



# PURGED

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*For Joy, who kept the light going.  
This book is for you, and for the bridge in the rain. xxp*



‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,  
baptising them in the name of the Father  
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’

*Matthew 28:19 (The Great Commission)*



# CHAPTER ONE

He was about to push her under for the fourth time, the final time.

Then something snapped in his fingers. In his heart. Just a sudden jolt that he might finish this way too quickly and wouldn't log it all in his brain. To rush stuff is to forget stuff, his mum once said. So he clicked a quick pause on the world and looked up at the lake. Just for a second or two.

Night had turned the water black but a fat moon was hanging. The sky was cloudless and close. He even saw a star moving slowly, the tiniest dot. The International Space Station maybe, or perhaps a full-on, sent-from-the-heavens sign. The latter, he decided. At the far edge of the lake the waterfall was still moaning in agreement, pounding hard into a cloud of spray. Even the jet-black pine trees swayed happily to its hiss. But the best and most magnificent sight was at his feet.

One more push.

He looked down at her, in awe. She lolled in his arms, water slapping at her shockingly skinny shoulders. The fused wet rope of her blonde hair had curled onto the surface of the lake, but her body . . . it was glowing. Wow. The Holy Spirit was bubbling under her bony skin, changing her and letting him watch.

She giggled, just then.

Her eye flicked open, just the one, deep in its socket. ‘So are you gonna let me up or what?’

It was wrong and he knew it was wrong. He was stalling and stretching it out; shirking his cosmic responsibilities. But she looked so . . . well . . . angelic. Besides, what sort of ungrateful lunatic would go all Speedy Gonzales through an actual, bona fide miracle?

But as he pondered all this, she had got her footing again on the lake bed and was up. She waded quickly to the shore in noisy sloshes, calling for him to follow. Then she turned and her skull face was beaming. His breath quivered. He glanced quickly around the lake and noticed that the sound of the waterfall had changed. There was a tapping sound in its drone now. A *tut-tut-tut*. He hurried and dropped next to her on the lapping shore, her dripping bare feet still touching the lake’s edge. He flicked the sacred water from his fingers.

‘I absolutely love it here.’

He winced at how loud her voice was.

When he picked her up earlier, she’d said her name was Nicola Knox. It was probably the most ridiculous name he’d ever heard. She described anorexia as ‘an insect eating her from the inside’. A disease, she said. *Riiiiight*. He knew that stuff. He’d seen those shows. The phrase ‘eating disorder’ was just a fancy pants way of saying vanity. Only fourteen years old and she was already hooked on idols. Still, though, as he ran his eyes down her arms, wasn’t she just a little plumper than before? Healing already?

‘I should thank you,’ she sniffed, a little weepy now. It made her voice quieter, which was good. ‘I feel . . . nice.’

He smiled at that.

‘And it all changes from now? I’ll eat better?’

‘Oh, you’ll feast. You’re a new creation. There’s no more suffering.’

‘Sounds so . . . I don’t know. Crazy.’

He stared at her.

‘I mean, I believe it, but it just comes across a bit—’

‘A bit brilliant. Because you’re not crazy. You’re baptised . . . you’re God’s adopted child.’

*Tut-tut-tut – you’re losing control of this.*

‘You *do* look different,’ he whispered.

‘Do I?’ Her unpleasantly thin neck extended a little. It reminded him of the part in *E.T.* that had always repulsed him. The long raising of the head, the telescopic throat.

‘Yeah . . . you look healthier.’

She threw her hands over her mouth and laughed nervously through them. Guffawed, in fact. ‘When I get home I’m going to rock up to the dinner table and eat like a maniac. Mum’s going to freak. And she’ll cry. God, we both will. We’ll *bawl*.’ Her eyes glistened with water, then she spotted a shift in his face. She prodded him with a genuinely sharp finger and for a second he saw that glow under her skin start to flicker and fade. ‘I won’t go back on this.’

‘You’ll stick with Jesus?’

‘I’ll never go back. Ever.’ The mechanics of her face peeled back a smile, which only emphasised the frightful bones in her cheeks. It made him sad, because he’d seen this before. People insisting that once they’d had a divine experience they’d never move away from faith. It offended him to hear that sentiment again, and it hurt him too.

Because she wouldn’t stick with this.

