

When a member of the Brethren attacks Irene, both twins, although struggling with their own unique challenges, discover they must join together. It soon becomes apparent to the twins their only hope for survival will be to use the power of the Gifter's Ring to destroy the Brethren.

A Balance of Evil

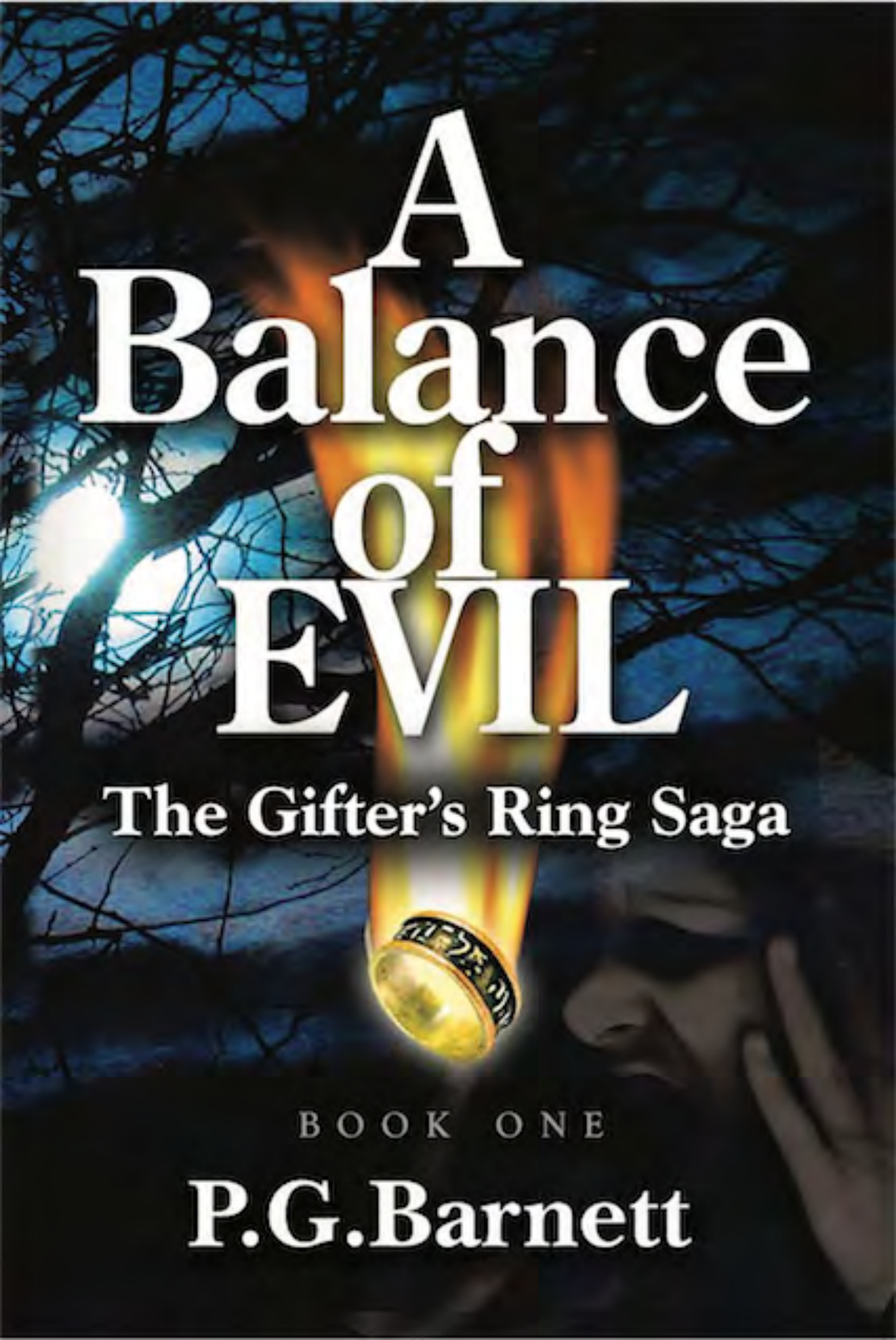
by P.G. Barnett

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A Balance of EVIL

The Gifter's Ring Saga

BOOK ONE

P.G. Barnett

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The Kill

Monday morning found Irene already awake, exhausted and stiff from a near-sleepless night spent on the couch. Massaging sore muscles in her neck and back, she fought with herself about going in to work. The visions of what she'd seen on Saturday night continued to haunt her, pressing, attacking her senses, slowly wearing down her resistance. She settled back on the couch, rubbing her swollen, burning eyes, wondering what to do. She knew she'd have to make some sense of what had happened to her; put things into a perspective that she could handle. Something told her that if she didn't, her chances of survival would quickly vanish.

Irene closed her eyes tightly. She thought about what Barkley had said. Randolph Hargrove was gone; she assumed dead, by the way Barkley had talked. Slowly, she twisted around and stared at the telephone on the end table. She had to call; she had to report this.

She stretched across the couch, picked up the phone and dialed the police department. Irene promised herself that the call about Randy's death would be quick... and anonymous. It wasn't until she heard a pleasant female voice answer that she actually stopped to think about what she was doing. What was she going to tell them? Did she even know for sure that he was dead? What if she'd really dreamed the entire thing? What if she was going insane?

The woman asked to help her again. Something inside told Irene that what had happened between her and Barkley had been real: deadly and real. She had no doubt that Randy was dead, but how would she be able to prove that it had been Barkley who had killed him? And where was Randy? Where should she tell the police to start looking for the body?

She quickly hung up the phone. What had she been thinking? He probably had everybody in his pocket. Who would she go to? The Police Commissioner? The City Council? The FBI? Without a

doubt, she knew she wouldn't be allowed to get that far. And if she decided to run, would he follow? Irene decided she couldn't take that chance. She knew too much. He'd already shown her his dirty little secrets.

