

THE
EVERYWHEN
ANGELS



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To Angel

Who's that writing?
... John the Revelator ...
He wrote the Book of the Seven Seals

anon. American gospel song.

PART ONE

**THE THIRTEENTH
ANGEL**

CHAPTER 1

A CURRENT OF WEIRDNESS

I think this is how it all began. Another day, same school. Another day, same walk to the bus. Another day, same bus ride. Another day, same walk the last hundred metres from the bus to the school gates. And this time, as it had been for several weeks now, another day, same game of tag with Christine Cook and the Patel sisters, and they played rough. I knew I'd have stood up to any one of them, but I didn't hang around to take all of them on; they had this way of attracting a crowd, and the crowd would join in against whoever they had a down on. Sorry – I wasn't going to play their game, and I didn't care if everyone thought I was bottling out, I preferred them under the CCTVs in the school building, where they had to mind what they did.

So, that Monday – I ran from the bus towards the side gate of the school, trying to make it look as though I was trying to catch up with a mate. I ignored the mock-friendly calls of “Hey, Angela!

Hey, Poet!” from behind me, but in my hurry I took a wrong step and staggered like one of those binge-drinkers we get in town on a Saturday night, head down, making long, clumsy strides to avoid falling. My bag shot out of my grasp, and my little Book of Common Prayer with the silver angels on the cover slid out of my pocket. I bent down to pick them up and someone barged into my bum, shoving me forward towards the metal security fence which sealed off the little piece of overgrown waste ground between our school and the builder’s yard.

I didn’t even have time to cry out. I knew this was going to hurt, and hurt badly. Even if I managed to put my hands out to stop myself, one of them would go through the rails of the fence, pulling my blazer and shirt back and ripping at the skin on my arm. Even if I turned my face and shut my eyes, I knew my cheek would slam into that fence with all the force that my hurtling body could lend it. But I did turn it and I did shut my eyes, imagining the cuts, the bruises, the bleeding, the sprains, the broken bones, and lots of pain.

A split second before knowing that this crash must happen, I knew somehow that it hadn’t. I felt nothing, and for that split second I was even convinced that I was unconscious and dreaming. Then I was convinced that I was wide awake, but

rather than sprawling in pain on the pavement outside the school, I was standing about one hundred metres along the asphalt track between the side gate and the front door of the school. Alone.

Sometimes I freak myself out, because something weird happens and I take it in my stride. When I am dreaming, having a nightmare, and there is some monster round the corner, I protect myself by becoming that monster in my dream; I hang my arms out in menace, I moan and growl, I feel the need to terrify in my turn, to hunt down prey, to rip flesh and break bones. And when something weird happens while I am awake, I step back, look around, and wait for an explanation. If an explanation comes, it comes. If it doesn't, and I can't step back, look around, and wait for one, I begin to feel a pull to do as I do in my dreams, to go with the flow and become the monster. In real life that is so scary.

This time I stood there, about a hundred and fifty metres from where I thought I was, with no one around me, and everything different. All the other kids from the school were gone, all sixteen hundred-odd, and the teachers - everyone. The school appeared to be quiet and empty, and when I looked back towards the road and the houses outside, there was no sound and no movement. It was as though I had come back

there at midnight, only it was daylight; and that was another weird thing – when I had dived headlong at the metal fence there had been sunshine; now there was a cold, nagging wind, grey clouds from horizon to horizon, and a feel of winter in the air. The only sound, apart from the wind in my ears, was coming from a few crows in the scraggy trees behind the main school building. It was like they were saying “We know what’s going on, even if you don’t”. I wondered for a moment or two whether maybe I was dead, and there was no tunnel to a bright light, but instead of that my own private hell – school. The wind was certainly making my ears sting, and all I could think about as I stood there was a silly quotation about Hell being cold. Like I said, sometimes I freak myself out, and this time I said to myself, “This is totally random, scary, but it’s got to be real somehow. OK, let’s not just stand here.”