The self-inflicted slashes on her arms were proof of that. Nicola Knox was a girl of extreme hot and colds. When the hard times came, when she caught reflections in the butcher’s window of her furious ‘fat’ teenage self, glaring back, she’d see insects again. She’d lose the faith that was burning in her right now. And really, if that was to happen, then why bother? Why give someone the Holy Spirit and the promise of eternal, blissful life, if He would just end up dribbling right out as she walked back to the car? Fact is, she was going to die at some later date. No question about it. Maybe next year in a bus crash, or maybe when she hit eighty and was all obese, sipping soup through a straw on a cruise ship. The time didn’t matter. Either way she’d have

lost this moment and be tumbling overboard. Straight into hell.

He'd help her.

She smiled at him, but really it was more of a grin. And he knew grins are different. There was something about her that he didn't like any more. Something old. It flashed in her eyes. For the first time he noticed one of her nipples pushing and rising under her wet summer shirt.

His eyes lingered on it, willing the shadow to rise. Astonished at how quickly sin can spread from one person to the next. Like fleas. Or the plague. He had to look away. He stood up and stretched out his arms behind his back, elbows popping. He could hear the blood pulsing through his ears, like the wings of a huge invisible bird. But through it all he could hear—

*Tut-tut-tut – you're losing this.*

'I know it sounds childish,' she said, fingers stroking the grass, 'but I honestly feel like singing.'

'Then sing.'

'You won't laugh?'

'Never.'

She started. They were quiet drawn-out notes, high-pitched and tinny. No words, just humming. It sounded like 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. Hearing her choose such a song showed a hint of beauty about her again, which meant it wasn't too late.

She leant back, arms locked, hands in the grass and feet in the water. She closed her eyes and started swaying her head from side to side like this was a musical. She stopped humming and frowned. 'Do you know the actual words of this song? I can't—'

He stepped right up behind her. Leant over and looked straight down at her upside-down face, gazing back up. 'All things bright and beautiful . . .' he sang. His tuning was far better than hers.

'Oooo, that's it,' she said. 'That's the one.'

'All creatures great and small . . .'

Her eyes closed. She smiled again. 'Mmmmm. Keep going.'

'All things wild and wonderful, the Lord God made them all.'

There was a rock right by them, just next to where she'd stuffed her socks into her trainers. He'd noticed it earlier as they waded in. He leant over and grabbed it. It was a heavy, jagged thing, big enough to hurt his fingers as he stretched his hand around it. And it was very cold against his skin like it had been dropped there from very high up, chipped off the moon. The waterfall wasn't tutting any more.

'Don't stop singing,' she said. 'You sound lovely.'

'Each little flower that opens. Each little bird that sings . . .'

A tear caught in her eyelash and he heard her say, 'Oh my God, I'm forgiven,' under her breath. He logged that moment. Put it in his 'Things that I've Seen That are Glorious' file.

His own voice trembled as he sang. 'He made their glowing colours. He made their tiny wings.' Then he clenched his hand around the sharp rock. His eyes darted left and right. Then he raised it. No time to ponder now. It was all about speed.

He could hear her crying. 'I feel . . . so . . . clean . . . I feel—'

The rock made a sharp cracking sound when he hit her with it. The loud snap raced out across the lake. At first he thought it was the rock itself cracking but that was as solid as ever. Maybe anorexics had weaker bones. Or there was just less flesh to cushion a blow. Either way her forehead had pretty much caved in, first time.

He watched her stick legs jerk out, the hollows of her knees splashed hard into the water. He saw her freaky long toes clench like old ladies' fingers grasping for stuff. Her elbows gave way and she fell backwards, hard against the grass. He crouched next to her. Watched those deep eye sockets wincing. Lids tightly shut in pain, quickly covered in black-looking blood. She said, 'Ow. What did? Ow. Ow.' Each word getting louder.

'*Shhh. Shhhhhhhhhhh.* Little flower.'

Suddenly, two white balls flicked open in her face and they were instantly swamped by the black blood. Then the mad, wobbling howl of shock began and became a scream.

Panicked, he snapped his head round, just to make sure nobody was

taking a random stroll at three in the morning. He looked back across the field towards the barn where they'd parked. His white Astra glowed blue in the moonlight. He looked up at the Healing Centre at the far edge of the lake, then up the hill where the black silhouette of the church looked on at what he was doing. In his mind's eye, he could imagine applause coming from up there. From some late-night congregation, praying for his ministry. But it was the hiss of the waterfall, or rather creation itself, that was clapping its hands. The best part was that there were no dark figures on the hill, no flashing eyes in the woods. The village of Hobbs Hill was fast asleep, like he'd planned.

