifted across her eyeball.

'He was here in the night.'

'Who was here?'

'Satan.'

‘Oh, right, of course.’ Muddy looked to Buggy for help. All he got was a slight frown and shake of the head. *Don’t upset her.* ‘Where was Satan, Mrs Magner?’

The old lady had a quick look around. ‘I hid in there, praying.’

‘In the portaloo?’

Mrs Magner nodded slowly. ‘*The . . . beast . . . knocked . . . at . . . my . . . door.*’

Muddy tried to think of a sensible response but drew a blank. He fired a *you know her, you deal with her* look at Buggy.

Buggy did his best to step up to the plate. He moved to the old lady’s side, put a comforting hand on her shoulder. ‘Don’t worry, Mrs Magner. Satan . . . erm . . . well, it’s a portaloo, he probably, you know . . . just needed a dump.’

Mrs Magner grabbed both boys with a strength that belied her wiry frame. ‘I will send wild beasts among you,’ she hissed, ‘which shall rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle, and make you few in number; and your highways shall be desolate. And I will draw out a sword after you; and your land will be desolate, and your cities waste . . .’ She went silent. And her silence was magnified a thousandfold. Nothing broke it. No traffic, no TVs, no radios . . . nothing. The three of them stood like that for an age, absorbing the devastation around them. As suddenly as she had grabbed them, Mrs Magner let them go. ‘There! Look there!’ The old lady stumbled away through the darkness. ‘An angel!’

Muddy gave Buggy a gentle shove. ‘He probably just needed a *dump*?’

‘Just trying to put her mind at ease.’

‘And an image of Lucifer laying down a log in her sanctuary is going to do that, is it?’

‘Works for me,’ shrugged Buggy. ‘Mrs Magner! Come back! We should stay together!’ he shouted.

The old lady disappeared from view. Both boys set off in pursuit.

Muddy reached the house first. It was wrecked but hadn’t been completely flattened like the others. Even in the gloom, Mrs Magner’s footprints were clearly visible in the dust outside. They circled around a pile

of bricks and led into what used to be a kitchen. From there, the trail went along a hallway and over a fallen lounge door. Inside the lounge, a peculiar stand-off was taking place. Mrs Wagner was in the centre of the room, patting her bible and staring at a small girl. The small girl was in the corner of the room, patting her toy dog and staring at Mrs Wagner.

The girl looked about five years old. She was covered in dust and bits of debris but the mop of blonde hair on her head seemed to glow in the darkness. Her big blue eyes were like saucers, bloodshot and moist. They were surrounded by circles of clean skin, where she had rubbed the tears with bunched fists. It served to make her eyes look even bigger. Her face was dry now. She had no tears left.

‘Angel,’ announced Mrs Wagner.

‘Is that her name?’ whispered Muddy.

Mrs Wagner said nothing.

Buggy moved forwards for a better view. ‘Well, I guess it’s her name now.’

The room fell silent.

‘I know,’ said Muddy, ‘let’s all stand here staring at the small, frightened child. That should really comfort her after everything that’s happened.’ He nudged past Mrs Wagner and crouched by the girl’s side. ‘Hi, I’m . . . well, I guess I’m Muddy. That’s my mate Buggy, and that . . .’ Muddy struggled to find a suitable description, ‘that’s Mrs Wagner. Is this yours?’ He reached towards the girl’s toy dog and patted it. The dog had a collar around its neck. The collar had six bands of tiny lights around it. When the collar moved, the lights flickered. The girl looked at the lights and seemed to relax a little, so Muddy continued to pat the toy. ‘He’s a lovely little dog. I bet you look after him really well. And we’re going to look after you really well too. So, there’s no need to be afraid anymore. Does he have a name, your dog?’

The girl looked up at Muddy then looked back at the lights without answering.

‘No? Well, luckily I’ve got a great imagination and that means I’m good at making up names.’ Muddy paused. ‘I think I’ll call your little dog

... err, Little Dog, if that's OK?' He lifted the toy's head. 'Is that OK with you little dog? Hmmm? If I call you Little Dog from now on?' He stooped and put his ear to the toy dog's mouth. 'Pardon? Yes? Oh, that's great. Thanks, Little Dog.' Muddy looked up at the girl's face. She was frowning. Not an angry or fearful frown, but a curious frown, as though she was trying to work out if the boy in front of her really had spoken to her toy dog. 'And what about you?' asked Muddy. 'Looks like we'll be calling you Angel unless you'd like to tell us your real name?'

The girl sniffed. Then picked her nose. Then turned away.

'Alright, well, Angel, you and Little Dog stay here for a moment. Me and Buggy are going to have a look around this house ... what's left of it. Mrs Wagner will stay with you.' As soon as the words left his mouth, he realised how utterly uncomfoting they were. He might as well have said, *me and my mate are going to leg it now and leave you alone with the mad old witch, OK?* He ruffled the girl's hair. 'Call us if you need us though.'

Only one bedroom in the entire house was in decent shape. It was missing a wall, but it had a sturdy roof and two useable beds. The boys rescued two mattresses from rubble in the other rooms before fetching Angel and Mrs Wagner.

'There's no power anywhere. It's getting a bit lighter out, but it's still too dangerous to go wandering around. We should stay here for a few hours and get some sleep. This room is safe,' assured Muddy. 'Angel, you and Little Dog can have that bed.' He pointed to the bed in the corner, furthest away from the open wall. 'Mrs Wagner, that one's yours. Me and Buggy will take the mattresses.'

Muddy dragged his mattress next to Angel's bed and sat with his back up against the wall.

Buggy positioned his by the stairs. He sat and looked out through the open space. 'No sinkhole could have caused all this.'

'Oh, I know what caused it,' said Mrs Wagner with unnerving certainty. She lay flat on her bed. 'All in whose nostrils *was* the breath of life, of all that *was* in the dry land, died. And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping

things, and the fowl of the heaven, and they were destroyed.’ She drew the bible from her pocket and clasped it to her chest with both hands. She looked like a corpse that had been laid to rest.

Muddy tutted. ‘Well, there’s a lovely bedtime story for the kids. Thank you, Mrs Magner. Really cheered us all up, that.’

Buggy glanced over, silently mouthed the question, *what’s she on about?*

‘She’s basically saying that everyone in the whole wide world is dead.’

‘Oh.’ Buggy thought for a moment. ‘Well, we’re not dead.’

Mrs Magner chuckled and closed her eyes.

‘Precisely,’ agreed Muddy. ‘A good point well made, mate. Listen, maybe each of us should say what we remember from last night. Then we can try to piece together exactly what happened.’

And so, they sat, ready to share their thoughts – two boys, an old lady and a young Angel. And not one of them spoke a single word. Angel was the first to fall asleep.

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