See, it seemed to me that if I stood there and did nothing, the weirdness would overwhelm me, drown me. The only way to cope with it was to walk into it. OK there was no wardrobe, no old-fashioned lamppost, no snow, but I knew I had a choice between going insane or accepting that I was in some crazy Narnia of my own. I had stepped into a storybook, or into one of my own surreal poems. Maybe there was no monster lurking round the corner, but there was still no

obvious explanation either. If I couldn't become the monster, I had to become the weirdness, swim in it, go with that flow. Maybe I would be washed up somewhere I recognised.

Going home seemed a sensible option, but as soon as the thought occurred to me, I felt like the tide of weirdness was flowing in the other direction. I wanted to go into the school, or I was being carried in that direction whether that was what I wanted or not.

I faced the big front door of the school, thrust my hands in my pockets to keep them warm, and took a couple of strides with my shoulders hunched. Then some more. They got easier as I approached the building, and my hand tightened around the little prayer-book in my pocket. I felt no surprise. That little shape in my hand seemed to belong here, and I got a kind of strength from feeling the angels pressing into my palm.

When I got to the door I half-expected it to be locked. It wasn't – it swung open easily, letting out a warm draught – and I stepped inside, stood still, and listened. I could hear the occasional muted caw from the crows outside, a slight rustle as that draught moved a piece of paper on the notice board, but nothing else. I looked to the right and the left, and as far as I could tell the school was deserted. It had that smell you get in

schools after everyone has left, a smell that tells you everyone was there a short while ago, kicking up the dust, sweating, letting food smells drift out of the dining room. The smell the school cleaners leave was there, and the smell of old books and new paper, and that smell you get when a photocopier gets hot. They were all there, and all those familiar things made the school seem perfectly normal and the situation even weirder.

Suddenly, down the corridor to my right, through a couple of glass doors, I thought I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head and looked down that way. Nothing was moving.

“Hello?” I called out, not very loudly, and immediately wished that I hadn’t. I almost felt as though I had broken something more than the silence, like a rule maybe. I wanted to turn back, go out of the front door again and run, but the moment I thought this and looked over my shoulder, I saw through the glass of the front door that the day had become darker. Or that may have been just how it looked through that type of glass – the sort with a wire mesh in it – but at any rate I could see the trees thrashing wildly, as though the wind had increased, and the crows flapping untidily in the air. Could one cry from me, and a single thought, really have

conjured that?

Again I felt in my pocket. That little Book of Common Prayer was still snug in my hand, and again it felt good there, sort of right, meant to be. I felt my confidence return again, and a suggestion that the tide of weirdness was flowing down the corridor down which I thought I had seen the movement. I said “OK” under my breath, nodded as though I was trying to convince a hidden watcher and not just myself, and pushed through the double doors into the corridor.

I stopped and listened. Had I just heard a faint snatch of conversation, the scrape of a school chair on a classroom floor, a door snicking closed? It was difficult to say. What I did know was that the further I walked down that corridor, the gentler the current became which carried me along. It was just as insistent, but it seemed warmer, almost comforting by comparison with the near-panic I had felt outside. And it occurred to me that I was accepting that I could feel all this as though I had been born with this extra sense, even though discovering it was like waking up and suddenly being fluent in Japanese! Although I was walking down the corridor, looking for something, it felt more like something had been looking for me, and was pleased that it had found me.

I thought, “Maybe there really is a monster, and I am becoming it, like in my dreams,” but I smiled at that thought.

I stopped at the door to a classroom. The current, faint now but still insistent, was flowing into that room. Through the glass panel I could see the back wall of the room, with maps and posters on it, and a window to the grey outside. The brief glimpse of that grey outside, like a pang, reminded me somehow that I was where I was meant to be. I thought I heard a bit of laughter from inside the room. I shifted slightly, and caught sight of part of someone’s back, a shoulder in a school sweatshirt.

I hesitated for one moment longer. Monsters did not wear school sweatshirts. I took a breath, pushed the door, and stepped inside.

About a dozen faces turned to look at me – faces belonging to kids from the school.

~ END OF PREVIEW ~