

Touched By An Alien

By Gini Koch

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Chapter 1

My first superbeing was an accident. Literally and figuratively.

Commented [ML1]: We need a GOAL for the narrator. We have it in the very first sentence: to have a "first superbeing". We don't yet know what that means, but it's interesting.

I was walking from the courthouse to the parking garage. Jury duty was over, I'd been released early, right after the lunchbreak, so I was free to go back to work and try to catch up on my missed half a day.

Commented [ML2]: We now know where we are, in part. In a city, just outside the courthouse, heading for a parking garage across the street. We also know it's right after lunch, probably around 1 PM.

The parking garage was across the street, so I had to wait for the light. As I stood there hoping I wouldn't sunburn, I witnessed a small fender bender. One slow-moving car rear-ended another right in front of the courthouse, about fifty feet away from me.

Commented [ML3]: Hmm...must be summer and hot there. Somewhere in the Southwest? Everything sounds American, so...good assumption.

The drivers got out—man from the front car, woman from the rear—and he started yelling at her immediately. At first I figured he was raging because he'd been hit and the start of summer in Arizona always makes everyone here a little crazy, but I could hear him, and it dawned on me that this was his wife.

Commented [ML4]: AND...give a bland scene (walking to parking garage) a major twist! There's a car accident right there!

She was apologizing, but he wasn't having any of it, so she got mad, too. Their fight escalated into shouting in a matter of moments. This was a full-on domestic dispute, the kind the cops rightly want nothing to do with.

Commented [ML5]: And now it's confirmed: early summer in Arizona. Yup. It's hot there.

Commented [ML6]: Not a sure-fire conclusion, but this narrator sounds much more female than male.

Commented [ML7]: Car accident wasn't interesting enough for you? How about we escalate it to a full-on major domestic dispute? Keep the reader engaged and interested in what's going on! Add another level of intrigue, excitement, and surprise. And this is all on page 1!

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The light changed, and I wondered if I should just head across the street to avoid getting involved with these two when it happened. The man's rage went supernova, and all of a sudden he sprouted wings out of his back.

I'm not talking little wings, either. They were huge, easily six and a half feet high and I guessed the span as double. They had feathers, but they were odd looking, which, I know, you'd figure would be a given in the first place. But they didn't look like bird feathers—they gleamed, and not with blood. There was a viscous substance on them, and as I watched, the man turned toward his horrified, screaming wife and shot blades out of the feathers that lined the wings' edges.

She was cut into ribbons in a matter of seconds, and he turned toward the courthouse and let more blades fly. The main Pueblo Caliente courthouse, a nine-story building with mostly glass walls, was built a few years ago, and was really very modern and attractive, doing its best to pretend the city hadn't once been a pioneer cow town.

I flinched as the projectiles hit. Glass shattered and flew everywhere—the courthouse went from sleek to rubble in a matter of moments. I could hear screams—the people coming out of the courthouse, those near the windows in the first few floors, anyone in his path, maybe more—were all being cut down, possibly murdered by this man. I couldn't guess how far the projectiles went; for all I knew they were going deep into the building.

I don't know why I didn't try to run or hide. In hindsight, I could say maybe I just knew it would be futile. But at the time, that wasn't what I was

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Commented [ML8]: Okay. Now we're making this AMAZINGLY interesting. What kind of person sprouts WINGS???

Commented [ML9]: ...and the wings are HUGE with feathers and something odd...

Commented [ML10]: And we're starting to see the narrator's personality come out. She's no longer merely an "objective reporter" of the situation. Now she's having personal responses to it.

Commented [ML11]: And this whole thing just gets more and more amazing. A very minor fender ding to major domestic dispute, to full-on rage, to metamorphosis into a creature with wings that are feathered and covered with goo...Can it get any better???

Commented [ML12]: Um, yes, it can get better (or worse, depending on your point of view): Now the feathers are turning into projectiles that can slash a human body to ribbons!

Commented [ML13]: We're not just talking about killing his wife. Now he's killing everyone in sight. This is now escalated to a mass murder in the heart of the city! Stakes keep rising and rising and rising!

Commented [ML14]: A little more scene-setting, complete with a side of snark at the end with the pioneer cow-town comparison. Notice that the description of the location is carefully woven into the narrative, not presented as a giant lump describing things in a great glob of adjectives. Instead, this gives us an occasional commentary from the narrator's perspective, an approach that also provides a chance to learn more of her personality without being told she's "sassy" or "sarcastic" or a little "snarky"—even though she is all these things at times.

Commented [ML15]: So now we're back getting narrator's emotional response to the situation. She's flinching. She hears shrieks and moans of people being murdered right in front of her. This monster was going to kill a LOT of people unless someone does something.

Notice we've gone from "no conflict" (I'll just go across to the garage and get my car and drive away), to "life or death conflict" (someone has to stop this monster right now!)

The goal is no longer to get to the car and drive away. The goal now is to stop this monster before more people are killed. It's not just a change in goals, it's a dramatic escalation of the potential for conflict. It's life-and-death with a horrible, scary monster.