She felt her intestines tighten in a painful knot and remembered her dance with him, the last dance of her life. As the ugly scenes of putrefaction flooded her senses, she realized this man could probably snuff her out like someone blowing out a birthday candle.

Suddenly, she was furious. She'd fought so damn hard to finally be able to stand on her own two feet, to cut the emotional and financial cords of her sister and father. And just when things had begun to go so very right, some slimy, corrupt governmental official decided to use her as a pawn for his own dangerous agenda. She quickly chose to allow her rage against Barkley to boil, actually welcoming the anger, telling herself that even if it only temporarily rid her of the fear and anxiety, she would gladly accept it. She told herself no way, no friggin' way; she'd find a way to fight him, to beat him at his own game, if at all possible. But what if it wasn't possible? She had absolutely no connections, no power, nothing to fight him with. Right now, she had nothing.

Her eyes narrowed in concentration as she stared at the coffee table, her gaze finally focusing on the gun that she'd left there. She reminded herself that there was always more than one way to skin a D.A. Smiling wryly, realizing that her life-long revulsion of guns seemed to be growing smaller by the minute, she leaned forward and picked up the pistol.

"You just might be right," she answered her thoughts aloud, "and it's guaranteed to be a hell of a lot quicker."

When she stopped to think about it, it seemed to make sense. It might be the only way to make sure.

Irene checked her watch as she walked into her cubicle. It was eight o'clock on the dot. She thought it funny that now, of all times, she'd finally managed to get a handle on Santa Monica traffic. And

then she told herself that if she didn't do something fast, she might never have a chance to travel the freeways again. She stared at the stack of cases Randy had given her, still sitting where she'd left them in her haste to get out and shop for her new dress. Suddenly, the sensations of the dance and the horrible visions, along with Barkley's words echoing in her head, slammed into her. Instantly she grew weak all over, a wave of nausea churning in the pit of her stomach. Wiping beads of sweat from her forehead, she sat down and then turned to stare out the window, desperately hoping that a plan would come to her. Every now and then she thought she heard the gun she'd left in the trunk of her car whispering to her. It had been crooning its insistent song of death to her all morning long.

