

Punched By An *Angel*



Ryan Gray

Volume One

"He needs to die!" A massive fist pounded a dark mahogany conference table, "That is the only way they will learn."

A muffled voice spoke through frustrated hands, "No it's not, plus it rarely makes a difference. I just need more time. If I can just...."

The head of the conference table cut the muffled speaker off, "You've had three extensions already. He won't change."

"He can change." The frustrated voice dropped to a low growl. "You have no patience, brother!"

The head of the table leaned forward, "And you don't know when to quit; the mortal dies tonight!"

Aggravated, the advocate stood up and shot back, "You've been over-eager to punch tenant's tickets ever since the crusades."

"And you've wasted our time and resources on a lost cause for years!" The chairman of the table had leaned so far forward that his heels lifted off the shimmering Berber carpet adorning the floor. He stuck his chin out, set his jaw, and gripped the table, glaring lasers at his opponent.

The opposition had a clean-shaven head. He wore a pin-striped navy blue suit and a large golden hooped earring in his left ear. A gleam sparkled from his right eye. He was almost a head shorter than the accuser but thicker throughout the shoulders and chest area. If the head of the table intimidated him, he did not show it.

A mediator arose from a chair between the battling parties and held out massive hands attached to giant arms. He was bigger than the others and shot sharp warning glances between the opposing parties. "Gentleman please, this is meant to be a discussion about a tenant. A tenant the Boss is extremely worried about. The matter has nothing to do with either of you being wrong or right. So, can we please focus back on the mission before either of you does or say something that will require," he paused for dramatic effect, then brought his hands together and cracked his knuckles, "consequences?"

The head of the table, still clenching his jaw, drifted his gaze to the left, "Azriel, what do you think?"

A third party, across from the mediating giant, looked up from behind folded hands. He sighed gently, staring at the ceiling, deep in thought. After shifting uncomfortably in his chair, Azriel looked around the table, then spoke, "I take pride in my work, but no joy. I have never decided a mortal's fate, much less a tenant, and I never will. I only transition those who have been placed on my list. No more - no less."

"Brilliant non-answer." The head of the table quipped as he rolled his eyes and plopped back into a white swivel chair.

"What is your deal, brother?" The bald advocate asked as he too retreated to his seat. "We have dealt with more tenants in breach of contract than we can count. Why is this one so different?" He paused and looked down for a second before shooting an icy glare at the head of the table, "Is it because you think I haven't done a good job?"

The table looked up at the advocate, then back to the prosecution, ready for the fight to kick off again. But, the tussle fizzled. Instead, the head of the table sighed and shook his head. "Of course not, Dee. You are the best. If anyone could aid this tenant, it was you." He grunted and gritted his teeth for a second while softly pounding the desk, "It's just this one - this guy! He was supposed to be SO much more, to be different. He had such potential, but now...."

"Listen, I know you see him as a hopeless cause, selfish and spoiled considering all he has been given, but I know tenant work better than any other agent. And I know this guy. He can still be brought back into contract compliance, maybe even on a mission."

The accuser chuckled to himself and leaned back with hands behind his head, "This is why I love you, brother; you are the ultimate optimist."

"I have to be." Dee replied with a grin, "It's my purpose, and I only give up on a tenant when I'm ordered to."

"Knock, knock." A new voice joined the room.

"Did you just say, 'knock-knock'?" Azriel chided the newcomer with a wry grin.

The knocker raised an eyebrow and replied with an air of dry refinement. "It's something I have observed young people saying, instead of actually wrapping the wooden door with knuckles. I find it fun and clever."

"Awe, to find joy in the simple things." The giant mediator mused with a chuckle.

The newcomer smiled back curtly, "Yes, to find joy is a gift I value - you gargantuan marble statue."

The giant was slightly hurt by the inference, "What? I find joy in things. Right?" He looked around the table for confirmation.

"Please, Uriel, why are we being visited by the head of administration? It's a long way for you to come just to pick another fight with our large stoic brother."

"Yes, I have an urgent note from the P.A.s office for Azriel and Denzin."

Everyone sat up straight in their chair and swallowed hard.

"From the Boss?" Azriel clarified.

"I assume." Uriel shrugged as he handed over a white, glowing envelope.

