

Copyright © 2024 by Gerard F Dunn

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Introduction

Greg was born into a dysfunctional single-parent household. He was shy and unpopular in high school, only wanting to blend into the background. Robert was his only friend. Whose mother and Lola (grandmother) made Greg feel loved and wanted. Greg finally finds the courage to speak to a girl in class, sparking a budding romance. Then, a Stranger came into Greg's life, threatening to harm him and his mother unless he cooperated with him to steal the Rose of St. Rita. He reveals Greg is a descendant of the Nephilim, the offspring of fallen angels and humans found in the book of Enoch. The Stranger informs Greg that they share a distant connection through the Nephilim.

The Miracle Rose of St. Rita was touring the US from the Vatican, and one of its stops was St. Rita's Catholic Church in town. The same church Robert's family attends. Greg persuades Robert to take him to Mass with his family. The Stranger wanted to steal the Rose and threatened everyone Greg loved if he did not help him. The Stranger needed the miracle of the Rose for him and his brethren, who were currently living a cursed existence on Earth. To gain access to the Rose, Greg lies to his best friend and the Pastor of St. Rita's, volunteering to help with the presentation of the Rose.

The price of Greg's cooperation with the Stranger cost him dearly. His mother and new girlfriend are dead, and his best friend is in a coma. Greg is

GERARD F DUNN

now an outcast and an orphan. The authorities send him to live in the foster care system until he turns eighteen.

Twenty years later, he is powerful and wealthy, just as he always dreamt he would be. Greg is now one of southern Virginia's most influential and wealthy pastors of a mega-church. His beautiful assistant is not everything she appears to be, even if she is only half-human. The re-emergence of the Stranger disrupts his life, and his best friend Robert wakes up from his coma.

Contents

Epigraph	VII
1. The Stranger	1
2. Angela	7
3. Rowen's Bargain	11
4. Larry	17
5. Senator Kanker	23
6. Lunch with Angela	27
7. Meeting in Richmond	31
8. Detention	35
9. Political Strategy	39
10. Fateful Encounter	43
11. Windfall	47
12. Rick Daniels	51
13. Lola	55
14. Fire	59
15. Mass at St. Rita's	63
16. Suspect?	67

17. Visitation of the Rose	71
18. CCT Footage	75
19. Miracle?	79
20. Fire Report	83
21. The Pendant	87
22. James	91
23. Cain	97
24. Coffee	103
25. Bezaliel and Raphael	107
26. Hospital Stay	113
27. Another Church Tragedy	119
28. Aftermath	123
29. Anna-Marie	127
30. New Beginning	133
31. Twenty years ago...	137
Cast of Characters	143
Acknowledgements	145
About the Author	147

*"All the earth has been corrupted
by the effects of the teaching of
Azazyel. To him therefore ascribe
the whole crime."*

1 Enoch 10:12

Chapter One

The Stranger

Behind his desk, Brother Greg studied the latest political report, identifying individuals and groups that might cause him trouble in the coming year.

"My employer has sent me to extend an offer of... assistance."

Greg's eyes snapped to the person who appeared out of nowhere.

Brother Greg, you have made quite an impression on him. You are on the edge of greatness. Your followers merely need a word from you, and they joyfully do your bidding."

The Stranger wore a dark suit. His silk tie blended neatly into his pressed white shirt, embellished by a gold tie clip with a ruby in its center. The small ruby had a phosphorescent glow. The cuffs of his shirt were slightly visible, revealing golden cufflinks. The Stranger's dark hair had been parted neatly to one side in a conservative cut. He had an almost too-perfect face with perfect white teeth when he smiled. He was immaculate in presentation and voice. He would make a great spokesman for Brother Greg, but he seemed otherwise employed.

"How did you get in here?" Greg asked, trying not to seem startled. "How did you get past my secretary?"

Greg's right hand drifted to the silent alarm. He was an expert at not telegraphing his intentions. He only displayed them when they served his purpose, like during one of his passionate sermons.

"That won't work," the Stranger said, looking down.

"What?"

"The alarm. Feel free to press it as much as you'd like. You will not need it." The Stranger smiled.

Greg returned his hand to his lap and gazed at the Stranger with a relaxed smile.