Irene shook her head to ward off the voices. She'd always had trouble getting started on Mondays, and usually after four cups of coffee and a Danish, she found a way to concentrate. But this was a problem she doubted a continental breakfast was going to cure. Irene tilted her head to catch the insistent pleadings of the gun, as they seemed to twirl around her ears. Stronger, seductively appealing, the voice seemed to be growing with each hour. She tried to ignore it and spun her chair away from the window. She had to be sure, and she knew the only way to do that was to go to Randy's office and see for herself.

Shakily, she stood and walked to the main concourse. Each step she took toward his office merely heightened the feelings of dread and fear that stalked her. By the time she'd reached the hallway that would take her to his lobby, she could barely control the rushes of panic surging through her. Run. Get away from this while you still can she tried to tell herself. But she knew she couldn't run, because she had to know; she had to be certain. She had to prove to herself whether her experiences with Barkley had been real, or merely the first, ugly signs of an ice-cold plunge into the waters of insanity.

Rounding the last corner of the concourse, she turned down the carpeted hallway and then stopped. From where she stood, she could see his lobby and Mary's desk. Mary wasn't there. She warned herself that it wasn't a good sign. Haltingly she moved down the hallway. Halfway down, her skin suddenly began to tingle, as if

she'd just received a million tiny electric shocks. She stepped closer, feeling like she'd abruptly stepped through an invisible wall of cold. Along with the cold, an overwhelming sensation that someone was watching washed over her. As if something was in the hallway with her, an ominous presence that seemed to be everywhere. She shrank away from it, but then felt the power reach out from the walls, the ceiling and the floor, immediately surrounding her.

Struggling to reach the lobby, she leaned against the office doorway, fighting off a bout of dizziness as intense sensations of the presence's hatred slammed into her. Helpless to stop it, she felt the presence wrap itself around her, like a dense, suffocating fog. A fetid stench of sewer abruptly surged into her nostrils. Her stomach lurched and she nearly gagged. Irene knew immediately. It was him; he'd been there. He'd been to Randy's office. Abruptly, she realized that what she'd hoped had all been a bad dream wasn't a dream at all. Randy was dead, she was sure of it; could feel it deep inside. She also knew that if she didn't do something to stop Barkley, she would be the next one to die.

She wondered how long Barkley had toyed with Randy before disposing of him. Had the D.A. chosen her to be the next "dependable soldier," as he put it, when Hargrove had suddenly ceased to cooperate? And then she wondered how long she could continue with the game before Barkley got rid of her also. She told herself that even a couple of lifetimes wouldn't be long enough.

"Uh, Irene?" she heard Mary say from behind her. "You okay?"

Irene spun around. Mary was holding a small paper bag and a cup of coffee. By the puzzled look in her eyes, Irene could see she had no idea what was happening. She asked herself why Mary couldn't feel it, and then suddenly felt extremely sick. Oh, dear Jesus, she told herself, either I'm as crazy as the Mad Hatter, or only I can see this is really happening!

"Where is he?" she said, barely managing to croak out the question.

"Randy? I thought you knew," Mary replied, her face softening with an expression of concern. "He left Saturday to go on one of his

fishing trips. Remember, I told you what he said on Friday? I think he said he was going to be back Tuesday.” She smiled. “Of course, that means I’m going to have to wade through that pile of notes on his desk and keep the office going by myself or he’ll never forgive me. When you’re the boss, I guess you can do stuff like that, huh?”

Irene told herself that Mary was going to be managing his affairs a lot longer than she knew, and then suddenly felt a maniacal laugh welling up inside. She fought to batter it down, mumbled something about catching Mary later and then turned away, intent on going back to her cubicle.

She’d hardly taken a step when she heard Mary gasp, and then a liquid plop. She quickly turned around to see that Mary had stopped in front of Randy’s closed door. Irene gazed at the coffee cup, lying on the carpet near Mary’s feet, and the deep charcoal-gray stain around her. For some reason, the receptionist’s hand seemed frozen to the knob. She was staring straight ahead, and as Irene watched, the young woman’s body began to tremble. Irene started across the lobby, but drew back as Mary suddenly whirled around, her face livid, twisted into a mask of rage, roiling embers of hatred in her eyes.

“You bitch,” she hissed. “You back-stabbing little bitch.”