Azriel licked his lips and cleared his throat nervously as he peeled back a sealed fold. Inside was an A4 paper in a crisp trifold. He read the note allowed:

"The tenant will receive a stay of execution.
His fate will depend on his response to his agent's assistance and message.
The corresponding agent will make the Boss's desires VERY clear."

"What am I missing with this guy?" The head of the table spat out, "After all he has ignored and the privileged he has taken advantage of - of all people, this guy should know better! So, why does HE get another chance?"

Azriel slid the note across the table to the advocate while he spoke, "I will never fully understand the extent of the Boss's patience, but ultimately," he chuckled, "The Boss is a softy."

"Ironic, coming from the guy most of the known universe has nicked named 'Death.'"

"Get seen in a long dark hood one time, and I'm marked for life." He looked around the table, "you all know I was only picking up that cycle to put it away for the farmer's family, right?"

"Yes, brother, we know!" The entire table moaned in unison.

Azriel blew air out of his cheeks and sagged his shoulders before looking up and returning to the topic at hand, "Anyways, to your point, brother, I believe we all underestimate His patience and need it more than we like to admit." Death turned to the head of the table, "Being a warrior, you should also find that...how did you put it, a few seconds ago, Michael? 'Ironic.'"

Michael held up both hands in surrender, "Don't get me wrong, none of us would be here or exist without the Boss's enormous, sometimes frustrating, capacity for patience. I am only...."

"Being an annoyance and prolonging a settled conversation." The giant cut Michael off, "A conversation divulging into needless speculation and questioning."

"No one is second-guessing their orders, Gabriel." Uriel blurted.

"No, he is right; we have our orders." Michael put the conversation back on the correct track. "Brother Dee, it's up to you now. And everyone here will assist you if, or when you call."

Death placed a gentle hand on the bald agent next to him and winced ever so slightly, "And let us all hope, for the tenant's sake, the assistance you need is not from me."

Part One

Stomping down my oak mahogany floors, I brushed a family photo, almost knocking it from the nail which suspended it against the wall. Bumping the staged image of my wife, son, daughter, and myself with my shoulder also spilled a drop of my AM cappuccino. The studio portrait was my wife's favorite photo of the family. As it should be, "Darn photo sure cost me enough," I moaned inwardly. The pic 'had' to be shot and printed by some *fab* photographer. After steadying the overpriced frame and photo, I once again stomped my polished dress shoes down the hall until I reached my destination; I stuck my head around the corner, "Hun, where are my keys?"

My wife groaned and rolled her eyes at me, "I dunno. Where did you put them last?"

I growled under my breath, "If I knew that, I would not be asking."

"Ugh, fine, I'll find them - again!" My wife, halfway through her morning makeup routine, stood from her dressing table. She tightened the belt, closing her plush purple robe, and shot me a glare before heading back the way I had just come.

I followed her just as a bickering pair of offspring crossed our paths, "Why would I even touch your stupid laptop? I'd rather use my tablet." My 14-year-old daughter, the elder, rolled her eyes with expert precision.

My son, 11 years old, and the temper of the family, growled, "Because you are lazy and always forget to charge your stuff!" He chased her towards her room but was met by a slammed door in his face.

"Mom, please tell her to..."

I cut him off. "Not now, you two; I am late for work and can't find my keys!"

"Ugh, no one ever listens to me!" My son turned and fled to his room, slamming the door behind him.

I turned towards him as he flew by and stepped in his direction. I was ready with a lecture about patience and not slamming doors, but jingling keys in my face stopped me short. Before I could ask where they were, my wife answered with another eye roll. "Under the sweater you wore to the school game last night, and then just dumped onto the sofa."

I smiled sweetly and grinned, "Sorry...thanks." I kissed her cheek, downed the rest of my cappuccino, dropped the cup in the kitchen sink, and escaped into the cool morning air on a bright sunny day.

Sixty seconds later, I was on my way to the other side of town in my new sedan. It was electric, a good excuse for an upgrade. The quietness of the vehicle still unnerved me. However, the amenities and available updates that came with the luxury model were incredible.

I flipped my blinker on to indicate a left turn and passed a mail carrier; he looked up and smiled at me, I waved, but he only continued grinning; something in his eye caught the sun because his right eye gleamed. "Strange fellow," I mused.

