

Chapter 1. “Your permission, please

Calls to end injustice go unheeded, Divine Rule and the laws of man — discredited, the Hall of Justice — besieged. Help, called for, prayed for, never comes.

Protest signs block my escape from the courthouse: Black Lives Matter, Defund Police, Antifa, White privilege, Marxism, Hammer and Sickle, Confederate flag, Reparations, Tax the Rich, and Burn it Down.

Pushing my way through them, I make it down the steps and onto the after dark streets of Los Angeles. Fire burns in the hills, and police cars flame. Smoke and smog muffle the sounds of sirens blaring, horns honking, and people yelling. To avoid inhaling the fumes of rubber burning and hot ash in the air, my necktie covers my nose and mouth. On this sultry summer night, sweat drips.

Seeking shelter from the helter-skelter generated by my client’s exoneration, a bar stool offers a retreat after a day of media sparring.

The bartender sets a basket of chips, napkins, and utensils. “Armani suit, flamboyant tie,” he forms his fingers into the shape of the devil horn hand sign, “Angelo Raguel’s trademark.”

Before responding, I flaunt my colorful silk necktie and adjust the loop, which affords me a moment of reflection. “The media loves-hates these ties.”

“Congratulations on the acquittal of your client.”

“Thanks.”

The TV above the mirror-encased liquor cabinet shows the news, and my interviews dominate the coverage.

“Gained weight,” just loud enough for the barkeep to hear.

The mixologist answers, “They say being on TV makes you look heavier.”

An upward jerk of my head, and with curled lips, I ask, “Have you ever heard of a drink called a Devil’s Circus?”

“Yes, a favorite of a regular female patron.”

“My client testified he drank one before the incident.”

“I’ll make it for you.”

Observing my reflection in the reflecting glass prompts a quick touch up. I pat my kinky hair and swab my mustache as thick lips part to check my teeth.

My hazel eyes dull with this vain review.

As I turn and survey this upscale lounge full of lawyer sharks mingling with opportunistic sycophants, my attention focuses on the few other Afro-American attorneys circulating among the white patrons.

When one of them passes by, he states, “Black lives matter.”

“Yes.” We knuckle bump.

The bartender brings the drink. It is an icy cherry colored margarita, with two red chili peppers cut and secured to the rim looking like devil horns. To keep from spilling the full-to-the-brim cocktail, I remove the decoration and enjoy a sip. Spinning around allows a quick scan of the lounge. From the barstool, it appears nobody notices me on TV.

Wrong.

A woman approaches, nods up at the screen, and says, "Self-defense. Told everyone!" My legs open to allow the cutie passage. A whiff of skunk weed stimulates my sinus. She flops onto the adjacent rotary seat, signals for refreshment, and projects a flash smile in my direction to communicate she expects I will cover the cost.

My smile affirms the bargain.

"We're friends," she says while watching my Afro-American celebrity client on the tube.

An appropriate supportive nod confirms my understanding.

She rotates to face me. "Intimate."

Raising my glass congratulates her.

She shakes her bosoms and suggests, "Maybe Angelo could be my friend?"

"Maybe." A slight vibration of my head, a rise of eyebrows, and a lustful stare, accompanies my lips popping open.

Upon making eye contact, her pupils dilate and contract as though the light fluctuates. A memory of something my mother said pops a warning into my thoughts — a sign of demon possession. A powerful sensation of Déjà vu triggers a feeling that we have looked into each other's eyes in the past. My glance away breaks our visual connection, and a sip distracts me.

An obese assistant District Attorney approaches and calls out, "Mr. Rague!" He squeezes between our stools. "You know why God can't find a good lawyer?"

Impatient for an answer, he replies, "Satan's got them all!" The D.A. laughs at his own joke, "Congrats on getting a cop-killer freed!"

The vixen's libation arrives, a Devil's Circus, and the man behind the counter stops to check on me. I say to him, "Chica bonita," referring to the hottie.

The barkeep looks over at her, then crosses himself. "Precaución." He wipes the bar's surface in front of me. "protégé a tu familia."

"Mi esposa te da las gracias."

Another swallow allows collection of thoughts, and I respond to the joke, "No one wants to defend God's reasons for letting evil permeate."

The hottie sipping the cocktail purchased by me says, "Blaspheme," and slips around the D.A.'s large frame, her eyes stable again.

She leans forward, displaying her feminine lures.

The fat man smirks. "Angelo would advocate for Satan just to prove God wrong."

“Challenge accepted,” spoken a bit louder than intended. “My goal is to confront the Lord as to why He allows injustice on earth and in all His Domains.”

The hussy exclaims, “Toast!” and shimmies as the three of us clink glasses. Her pale white skin blushes as she undulates and chants, “Uuu... uuu... uu... u... u. Uuu... uuu... uu... u... u. Ah... ah... ah... aaah.”

The refrain haunts me; images of the Rolling Stones on stage with girls singing backup in the song *Miss You* flash in my mind.

