

Battling wills

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [March 2, 2016](#) issue



Traumatized: Jessica Jones (Krysten Ritter, right) is a superhero haunted by Kilgrave (David Tennant), a manipulative man from her past. © 2015 Netflix Studios. All rights reserved.

In the Netflix show *Jessica Jones*, Krysten Ritter plays Jones, a superhero who is traumatized by Kilgrave (David Tennant), a villain who once held her captive. Kilgrave commits twisted acts of violence, and in the second episode we learn that he has stolen the kidneys of a young man. Now disabled, the young man must live with his mother, who seems perversely pleased by her son's dependence on her and attributes it to God's will. Jessica Jones disagrees, and tells the young man, "God didn't do this. The devil did. And I'm going to find him."

Kilgrave has a superpower that lets him overcome any person's will with a command of his own. When he tells someone to do something, that person must do it exactly and literally. So he tells people to put their hands in blenders. He tells them to let him into their apartments and to cook him dinner. He tells children to lock themselves in closets, and he tells Jones's neighbor to stalk her and send him pictures of her.

This horrific villain is obsessed with Jones. Most comic-book villains want something abstract, like world domination. Kilgrave wants to dominate Jones, and he acts with random but stunning cruelty, using other people as weapons and putting innocent bystanders and Jones's loved ones into danger as he tries to manipulate her.

These are obvious examples of the way that Kilgrave uses his power, but it's the more subtle demands for compliance that make him most frightening. When Jones was the victim of Kilgrave's mind control, he not only kept her in his apartment and raped and exploited her. He chose her clothes. He demanded that she smile. Now their history has made each of them obsessed with the other in an unending game. When Kilgrave demands that Jones send him a photograph of herself, smiling, she complies, thinking that she is the one wielding power in the transaction. But is she?

Kilgrave's control is chilling precisely because we recognize it. It plays out in ordinary abusive relationships. One of Kilgrave's most disturbing lines is, "I promise I won't touch you until I get your genuine consent." But what does "genuine consent" mean when someone is being manipulated emotionally?

Jones thought she could flee, but when she sees what Kilgrave is doing to others, she becomes determined to fight him. At the same time, her willingness to fight him means that his demands will continue to assault her.

Kilgrave's utter lack of respect for human bodies and human wills is an extreme version of the ordinary dynamics of power. Why do some people use their will for evil? What is "consent"? *Jessica Jones* highlights the role of human will in relationships and in moral judgment.