A few minutes later, I was cruising down the interstate; I flipped on my favorite conservative talk podcast. I only had to tell the onboard computer to turn it on; it still amazed me every time. I looked up just in time to notice all the other car's brake lights in front of me going red. "Ah, come on!" I braked with plenty of time to spare but knew I would be late getting to the office.

I leaned to the left, against my door, beginning the traffic "dance:" a stop-and-go annoyance with no rhythm but plenty of guaranteed frustration. Several motorcycles drifted past, splitting lanes, "That's not a bad way to travel today." I spoke aloud just as a massive roar behind me drowned out my conservative talk podcast.

A biker in all black, with a shiny little pit helmet strapped to his head, drifted towards me slowly. His massive hog was long and wide, barely narrow enough to slip between the traffic lanes, so he drifted by slowly. As he passed me, he came close to stopping beside me, slowing to a slight crawl. He looked into my window and made eye contact, and grinned.

I smiled back and held a hand up as a small wave; he didn't respond but kept on grinning. I wouldn't have noticed him much. However, just as his face was almost out of sight, a gleam sparkled from his right eye.

I sat up straight, "Huh, that's not possible." It had suddenly occurred to me that the biker looked an awful lot like the mail carrier.

HONK HONK....I had gotten lost in my thoughts, and traffic was moving, I had 'dared' to wait three seconds without moving forward. I complied.

After twenty minutes of stop-and-go dancing on the interstate, I made it to my exit. The exit ramp wound me around 360 degrees before dumping me in front of a stop sign at city street level. As I came to a complete and total stop, I noticed a homeless man holding a cardboard sign to my right. He was standing close enough to the car, so I could only see up to his chin. I remembered I had a couple of dollars in my middle consul, which was a rarity. I dug through the compartment, found the old green papers, and pressed the button to roll down the passenger side window. "Hey, friend, I have a few bucks for you."

The homeless gent turned, stepped up to my car, and bent down. He reached in, took the money from me, and looked up, making eye contact...a gleam sparkled in his right eye.

"AH!!!" I screamed and gassed my car without thinking or looking, but thank heavens, the intersection was clear. I came flying into my office parking lot, gripping my steering wheel with white knuckles. "Maybe I'm coming down with something? Maybe I drank something...no that wouldn't...or maybe, I..." my paranoid contemplation continued as I opened my car door and stood from the vehicle, briefcase in hand.

I continued to mutter under my breath excuses and reasons why my mind was playing tricks on me. I passed a landscapist trimming a strip of grass leading up to my office entrance. He wore gray overalls and a gray hat. Peering up from underneath the hat, he grinned at me; a gleam sparkled from his right eye.

“Holy Moses?” I screamed, gripped my briefcase like a football running back, and sprinted past the impossible gardener and into my office.

“Pastor, pastor...Are you ok?”

“What? Who?” I cleared my throat, breathed, and then turned back to my office manager, “Marge, who is that gentleman trimming the lawn outside?” I pointed in his direction.

She stared at me, puzzled, “There should be no one, Pastor; the landscapers were here yesterday.” She jumped up and walked around her desk until she stood next to me and followed my finger with her eyes. No one was there.

“Huh, I could have sworn.”

“Do you want me to call the landscapers back to fix something, or did they miss a section, pastor?”

“No.” I almost snapped back, “I mean...no, thank you, Marge, that will not be necessary.”

“Ok, can I get you some coffee or water?”

“Ah yeah, sure,” I replied absent-mindedly, wiping a bead of stray sweat from my brow. I turned and headed into my office.

Marcy was on the phone at her receptionist's desk and waved as I approached. She still managed to hand me a stack of memos for me to go through as I passed by. She clicked a button on the phone and pointed her mouth away from the phone in my direction, “Pastor John, don't forget, you have that Korean delegation coming to visit on Sunday.

I smiled weakly and said thank you, only half listening as I took the notes from her out of habit more than desire. Stepping into the office, I loosened my tie and popped open the top button of my collar. I dropped my briefcase onto my desk and then remembered I had my memos in my hand. I looked down at them to check for any urgent matters when a creaking sound behind me caused me to turn.