Suddenly, she threw herself at Irene.

Irene tried to back-pedal, but Mary reached her and before Irene could react, struck her in the face with a clenched fist. Reeling from the blow, her mind responding sluggishly to the viciousness of the attack, Irene stumbled away, fending off Mary’s frantic attack with her arms. Mary instantly began to shorten the distance and for a split second, Irene saw a wild look of intense hatred in her eyes. Mary intended to kill her and she wondered how in the hell she was going to end this attack without hurting either Mary or herself.

As Mary advanced on her, she realized she wouldn’t be allowed an opportunity to reason with the girl. She knew she’d inexplicably been given little choice in the matter. Suddenly thankful she’d stayed in shape in college; she took a deep breath and carefully gauged the distance as Mary rushed in. Mary drew back her fist to hit her again, but before she could connect, Irene lashed out, smashing

into Mary's face as hard as she could. Mary's nose exploded with an immediate gush of blood, and she instantly crumpled to the floor.

Irene collapsed into a nearby couch and closed her eyes. For several moments, she listened to Mary's faint breathing, thanking God that the woman was still breathing, telling herself that with one punch she could have killed the girl. Gingerly, she tested the spot on her cheek where Mary had hit her, wondering if the bone was bruised. Mary had been trying to kill her—at least it had seemed that way to her—but why? Irene wondered what in the hell she'd done to cause the sudden rage. She stared at Randy's door. What had made Mary stop there?

Irene forced herself to get up. Stepping over Mary she stumbled across the lobby to face the door. Her gaze was immediately drawn to the nameplate, the words seeming to jump out at her. With a sharp intake of breath, she read the name, suddenly feeling the first warning signs that she was about to pass out beginning to speed through her body.

Irene Cunningham Assistant District Attorney

"I should never have trusted you, you slut," she heard Mary mumble.

Irene whirled around. The scrappy young lady was sitting on the floor, her legs sprawled in front of her, her dress hiked up above her thighs. Irene watched her reach up and try to stem the flow of blood from her nose. Her face had already begun to swell and her eyes were puffy and almost closed. She moved to help her, but Mary flinched away in disgust and staggered to her feet. Warily, Irene tensed for another attack, but the girl circled away from her and snatched her purse off her desk. She walked unsteadily toward the hallway, but then stopped as she reached the opened double doors of the lobby. She lurched around and stared at Irene.

"I should have gone with my first instincts. You were in bed with the bastard all along, weren't you?" she said, her voice bitter.

Irene gestured at Randy's door. "I swear, Mary, I don't know what's going on here. I had nothing to do with this." Suddenly, Irene wondered if she did indeed have everything to do with what had happened.

“You’re lying,” Mary said finally, following it with a sardonic laugh. “Well, I’m not going to stay here and watch you and that piece of shit Barkley screw Randy and the entire city of Santa Monica. I suppose that stupid excuse for a rehab program, that GIFTER program Barkley’s so hot on, was your idea, right? What’s wrong, counselor, you had to fuck him to get him to listen to your crock-of-shit ideas?”

Irene gazed at her stupidly. Before she could ask Mary what she was talking about, the young girl cut her off.

“I’m out of here. I’m not going to be here when Randy gets back and finds you sitting in his office. You want to shove the knife in his back? Well, go ahead, but you can do it by yourself.” She started to turn away, but then stopped and smiled dangerously, gazing at Irene with a frigid stare. “And by the way, you can just kiss my ass, bitch. I’ll bet you’re getting plenty of practice kissing Barkley’s.” She spun and walked to the elevators.

Irene watched her enter the elevator, turn around, and then viciously stab at a button. As the doors started to close, Mary raised her hand and flipped her the bird.

She turned slowly and stared at her name again. She’d always dreamed about this day: the day when she’d finally see her name on the door of a law office. It was supposed to be the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. Written in beautiful enameled script, emblazoned across a gleaming plate of brass, it was supposed to be the symbol that she’d finally made it.