"So, if I don't need security, then that means you want something and mean me no harm, or you intend to harm me, and you don't think I can do anything about it. So, which is it?"

"I assure you, it is the former, Brother Greg."

"What is it you want? Money? A job?"

Greg studied the Stranger's face and body language. Ordinarily, he was good at sizing up a person's intentions, but this time, he could sense nothing about the person in front of him. The Stranger was a *blank* slate; his eyes seemed lifeless.

"I need nothing from you. My employer wants to help you reach your fullest potential."

No one offers anything of value for nothing. No one does.

"So, what will your employer gain from my success? Or is he doing this out of the goodness of his heart?" Greg's tone didn't hide his sarcasm.

The Stranger chuckled strangely. It was artificial—hollow. The humorless gallows laugh brought an involuntary chill down Greg's spine.

"Oh my, no. His heart... Yes, indeed. My employer has a vested interest in you. The more people follow you, the more your opinions and influence can affect what they do, say, and think."

"Why would I need anything from your mysterious employer? Who is this mystery person who sent you into my office uninvited and unwanted?" Greg's voice was low. The amusement of this conversation had worn off.

“You need nothing, at least yet. I am merely here as an introduction. There will come a time—sooner rather than later—when our interests will... How should I put it? Intersect.” The Stranger smiled once again oddly. “A Mr. Larry Horton will come by; he works for an important political figure, and I encourage you to work with him. It will be in your best interest, I assure you.” Greg knew who Larry Horton was and who he worked for; he was just in no mood to talk to politicians or their operatives. Greg had been ducking his calls for some time. He didn’t want whoever this person in front of him to know that.

Aggravated, Greg took a breath, looked down, closed his eyes, and placed his hands on his desk. When he got to his feet, the Stranger was gone. Greg blinked and rubbed his eyes.

It has to be fatigue. I have been going nonstop these past few months and have had little time for myself. Yes, that had to be it. My mind is playing tricks on me.

Greg hit the intercom button. “Grace, can you come here, please?”

The door opened, and an attractive young woman walked in.

“Yes, Brother Greg?”

Grace had an athletic body with chestnut-colored hair and iridescent green eyes. Greg was a vain man who did not surround himself with plain-looking people. She could’ve easily been mistaken for one of the young church volunteers who always fawned over him. Grace was different. People made the mistake of thinking they could easily manipulate her. Greg had witnessed first-hand how brutal she was when she pushed back those who would take advantage of her looks, albeit in a soft but brutal fashion, often painful to witness.

“Who was that man, and how did he get into my office?”

“What, man? No one has been here since your morning staff meeting.”

Grace was extremely reliable, but this time, he doubted her.

“Really? I was talking to myself a few minutes ago?” he said sarcastically.

Grace remained silent, arms behind her back, face flushed slightly.

“A man was standing in my office not 2 minutes ago. He came in and left, and you saw nothing?” His face showed no emotion. Grace learned this was a warning sign.

She swallowed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t see anyone in or out since earlier this morning.”

Greg stared at Grace, willing an explanation from her nervous eyes. After what seemed an eternity, Greg growled and looked away. “Never mind. Don’t you have something to do?”

“Yes sir,” she left quickly, closing the door.

“Where was I?” Greg stared at his messy desk.

He was already behind and needed to prep for a meeting with the Founders Church Counsel to discuss fundraising and outreach for the coming quarter. Greg was halfway into his work when Grace buzzed him on the intercom.

“A Mr. Horton is here to see you.”

Greg, still irritated, snapped, “I don’t remember an appointment with him today.

“Yes, sir, I know, but he seems insistent on seeing you.”

Mr. Horton represented a famous politician who never took no for an answer. Greg had given him vague promises in the past to meet, but that was just a stalling tactic. He couldn’t wiggle out now. Greg was backed into a corner, and he did not like that.

He breathed deeply and cursed softly, “Send him in.”

Greg stood, put on his best fake smile, and shook his hand. “Nice to see you, Larry. What brings you by?”

Larry Horton was a balding man, maybe five foot eight—though Greg suspected he wore lifts. Larry always seemed out of breath, even though he was pretty skinny. His face was pale with brown eyes. There was something about his eyes. Greg had an old friend whose grandmother had an expression for people like that: Dead-eyed.