He must have been looking for longer than he thought because by the time he turned back Nicola had turned onto all fours and was starting to crawl away. She moved very slowly, he noticed, as if he might not actually see. It was very silly of her, really. For a moment he just observed the weird jerks of her skinny limbs, the fluids falling from her face. She was like some freaky animal person; one of those feral kids. And he saw urine flooding the backs of her legs.

*Help her!*

He grabbed the rock and raced up behind her, jamming his knee into her rib-lined back with all his weight. They both plunged into the grass. When her chest hit the soil her scream vanished in a thump of air and he leant in close. He placed a whisper in her ear, as tenderly as he could manage: 'You're going to be healed. You must let me finish.'

His hands clenched around his rock.

Arms high.

*Aaaaand down.*

This time the sound wasn't a crack, it was a moist thud. Someone dropping a watermelon on kitchen lino. It went deeper this time, right into the back of her skull. He had to yank and pull at the rock just to get it out of her sticky blonde hair.

'I've just got to get you to the water. You'll never be fat again. Okay? *Okay?*'

She was twitching like crazy underneath him, face down. Her legs,

her arms, her fingers all jerked. For one horrible second he thought she really might be full of insects, just like she'd said. And now he was being tricked into making little doors for them to get out.

But there was a little glow left. Just enough.

He didn't want to look at her, honestly he didn't, but he always wondered. When you snuff out the light, does it burn brighter just at the end? He'd just baptised her and her soul was in that delicate stage of freedom. Maybe he'd see this agony flash into wonder; terror into awe. Perhaps he'd spot a reflection deep in her eyes, of a tunnel opening up – a long white, strobing runway. Maybe she'd gasp something like, 'I can see God, and he's reaching out his hand.'

He had a little Mag-Light torch in a velcro pouch on his belt. He grabbed it and eagerly flipped her over onto her back. He clicked so that the beam would shine right into her face. But he didn't see heavenly bliss looking back. It was a frantic ghoul stuck with blood and soil, looking right at him. There were bits of grass on her face too, like the earth was wriggling its fingers around her, keeping her in the ground and the dust. But the world would have no claim on her now, he'd see to it.

*Help her!*

He grabbed her feet and started pulling her towards the water in hard frantic yanks. In the moonlight he could see her biting and chomping at the air, eyes rolling upward. He wouldn't be filing *that* memory away. No way. That was going straight into the brain bin. At one point she spasmed and her back arched horribly. A bubble of vomit raced up into his mouth so he had to swallow it.

He could see those two golden teeth of hers, at the back. The ones she'd shown off about before. They both flashed under the torchlight as she bit at the air, like there were two glowing eyes in her mouth. Someone hiding inside her. But he wasn't worried about it. He'd brought his tools. He'd sort that out, afterwards.

The waterfall. The roaring, jealous waterfall was now raging and calling out. It kept saying *bring her back, bring her back to me. Let's help her!*

It was just as he started to drag her into the cold water again that he noticed her lips peel apart, making thick bubbles of blood. She was saying something and he shivered when he heard it. At first it sounded like ‘please’. It hurt him to think that she was still pleading for it to stop. That she hadn’t realised that what was happening was the fulfilment of all they’d prayed for in the water only ten minutes before.

Yet when she said it again, it sounded less like please and more like *yes*.

Not a delirious ‘yes’, not a sexual ‘yes’, and definitely not a ‘please’, but *yes*.

And he felt a tear fall from his eye. Just like that.

Every sound blended: her screams, his breathing. The cows in the next field had even woken up, excited by the new smells. But it was the song of the constant waterfall that pulled it all together. And he knew that he was listening to the portcullis of heaven rattling open.

Chains swinging, angels singing.

God on this throne clasping his hands together in watery-eyed delight as another latchkey prodigal finally skipped her way down the front path. And a nod of appreciation from the Lord to him, his willing servant who gritted his teeth and did what other Christians would talk about but never dare do. To actually guide the lost ones home. A home that would never perish, spoil or fade.

Just before he pushed her under for the third and final time, he grabbed her wet, tiny hand and he kissed it gently. It was still glowing. Just a little, but enough to reflect on the quaking surface of the lake.

‘Nicola . . . you are beloved.’ He wiped a tear away with the palm of his hand, and checked his watch. ‘So let me sing you in.’

He sang the hymn again and was pleased to hear that she was singing too. Muffled and wet, but definitely there. He pushed her down and stood on her while he looked up at the stars. At all those little windows.