As she gazed at her name, she realized that her symbol of freedom was telling her something completely different. It was telling her that Randy was dead and that she had very few chances to save herself. She reminded herself that somehow, Barkley had managed to take her most private dreams and hopes and twist them into something putrid and ugly. He was using everything he’d learned about her, had taken from her memories, to get what he wanted. It was then that she realized he wouldn’t stop until he did get what he wanted, until he got everything he needed from her.

She whirled around and headed back to her cubicle. For the longest time, she sat in her chair and stared out the window, again

listening to the insistent voice of the gun calling to her from the trunk of her car and thinking about what Mary had said. It was her conversation with Mary, the young girl's mention of Barkley's new rehab program that caused her to go through the case folders Randy had given her. One by one she read the cases, feeling the sense of dread getting thicker and thicker. Each case ended the same way: the offender inexplicably remanded for months, or even years, to the rehabilitation program known as GIFTER. Her hands trembling, she read the rap sheets of what she realized was a veritable army of the most hideous scum Santa Monica had to offer. Abruptly, she realized that she'd discovered his game, but then reminded herself that it was, after all, his game, and that not knowing the rules could get her killed.

She wondered what she should do with the discovery. She thought about television or the newspapers. If she could get the whole story, enough detail to go public, she could bring him down. But how? How could she get the information without destroying herself in the process? Her thoughts turned to Michael. Even though she'd had reservations about trusting him at first, hadn't he been supportive, actually concerned about her, when she'd finally confided in him? Hadn't he even warned her to be careful? Tired beyond belief, suddenly feeling sick to her stomach again, her cheekbone beginning to throb so bad it made her teeth hurt, she decided to take the folders with her and go home. Grabbing her laptop, scooping the cases off her desk, she headed to the parking lot, her mind churning with thoughts of the GIFTER program and Barkley's possible motives.

* * *

It wasn't until three o'clock that afternoon that Irene finally screwed up enough courage to call Michael at work. The very second he answered; she knew she'd made the right decision. It was as if the pressure cooker she'd suddenly found herself in had vented a major portion of its steam. She reminded herself how lucky she was to have him for an ally. Irene asked him to come over to the apartment as soon after work as possible, remembering not to say

anything that might divulge anything to uninvited ears, and stressed how important it was that she see him. She grinned happily when he agreed and quickly hung up, and for thirty minutes simply sat on her couch, staring off into space, thinking until her head began to hurt. She had to take her thoughts off her problem or she was going to explode.

She gazed at the darkened screen of the television in the corner of her living room and thought that maybe she could watch a movie or something. Staring at the VCR on the shelf below the television, she remembered she had a tape of one of her all-time favorites, *The Wizard of Oz*, and smiled. She pictured the wonderful characters, acting out scenes that had long ago been burned into her memory. She thought of Dorothy and how she'd had to destroy the bad witch to get back home. She reasoned that in a lot of ways, she and Dorothy were a lot alike: Dorothy couldn't go home until she killed the witch and she couldn't live in peace until somehow she managed to destroy Barkley.

She'd just started the movie when the doorbell rang. Irene clicked off the VCR and TV and rushed to the door and opened it. Seeing Michael standing on her front porch, on his face an expression of genuine concern for her, she had to fight off the sudden impulse to yank him into her apartment and hug him fiercely. She inwardly tried to collect herself with a deep breath, attempting to will a sense of outward calm to every extremity of her body, and then invited him in.

After assuring him that she'd simply left work a little early and asking if he wanted something to drink, which he politely refused, she led him into the kitchen and began showing him the case folders. Time after time, she pointed out the severity of the crime and the almost utter contempt for proper jurisprudence, and then the sentencing to GIFTER. She searched his face, at times thinking she could actually read the same look of shock that she'd experienced. For the next two hours, she watched silently, time and again having to irritably remind herself that she'd actually stopped chewing her nails when she found an errant finger in her mouth.

He examined each case methodically, expertly moving through the paperwork with the practiced ease of someone who'd spent a career shuffling paper. Finally, Michael stopped to pass a hand through his bristled hair, whistled a low soft note and then flopped heavily against the back of his chair. Irene could plainly see that what she'd shown him was hitting him as hard as it had her. He closed his eyes and then shook his head for a moment, and then he looked up and stared directly at her.