Sitting in one of my guest chairs against the opposite wall was HIM! A sparkling gleam taunted me from his right eye, and an ominous grin mocked me. Momentary shock held my throat captive. I couldn't speak - couldn't move.

The intruder leaned back and crossed his right leg over his left, “How you doing, John?”

My throat started working again. “Who are you?”

“An old, long lost friend.”

“Ummm.” I stammered at the strange claim. I moved around my desk, clumsily putting obstacles between the stranger and me, “Did we know each other in high school, college, or something?”

The stranger laughed and flicked a hand at me dismissively, “No, no, we’ve known other way longer than that.”

“Kindergarten?” I asked with an uncharacteristically high voice, at which I winced.

“Let’s just say I was with you from the beginning.”

“Beginning of what?” I leaned against the table. I had to take control of this conversation and figure this guy out.

“Just the beginning, John.”

“Ok, well, maybe if we make an appointment or a time for coffee later....”

“Nah, John, you’re thinking is all wrong.” The stranger stood. His head was shaved bald, and he was of average height, with a trimmed brown beard, and dark olive skin. Almost unremarkable until he stepped closer, close enough for me to see his eyes. The iris’s were hazel, yet unsettled, moving, mixed with glittering particles of light, causing a gleam that set off the sparkle in his right eye.

I gulped, “What are you?”

“That’s not the right question, John. The correct question is ‘Why am I here?’”

I gulped again, “And why am I here?” I accidentally parroted him.

He laughed, “That is also a good question, but not the first we should answer.”

I snapped up the phone and dialed 0, “Marcy, come in here, now, please.”

A moment later, the door opened, and she stepped in, “What’s the matter, Pastor? Are

you ok?” Her worried look responded to my terrified face.

“When did this gentleman....” I stopped talking as I looked to where the gleaming stranger stood - he was gone. I turned back to Marcy, “Did anyone pass you in the hall?”

“No, no one did. Are you ok?”

I shook my head and held my breath for a moment, “Nah, I’m good. Thanks, Marcy.

Please leave the door open, though, if you can.”

She paused for a moment, unsure, but eventually smiled and turned around, and went

back to her desk, leaving the door ajar.

I turned, still shaken, sat at my desk in my ergonomic chair, and opened my laptop, ready to work.

“Wow, that was awkward.” The stranger stood next to my large mahogany bookcase. It was my collection of Bibles, dictionaries, commentaries, and a couple of books I had written, books which had given me moderate notoriety in the region.

The intruder spoke while playing with a matte tea cup I had brought back from a trip to Argentina; I kept it displayed next to my selection of thesauruses.

I sat up straight and blinked hard repeatedly, trying to rid my brain of this delusion.

The stranger noticed my blinking and rolled his eyes, “No, John, you’re not hallucinating,” He muttered to himself while putting my decorative cup back onto the shelf, “Why do humans always think blinking would get rid of a hallucination anyways?” He turned back to me and flicked his hand to the left. The door slammed shut. Then he tisked me with a thick index finger, “Now, no more interruptions. Let’s do this!”

I stood and ran around my desk, grabbed the door, and yanked on it. It wouldn’t budge. I pulled harder, but still nothing. I braced my left foot against the wall and pulled with all my might...nothing. “Fine.” I stood, looked at the stranger, and pointed a finger at him, “Whatever little trick you have going on here, stop it right now, Mister, and open this door!”

He stared at me momentarily before finally speaking, “John, we have a situation.”

“Please open the door?” I pleaded.

“A situation that, unfortunately, requires some direct contact.”

I drifted away from him as he slowly stepped forward.

“See, I convinced the higher-ups that you are valuable enough for this opportunity. One last chance for you to get back on track.” He clasped his hands together firmly, selling his point hard.

“Higher ups? What higher-ups? Who...I don’t...” I stammered, my brain not handling the fear and shock.

“Do you still not understand why I am here?” He stopped walking forward and rested on his heels, and sat back, “How about I show you my true form,” As he spoke, his body morphed higher, wider, thicker, and brighter, “Then we can decide if you will listen and where we go from there. Ok?”

Eight Hours later, I pulled into my driveway, still numb and very much terrified.

My wife and kids came pouring out of the house to meet me, something they hadn’t done in years. However, their reason for meeting ‘old dad’ in the driveway was all skepticism and worry, not joy to see their father come home.