A licentious urge disgusts me, and a twist removes me from interaction with the couple and allows the glutton to entertain the floozy. No doubt she has slept with everybody here. A large gulp chills my throat and causes a brain freeze. The television shows demonstrators overturning police cars. My view changes from the TV set to the bar scene reflected in the mirror. An old gent at a table raises his glass as if joining our salutation.

Odd; the man eluded my attention earlier. The senior gentleman sits alone in a booth, whereas moments before our salute, the tables appeared occupied. His eyes stare at me, appearing as blue-sapphire gems embedded in sandstone-colored skin. He looks in his mid-seventies, as opposed to my late forties. A decanter of blood-red wine airs next to a half-filled glass. His ring, a cushion ruby matching the hue of the vintage, taps the chalice. I am attracted to the necktie. As though mind-reading, he unwraps the cloth, brandishes the flamboyant scarf lengthwise, entwines it around his neck, and tightens the loop. Fingers, long and thin, comb silver hair. The lapels on his designer suit receive a quick dusting. Challenged by his provocation, my Rolex Submariner timepiece slips out from under the Armani cuff. Acting in

competition, the gent spins his Oyster Perpetual. Strong feelings of jealousy, envy, and coveting arise. Why? Nodding adieu to our rivalry, a turn on the seat brings me back to watching the interviews on TV and ends this rivalry.

My last swallow goes down, a taste of mescal tequila lingers — time to go. The barfly's eyes gleam with desire. A goodbye comment morphs the woman's smile into a frown: "Sorry, honey, wife waits at home. Nice thought, though." Leaving a twenty-dollar note and an empty glass on the counter ends my commitment.

She displays her enticements, "Angelo," as she slips the bill into her bra, "in the future?"

Temptation proves impossible for me to resist. "Thanks," reaching over, a cupped hand slides the note under the woman's breast, "keep you in mind." Disgusted with myself and her, another Jackson gets plucked out of my wallet and handed directly to the bartender.

The passage to the exit becomes obstructed as people extend their hands and shout congratulations. Avoiding the elder in the booth requires an alternate path through the crowd. My blood pressure escalates. The struggle to gain headway causes drinks to spill and curses to fly. Men fondle women, and same-sex couples entangle, blocking the way.

The sophisticated atmosphere of the place deteriorates. Every turn gets impeded by the agitated swarm, as though in a fire panic with jammed exits. The escape route takes me by the gent's table, despite efforts to avoid him. He calls out, "Angelo Raguel," and slithers out and forces our hands to connect.

“Your permission, please, to introduce myself.” His grip hurts. My facial expression freezes to disguise my alarm. He makes eye contact, “Emmanuel Janus,” and does not lighten up the grasp, “I hope to engage your legal services.”

“What prompts you to seek representation?”

“Defamation of character.”

“Who defamed you?”

“God.”

“God?”

“Yes. How did God slander you?”

“He blamed me for the injustices and evil brought forth.”

“What do you hope to gain from the outcome?”

“Impeach Him and evoke my rule over Heaven and Earth.”

“And the location of this proceeding?” And we file this claim where?

“Heaven.”

“Upon my death?”

“Whenever.”

“And my role?”

“Devil’s advocate.”

Inner thoughts caution me to sound professional and keep from screaming in pain as the bones crunch. “You need to call the office, sir.” I squeak and yank back in a vain effort to release his clasp.

Emmanuel’s vice-grip tightens, “Watched the trial,” followed by an aggressive pull forward, “an impressive defense.”

Stumbling into him brings our faces inches apart.

He whispers, “Angelo, old friend.”

Repressing an unexplainable impulse to embrace him, I jerk back as if his breath smells. I tell myself, ‘Stay calm and in control.’ My words said aloud, “Sympathetic jury,” sound pathetic. A sudden hypoglycemic attack overwhelms me, and perspiration beads and drips.

“Yes, seeking the same: sympathy and respect.”

He watches me wipe the sweat off. Amidst the noise and confusion, my nose bleeds. Wiping it clean, I show the old buzzard my bloody fingers. He glowers at me with tiny black pupils, and his face blushes. A change in my tactics stops my pulling back like a rabbit in the jaws of a wolf.

“Don’t we all?” Nauseated from one drink? To appease him, I say, “Please, call my office, and the secretary can arrange an appointment.”

His eyes lock on mine as those of a cobra on a mongoose: paralyzed prey. “Intuition warns,” the old man’s pupils dilate and contract in rapid succession, “we should talk. Now.”

Mother’s warning shouts in my head.

Dazed and confused, I stutter, “Then-s-s... sorry.” To break his grip, I yank the harasser’s forearm with my other hand. Once free, the hostile horde encroaches on my path, and the temperature rises. Everyone sweats, and the air smells of rotten eggs. The chant, Uuu... uuu... uu... u... u. Uuu... uuu... uu... u... u. Ah... ah... ah... aaah rings in my head. Upon my escape, I hustle to the car.

Gusty winds blow through Los Angeles. Southern Californians call these warm breezes, originating in the vast haunted canyons of Utah’s Great Basin, the Santa Ana’s, or the devil’s breath, diablo viento. Hot blasts fan fires in the hills and wreak havoc throughout the region. The night sky glows as thick smoke and ash muffle auto horns. Sirens wail while people scurry, fearful, and seeking shelter. In the *Air Tonight*, the Phil Collins song plays like an earworm; a tune stuck in my mind. The music comes to an abrupt stop, as though someone bumped into a vinyl record player.