"Do you have any idea what this is?" he said, sounding grave.

Irene shook her head. "Right now, I'm not sure, but there's more." She told him what had happened at the dance, sparing none of the details, watching his eyes widen in disbelief when she told him of the unique style of conversation she'd had with Barkley. When she got to the part about her nameplate on Randy's door, his eyes narrowed suspiciously and then his expression ominously darkened. It reminded her of the first time she'd met him—his face when she'd told him for whom she worked. Suddenly she realized that he'd not had a chance to speak with Mary yet, and thanked God for small miracles. She had to convince him, had to make him understand that Barkley was trying to use her and at the same time set her up to take the fall if necessary. She reached across the kitchen table and rested her hand on his arm.

"I know what you're thinking, but ask yourself something," she said. "If I was one of the bad guys, why would I be showing you anything at all? What would I have to gain?"

Irene watched him search her face, knew that he was trying to picture her as a heartless bitch with some menacing agenda. She prayed that he would recognize her expression for what it was: a desperate need for him to believe that everything she'd just told him was the truth. Suddenly, he smiled. She breathed an internal sigh of relief and grinned back at him.

"I guess not," he finally replied.

"So just what is this GIFTER program supposed to be?" Irene said.

“You really don’t know do you?” he said, hardly disguising his surprise.

Irene shook her head. He pursed his lips in thought, as if he were trying to decide if he should say anything more, and then shrugged his shoulders.

“GIFTER stands for Greater Inner-city Family Training Enhancement and Rehabilitation,” he said slowly. “Barkley started it about two months before you came to work for us. At first it was supposed to be a local program, something home-grown, specifically intended to clean up Santa Monica’s inner-city drug and crime problem.” He shook his head in disbelief. “And surprisingly, it worked. It worked so well, in fact, that Barkley’s program has caught on nationwide.” Michael gazed at her curiously. “I’m surprised you hadn’t read about it in the papers.”

Irene felt her face begin to blush with embarrassment. She didn’t have the heart to tell him she’d been so involved in the want ads over the last couple of months that she’d never taken the time to read the rest of the paper. Dismally, she told herself that so far, Michael had given her nothing to go on, unless she was planning to petition the Vatican for Barkley’s sainthood. She urged him to continue.

“Well, as near as I can figure out, the program was originally intended for the soft offenders, petty larceny, shoplifters, first-time drug busts, gang-bangers and the like. The program is supposedly guaranteed to change them.”

“How?” Irene asked, her optimism dashed when Michael shook his head.

“I really don’t know. Some type of conditional training. My guess is kind of like a boot camp, or something like that. And everything was really rocking and rolling. I’ve actually seen the before-and-after results with my own eyes. The program works. But then Barkley took the next step.” Michael paused and cleared his throat, and then stared down at his hands.

Irene gazed at him questioningly. He clearly wasn’t comfortable with getting into this, and she suddenly felt a tiny, searing ache in her chest at how difficult it appeared to be for him,

but she knew she couldn't let him stop. Silently, she coaxed him with a gentle wave of her hand. He looked up at her, resignation in his eyes, and she immediately sensed his reluctance to talk. She decided to wait patiently.

Michael finally continued, lowering his voice as if suddenly afraid that his admission might be heard by someone other than her.

“The program started working so well that Barkley had no trouble at all convincing the state to allow hardened criminals into the program.” He gestured at the stack of folders. “I’m sure by now you’ve realized that the bulk of what’s going into the program now is the abscessed warts on the ass of society: the murderers, child molesters, the coke and crack addicts. He’s getting them all. Think about it. What defense attorney in his right mind is going to say no to a deal like that when it’s offered?”

Irene was dazed from the impact of what she was hearing. Everything that Michael was telling her was contrary to what she'd heard from the various law firms she'd interviewed with over the past two months. Her impression of the rumors had been that crime in Santa Monica was at an all-time high. She studied Michael intently, not knowing what or who to believe. She allowed him the benefit of the doubt when it came to what he'd told her about Barkley's program. She'd at least seen the paper evidence that the program existed. But other than doubting the overall legality of the program with respect to hardened criminals, she'd heard nothing to indicate a dangerous ulterior motive. Irene remembered what Michael had said about Randy being used as Barkley's hatchet man, and suddenly began to wonder if that was true. Even though she never had a chance to know the man, somehow she felt that he would have been proud to be part of a program that made the streets safer.