“Where have you been? Marcy and Marge called from the office worried about you.” As I approached her, she looked past me to the vehicle I arrived in, “Where’s your new car?”

“OMG, dad, what in gawd’s name is that?” My daughter was aghast.

I looked back at the 15-year-old Ford hatchback I now drove, then stared at my family blankly, “The cheapest vehicle in the lot.” Then I shot a glance at my little girl, “And watch your language.” I pushed past my family, disappointed at how loose my children’s tongues had become.

“I need a drink!” I declared as I stomped up my entry stairs. But the thought of calming my nerves and losing my thoughts into a couple of beers tasted sour in my throat. I looked up and sneered, “Fine, water it is.”

I headed for the kitchen, my wife and kids hot on my heels, “Did your car break down, and that thing is a loaner? If so, we must give that salesman and car lot a piece of our mind.”

I snapped up a bottle of cold water from the fridge and slugged some before cutting my wife off, “No, Janine, the car was fine.”

“Then where is it? And where did you go?”

Exhausted, I slumped against the kitchen counter and sighed, “I took the new electric, luxury car back to the lot and traded it in for the least expensive reliable vehicle they had.”

The kids stared at me and back to my wife, awkward curiosity holding their usually short Tik-tok and Roblox-compromised attention spans. “Kids, go to your rooms while we talk,” Janine ordered.

“No, they need to hear this.” I countermanded the order.

My wife crossed her arms, “Fine, well? I’m listening.”

I took another sip, stared at the floor, sighed, and looked up at my family, “I took the money from the trade-in and gave it to a family on the south side of town.”

“Who? Members of our church?”

I shook my head, “Nope.”

“Friends of members of our church?”

“Nope.”

“Aahh.” She shot her gasp of disapproval at me, a 16-year habit I both hated and dreaded. However, in this instance, Janine’s disapproval was small potatoes.

I shot back my own glare, “I had never met them before, and I did not know how much the trade-in would give me.” I raised my hands in submission and cocked my head back into a small scoff as I reluctantly explained, “But apparently, it was the exact amount, to the dollar, that a family of seven needed to keep their house.” My wife tried to butt in, but I cut her off, “A house they were about to lose because their youngest has Leukemia, and the extra hospital bills were crushing this poor family.”

Jenine closed her mouth and thought for a while, “So if you didn’t hear about them from the church, then how did hear about them?”

I sighed even louder, readying myself for the reaction to the crazy bomb I was about to drop on my family, “I was given instructions and an address.” I waved my hands around.

“Instructions, from whom?” My wife was incredulous.

“Who do you think?” I asked with wide eyes and then looked up at the ceiling.

I looked back down, noticing my kids had taken a few steps back, and my wife had again crossed her arms and was rolling her eyes.

“Look, I know it sounds out of character for me, but you know, back in the day, Sweetie,” I stood up and tried to take my wife’s hands into mine, “We did this sort of thing all the time.”

“Ha,” she mused, “Back in the day, we didn’t have a mortgage and two kids in private school.”

I gave up trying to take her hands, and I backed up, “Yeah, about the house and the kid’s private education, we need to talk.”

I slammed the hotel door shut behind me, dropped my bag onto the floor, and flopped down onto the stiff hotel ‘comforter’ face first.

“Well, I think that went very well, didn’t you, John?” The destroyer of my world was back.

“Go away!” I grunted out, “I’m not in the mood.”

“Ah, come on, John, don’t be like that. We are in this together.” He grinned, no doubt with that annoying, cocky grin and that dumb gleam in his eye.

I sat up and located where the voice was coming from. In the corner of the room, a small table and two chairs sat with a hook-shaped lamp peering over the generic furniture. I pointed a forefinger toward his face. “We? We? How are WE in this together? I am the one kicked out of MY house. First time in sixteen years, by the way. I have never even slept on the couch, and now, after talking to YOU, I get kicked out of my own home in one day! We? There is no WE!” I glared at the disrupter of my life, wishing I could make laser beams blast through his skull.

He leaned back and smirked at me, “You know what I am and who I represent, so if you are not onboard, now’s the time to quit.” He clapped and opened his hands two feet apart. Between his palms, a television-like image appeared. It was my family: kids mopping around the house silently - Janine crying, talking to someone on the phone, probably her sister in Chicago.