We have new GOAL
We have tons of CONFLICT

thinking. I was scared, but more, I was angry, and I just wanted to stop him. He wasn't slowing the attack at all, and I realized he was enjoying it, enjoying the power, the fear, the death.

His back was still to me, and I could see a spot, right between where his shoulder blades had been and wings now were. Something was there, pulsing, almost like a human heart, but it didn't look like a heart. It resembled a small jellyfish really.

I tried to think of what I could use to stop this monster—it wasn't as though they equipped marketing managers with Uzis. I didn't take my eyes off the pulsing thing on the man's back as I dug through my purse and my fingers found my weapon—my heavy, expensive Mont Blanc pen. It had been a gift from my father when I'd gotten a promotion at work. I doubted this was what he'd hoped I'd use it for, but I wasn't holding any other options.

I dropped my purse, kicked off my heels, and ran, straight for his back. He was moving closer to the courthouse but was still less than a hundred feet away from me, and back in school I'd been on the track team. I was a sprinter and a hurdler, and some things don't leave you, even if you haven't done them for a while.

Because he was a little taller than me, I knew I needed to be airborne when I hit him. I judged it and leaped at the last possible moment. My pen slammed into that jellyfish-like thing on his back just as he started to turn. I could see his eyes—they were wide, glowed red, and no longer looked human.

Commented [ML16]: AND now we have clearly stated motivation: She's scared but also VERY angry. She wants this guy stopped. She wants him not to enjoy killing people in front of her.

We have GOAL
We have CONFLICT
We have MOTIVATION

Commented [ML17]: So she constructs a plan. In this case, at the very beginning of the book, we don't know enough about the world or its situations to know if this is an "obvious" plan so it does need to be spelled out a little more than it might if it were later in the book. But the explanation is just enough—we know what her target is gonna be: that pulsing jellyfish thing. The only question is...how?

Commented [ML18]: Note, we now know her job: she's a marketing manager. And her tone is again a little bit sassy.

Commented [ML19]: Again, just a hint of sassiness and clever wit. This is a fun character.

Commented [ML20]: The previous assumption that the narrator is female is confirmed.

Commented [ML21]: And we learn she's of an athletic bent, likely lean and fit, rather than all curves and soft cuddles.

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As I drove the pen into his back, his mouth opened, but he didn't make a sound. His eyes, however, went back to human, and they glazed as I watched them die. Then his body fell forward and mine with it. I scrambled to my feet, covered with ooze from his wings and the exploded jellyfish thing.

The police arrived.

This opening scene is brilliant. It introduces character, world, location. We learn a tiny bit about the hero's back story (Mont Blanc pen gift from dad, sprinter/hurdler, marketing manager). We know where we are: in Arizona in early summer, where it's hot-hot-hot. It presents a very simple situation—going home from jury duty—and escalates it and escalates it and escalates it with one surprise twist after another keeping the reader on the edge of their seat until at last—the hero stabs that jellyfish thing and KILLS it.

BUT....she did that in broad daylight. In public. In front of the courthouse, for goodness sakes! Yeah...her situation is now worse than it was before. Now she has to deal with the cops!

This is a gorgeous example of a superbly executed "Yes, But" scene ending.

NOTE that there is no scene break between this scene and the next. Not even a paragraph break. The narrative just continues, but with a significant change of cast as more characters arrive. That's one good way to signal that you're starting a new scene without beating the reader over the head with it.

In about 850 words we have learned so much about this story, including a lot about the hero, the time and place this is happening, the possible opponent (if a pulsing red jellyfish thing isn't an opponent, well...we have a problem) and a lot about our hero's background and personality. We know she's brave without being foolish, she tends to protect other people rather than run away and hide, she's athletic. She's smart because she figured the situation out very quickly in difficult circumstances. And we know this narrator has a lot of snark in her attitude. She's fun to listen to as she describes what happened. All in all, we know setting, initial conflict, character, and tone. Pretty darned amazing for 850 words, don't you think?

When you can execute Page-Turner scenes with the skill and finesse of Gini Koch as demonstrated here, you will truly have mastered the art of writing best-seller quality scenes.

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Commented [ML22]: And here is the climactic battle. Note how BRAVE she is. Everyone around her is running away from the monster. So what does she do? She runs TOWARD this murdering beast. That's courage—and we know just that little bit more about her. Her goal is to stop him and she has DONE IT!! Yes!!! She achieved her goal! Fabulous...except...

Scenes (except the final scene) have to end in failure....

Commented [ML23]: And here's the "BUT" at the end of the "YES" ending. YES she killed the monster, BUT now she has to explain everything to the police...Yes, but. Her situation is clearly worse than it was when she just got out of jury duty a little early. Now she's gonna have to get out of trouble with the law because she did, in fact, just kill a man in public.

Oops.

What on earth is she gonna do to get herself out of this mess?

AND THAT IS WHY READERS KEEP READING!!