But the streets weren't safer, and she knew it. The streets weren't getting safer anywhere in the country. So why was Michael trying to convince her that they were? Suddenly, she wondered just how much Michael really knew and how much he was inventing as he went along.

“That's about all I know,” Michael finished suddenly.

Lost in thought, Irene refocused, instantly aware that he was studying her intently, his eyes quickly darting to cover her body language, and then back to her eyes, then to her face, and then back to her eyes. She got the feeling that he needed a reaction, something from her, a word or a gesture that, when offered, would immediately put him at ease.

Crestfallen, she told herself she'd reached a dead-end. Despite nearly three hours of conversation, Michael had given her nothing that she could use. She could feel the pressure of her situation begin to build again, this time a near-desperate panic that exploded inside her, threatening to channel its way out of her body on the heels of a scream.

Somehow, she managed to keep it inside as she smiled wearily and then stood. Thanking him for dropping by, she walked him to the door, let him kiss her on the cheek after he promised to stop by her cubicle and chat, and then slowly closed the door and locked it. Finally, the terrifying realization hit her: she was trapped, a solitary target on Barkley's private shooting range. It was just as he'd said. She could do what he'd asked of her or she could die, her choice de jour. Again, she thought of the pistol she'd left in the trunk of her car. Getting the weapon past the metal detectors would be difficult, but she realized that somehow she was going to have to find a way.

She slumped weakly against the door, and before she could do anything to stop it, she started to cry, her chest heaving with deep sobs that wracked her entire body, sending her to her knees on the hard tile floor of the foyer.

* * *

It wasn't until Irene walked onto the first floor of the D.A.'s building the next morning that she realized fate had chosen to make her decision for her. She smiled at the guard stationed at the single arched metal detector as she passed through, but then hesitated as the alarm sounded. Slowly, the policeman slid off his chair, a round, padded stool that resembled a piece of discarded barroom furniture, and waddled toward her. Cursing the cruel sensitivity of

the machine, he asked Irene to discard whatever jewelry she was wearing and try again. She removed her watch and the tourmaline ring she always wore, and then attempted to pass through, but the alarm sounded again.

Irene stepped back through the arch, shrugging her shoulders by way of explanation to the line of people that had formed behind her. She reached up to remove a set of dangle hoop earrings that Angie had given her last Christmas, but the guard stopped her with a curt wave and asked her to move on. As she hurried to the elevator, Irene told herself that she'd suddenly and inexplicably been shown a way. She knew that if she thought for too long about what she was about to do, she'd never be able to go through with it, and forced herself to make a decision.

Suddenly snapping her fingers and groaning loudly as if she'd forgotten something, she whirled around and headed back to the parking lot. Minutes later she returned and melted into the rapidly diminishing line at the detector. She forced herself to look at the guard and grin broadly, wanted him to see her, desperately needed him to remember that she'd already passed through the metal detector once before, and then held her breath as she passed through again. When the alarm sounded, she immediately clutched her purse under her arm and feigned removing her earrings, this time apologizing loudly to the guard for having left something in the car. The guard never left his stool, choosing to irritably wave her on with his hand.

Expelling a long breath, she forced herself to casually stroll to the elevator, wait for a car and then head upstairs to her cubicle. She turned on her desk lamp, gently placed her purse in the bottom of a nearby file cabinet and then, for a brief moment, allowed herself to think about what she'd just gotten away with. What if she'd been caught? How would she have been able to explain the fact that she didn't even have a permit to carry the damned thing in the state of California? With chagrin she reminded herself that state-issued permits didn't have a habit of crossing national territorial borders. What she'd done could have ruined her career. But it was all so simple, once she stopped to actually look at it.