“Oh great, my wife’s already spreading the word of my insanity through her annoying sister.” I blurted out my first insecure thought.

The odd being sighed, looking down at the image, “You still don’t get it, John. Your family is reacting to the habits you have modeled for them. They are used to you leading in one direction: comfort and safety. Suddenly, anything uncomfortable and scary puts them in a mild shock, especially your wife, who has become every bit as spiritually lazy as you are.” He shrugged his shoulders, “Maybe even worse.”

“Wait, how did you...” I changed my mind and instead asked, “What do you mean?” I began to ask, shaking my confused and tired head, but I was cut off.

“You think humans invented video?” He slammed his hands shut, “Anyways, what will it be? Go back home to the comfortable lazy, vanilla life you know, or see this through to the end?”

I gritted my teeth but shrugged my shoulders in resignation, “Do I have a choice?”

“Yes, you have a choice.” He laughed at me, “You are a church pastor with thousands of attendees. You have an organization with millions in assets and income. Choice is not the issue.”

I shook my head, “No, I mean, where else could I go? I know you, or rather, Who you represent. He has the only truth. There really is no other choice.”

The disrupter smiled, “Hey, living by the Word and not just lecturing on it, look at us - progress already.” He sat forward, “Now, down to business.”

“Wait, what? Can’t I go to sleep now? I’m exhausted.”

“Pish posh, young man,” The stranger was suddenly changed, dressed in an old 19th-century English horse riding suit, buggy whip in hand and top hat under his arm. “Our work has just begun.”

I had too many questions to ask at once, but the most meaningless won out, “I have so many questions, mostly about that outfit; you look ridiculous.”

“Are you serious? I appeared to the Earl of Grey in this suit; you know, the same guy from the tea? Anyways, he needed some extra assurance when ending slavery in the empire, not that you dirty colonists had a notion about ending slavery. It would still be three decades before your country would have to pay its price in blood with that nasty civil war.”

“You advised *the* Charles Grey, the English Prime Minister, 200 years ago?”

“Closer to 180 years, and I would not say, advised as much as...” he waved his buggy whip around, deep in thought, “Revealed is a good word; I revealed to him, just as I am revealing things to you, *Sir* John.”

“If you’re such a big shot, working with prime ministers, foreign dignitaries, and such, why deal with me? What happened, a little demotion? Did you mess up?” I smirked.

This seemed to shut up the cocky intruder for a moment. He swallowed hard and sat back down in his chair, laying his riding crop and hat on the top of the cheap laminated table. He looked down as he spoke. “Yes, John, I did make a mistake.” He looked back up into my eyes and sighed, “I put my faith in you.”

“Excuse me?” I was confused.

He leaned back, “See, I’m assigned to watch over those we deem as disruptors and leaders. Those with the foresight and willpower to effect massive positive change on the world around them.” He brushed something off his top hat, “The engineering department upstairs endows them with special gifts: Charm, people skills, speaking abilities, higher than average IQs, etc.”

He leaned forward and dropped his hands into his lap. “I had a perfect record until you, John. I’m used to working with political influencers, kings, and warlords even. So when I was given the opportunity to assist a pastor: one to influence influencers! I was excited. How hard could it be? I mean, you’re not a billionaire playboy or a bloodthirsty warrior.”

He stood and began pacing, chuckling to himself, hands behind his back. Saying nothing for a while, he finally shook his head, clenched his teeth, and looked back at me. His eyes were dripping with disappointment. “How hard could it be?” A lone tear streaked his face.

I swallowed hard, my insides sinking down to my ankles. A long lost feeling in the annex of my mind, barely peeking out, reminded me of who I once was, or could have been, or should have been.

“Never mind,” the disruptor of my world interrupted my thoughts, “If at first, we don’t succeed...and all that.” I looked back up, and the stranger was back in street clothes. “We have work to do.”

I cleared my throat, “Um, yeah, right...by the way, what do I call you?”

The stranger smiled, “Denzin, call me Denzin.”

“Denzin?” I repeated, “That’s a strange name. What does it mean?”

“Truth, John, it means truth.”

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