“Sorry to barge in on you like this, but I have been waiting to see you for some time now.”

“No, Larry, I’m sorry that I could not get back to you. My schedule lately has been packed. What can I do for you today?”

“Senator Kanker is a patient man, but even he has limits. I am here to... persuade you to move up our meeting.” Larry smiled. The smile appeared warm and genuine, but his eyes looked cold and reptilian.

Greg couldn’t suppress a small shiver but sighed and motioned for him to sit.

“What can I help you with, Larry?”

“Well, as you know, my boss is interested in politics and needs additional supporters within the local community. Your church is one of the largest in the region and very influential. He needs the backing of an organization with much influence within the religious faithful to advance his campaign.”

Greg shifted in his seat. He knew this was coming.

“So, what would you like me to do? You know that my organization has already endorsed him. We have given you nearly free advertising on our website, podcasts, TV, etc. What more do you ask of us?”

Larry barely smiled. Greg could’ve sworn that his eyes had changed color.
No, darker.

“We need you to be *completely* onboard. No sitting on the fence; no half measures.”

A prolonged silence lingered among the men. A stagnant feeling filled the air. Greg could hear the throbbing of his pulse in his temples.

Larry’s expression melted into a warm smile, and he stood. I’ve spent enough of your time today. I can’t wait to hear back from you soon. Have a good day, Brother Greg.” Larry walked out of the office, not pausing for a reply.

Greg stood in place, wondering what had just happened. Did he agree to anything? He had been prolonging the meeting as much as he could. Deep down, he knew he had no choice because the outcome had already been decided.

Chapter Two

Angela

*T*wenty years earlier:

Greg heard plates and utensils loudly being placed on the kitchen counter. Still in bed, he was dreading another school day. The TV was tuned to the morning news show the local weather report was on, forecasting a bright and warm day.

“Greg, get your ass out of bed! Breakfast is ready,” his mother yelled.

Greg groaned and rolled to his back. He wished he could’ve started his day once without his mom yelling.

“Coming!” he yelled back even louder.

Greg sat up and rubbed his eyes. Dragging his feet, he walked toward the kitchen, where his mother poured herself a cup of coffee. A cigarette hung from her slightly parted lips. Her hair was unkempt, and she was dressed in a wrinkled nightgown.

She grunted, “You need to get up earlier; I will not bring your breakfast to bed.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Greg sat at the table and began stuffing lightly burnt pancakes in his mouth—they were more edible than most days. He wanted to finish fast before his mother started her morning rants. God, he hated them. If they were not about work or her boyfriend, they were about how he should help

more around the house. Greg quickly finished the last food and dashed out of the house while his mom's back was turned. He heard her yelling something as the front door slammed shut.

Greg's neighborhood was one of the older ones in town. He and his mother lived in a townhouse built thirty years ago. During the previous housing boom, they constructed many townhomes with poor-quality materials and shoddy construction methods. Many homes needed repair and maintenance, such as a new roof or siding—sometimes both. The sidewalks were cracked, and the roads were full of potholes.

Greg never noticed these imperfections; it was simply home. It was a short walk to the bus stop. Kids milled around the street corner while they waited. They were clustered together, talking and laughing, except for one. His only friend, Robert, stood alone, rocking on his feet and staring at the sky.

“Look out! There's a spider on your back.”

Robert jumped off the curb, doing a jig, trying to yank his jacket off. At that moment, he saw his friend and stopped. The other kids at the bus stop were laughing.

“Hilarious, asshole.”

“Sorry, couldn't resist,” Greg said with a brilliant toothy smile. He had a knack for disarming even the angriest of people. His mother told him it was a gift.

Robert shrugged and gave his friend a light punch on his shoulder. “What's up, Greg? You made it before the bus got here this time.”

“Just didn't want to hear my mom drone on about whatever bullshit was up her butt, so I got out as fast as I could this morning.” Greg looked down.

He hoped he didn't sound too pitiful, but his mom could be a real pain. The two boys had known each other since elementary school. Greg would invite Robert to his house when he was sure his mom was not there because her behavior embarrassed him. She always complained about something. The few times Robert came over, she would ask inappropriate questions to Robert about home life, such as why his father was not around, just like