What the...?

Emmanuel stands by my car. Fear turns to wrath, slowing my stride, “How did ass breath get there?”

“Sorry to startle you; a habit of mine, always rushing ahead.”

To regain a confident demeanor, I inhale deep, which causes me to choke on the smoky air. Upon recovering, my reply hopefully sounds professional, “Sir, as stated earlier, you must schedule through the law office.” Attempting to push past him, my polite request, “Please step away,” gets ignored, and he does not budge. Then the obstinate one steps aside, fast — so quick his movement is not detectable to me. Before falling, my flapping arms reach out and grab onto the car. The pursuer stands there, acting like nothing strange occurred. With the doors closed and hearing the locks click, I breathe through my nose to calm my heart. Safe inside, with the engine running, my curiosity forces a look his way.

The stalker taps his watch.

“What?” The volume of my voice startles me. I buckle my seatbelt and review the dashboard display, including the digital clock reading moments before midnight.

As I back the car out, the rearview mirror shows Emmanuel still tapping on his timepiece. Hearing his words, “The hour grows late,” spooks me, as his lips do not move. The reception is loud and clear, though the window remains closed. With his mouth sealed, he adds, “Drive carefully,” and raises a cupped hand to his face, mimicking drinking. “You’ve had a bit too much.” The SOB flashes a sharp-toothed smile.

Our telepathic conversation concludes with me, saying, “Thank you, Sir. Now goodbye.”

He bobs his head in an odd parakeet manner.

Turning, I check the rearview mirror and see the idiot waving with his forefinger pointing like a wizard casting a spell. “Jerk,” leaves my lips. Time to focus from the reflector back to the road ahead. Stomping on the gas sends the car zipping onto the boulevard.

Red lights strobe. “Driving while Black?”

Once I pull over, a policeman approaches. Upon opening the window, my rehearsed statement, “Officer, I’m a lawyer. The gun and the permit,” I say as I reach over to retrieve the weapon’s license, “are in the glove compartment.”

“Blue lives matter.”

Flash, Bam.

The bullet projects me forward. Before passing out, I grab the steering wheel, spit up blood, and focus on the glowing clock, now reading straight-up at midnight. Unable to move as though experiencing sleep paralysis, staying awake slips away. Exhausted beyond any sensation of tiredness, my eyes open wide — it gets dark, dark, darker — then my vision returns. Looking down at the scene from high above — floating — still alive, but near death causes my thoughts to spin. My observation shows a white robe and sandals cloak me. Colors on the gown’s collar and front and complementary hues decorating the bottom seam recall my famous neckties. Senses register smelling, hearing, and touch, the same as before the shooting.

A feeling of cold pervades, though not a chill, just a desire for warmth. I think of being stuck outside on a cold winter night and wishing to nestle in front of a fireplace, under a comforter, and drinking whiskey. A glowing orb hovers. The light attracts me like a bug — why?

A shroud, an enveloping fog, approaches, and blots out the luring beacon. Without mobility, progress fails, and my ability to flee the shadow overtaking and ensnaring falters. The vast space confines me, entraps me, though senses do not detect any barriers.

Mime acts pushing hands against an invisible wall, feeling form, where none exists, provides a reference.

Facing eternal damnation, lost forever in a realm devoid of heat and comfort, my struggle to reach the light before blackness overtakes it — flounders. An outer crescent of brightness remains, the rest eclipsed by darkness. Although moving as fast as possible, my advancement stalls in place, and I pray, “Please, please, warm, bright beam,” to no one in particular, “not dank cold mist.”

Sulfur smells overwhelm my olfactory system, and repeating unsourced chants reverberate. Other spirits float up alongside. A mother clings to her children — the innocents glide towards the light. The adult, perhaps not yet cleansed of transgressions, cannot join them. She cries and flails. More souls pass — the forgiven linger for a moment until the brightness absorbs them. Others, not repentant, scramble in place, slipping and sliding away from their goal. Night-beings appear. Demons fly back and forth, snatching the condemned.

Fiendish eyes gleam as the ghouls’ shred victims with vampire teeth and rapture claws. Cries for aid and shrieks of terror echo as the soul-eaters encircle. “Someone, somebody, help me, please!” To whom do my appeals go? God? Who’s in the light? Mother? Father? Ancestors? “Anyone? Anybody out there?”

The Phantoms leap.

My arms raise to protect my face, but the creatures fly through them. Toothed jaws open wide, and the hot, sulfuric breath of hell blows. Devoured souls in the beasts' throats, their heads bumping against each other, squirm as fish in the mouth of a baleen whale. A scream, the yell of a man falling backwards off a cliff, emits from deep within me.

The soul-snatchers flee in sudden fright, a chaotic retreat. A great white shark attacking a pod of seals supports the imagery. What horrific evil strikes terror into these ogres?

The luminance available fades into the encompassing darkness.

A quick and terrible demise awaits me.