She gazed idly at the calendar sitting on her desk. Tuesday, November twenty-third. Nothing particularly special about the day. Most people would be thinking about the coming holiday and planning to stuff themselves full of good food. It was supposed to be a time when family came together and gave thanks for all the wonderful bounty in their lives. She winced inwardly as a twinge of sadness suddenly stung her. What would her actions do to her family? She realized that their sharing wouldn't be the happy kind.

She checked her watch again. It was seven-thirty in the morning. Only about ten hours left. Today had proven itself to be the day she would make an appointment with destiny. She decided to schedule it for six o'clock that evening. She would call him and set it up to see him after hours. Let him think that she wanted to do more than just cooperate. The thought of having sex with him turned her stomach violently, but it seemed the only plausible way of getting inside his defenses. Of course she didn't plan on his being alive to enjoy her body anyway.

She glanced at the file cabinet drawer that held her purse. Just a little longer, my little friend, then you get to come out and play, she thought.

The blinking of her message light on her phone caught her attention; she placed the phone on speaker and listened to the message. It was her sister, Melissa, telling her that she and Grandma were flying out to see her. When had she said? Irene pressed the two-digit code and gripped the arms of her chair tightly as she listened to her sister's message again. A tight knot welled up in the base of her throat; Melissa had said they were arriving sometime this evening. They needed to talk to her about something extremely important. She thought her sister sounded a little less laid-back than normal, as if something had upset her normally genteel lifestyle. But at the same time, she sensed something else in her sister's inflection, a rushed phrase or two. She'd lived with Melissa long enough to know when something was upsetting her. Irene thought about what she was about to do and wondered how Melissa would react. Then, suddenly, she realized that fate had chosen this day for a reason; she would have to finish him before they got here. It was already too

late for her, but she would be damned if she allowed him to get to Angie, or Grandma Danielle, or even Melissa, for that matter. She told herself it made no sense to let the stench of the man's sewer find its way into her family's life; it had to be now: there were no more choices to make. Sickly, she wondered if she'd ever had any choices to begin with.

She waited in her chair until two o'clock, even skipping lunch, constantly gazing at the smooth movement of the sweep-hand on her watch. She picked up the phone and buzzed Barkley's office. A bead of sweat trickled from a pool collecting inside her palm, tickling her wrist as it trailed down her arm to her elbow.

"Hello, Miss Cunningham, so good of you to call," Thomas Barkley said. "Hope you're feeling better than last we met?"

Irene swallowed hard and stared at the phone. As far as she knew, the D.A.'s phone systems didn't have caller ID. She wondered how he knew it was her on the end of the connection. The dizziness from the day before in the hallway returned, threatening to take hold and plunge her into darkness.

"I... I've been giving it a lot... of... thought," she managed to say, "and I think you and I should definitely discuss our future... together." Abandoning any hope she'd had of sounding sexy, she continued. "How about after work... in your office?" Listening to the silence, she felt a sudden sensation of intense cold ripple up and down her spine. Suddenly she felt him looking at her; felt it as if he were standing right next to her, raping her with his eyes.

"I knew you'd come around eventually, Irene. May I call you Irene?"

When she didn't answer, he continued, "This evening would be perfect. We can discuss the details of our arrangement, and perhaps spend a little... how should one put this, quality time together. By the by, Irene, I must add that you look absolutely stunning in that outfit. Red has always been a favorite color of mine also. Until six, then."

Irene immediately hung up and stared at the phone in horror and disbelief. She let her gaze dart wildly around the cubicle, trying to locate any hidden cameras. Feeling suddenly dirty and exposed, she

checked under her desk, praying to God that this sick bastard hadn't been getting free crotch shots of her while she worked. Abruptly she sat up, realizing that she could probably search all day and never find anything. During the entire telephone conversation, although it had lasted only seconds, she'd felt that same strange connection to his soul that she'd experienced the night of the dance. Disgusted with herself for even thinking about it, she realized that no matter how many times she tried to tell herself otherwise, Thomas Barkley was like no other man she'd ever known. She was frightened of him, sickened and disgusted with the power he held over her and yet, at the same time, drawn to him. And even though she realized that his touch would be the end of her life as she knew it, somehow she found herself mesmerized by the mere thought of his seductive capabilities. No, she told herself while her thoughts brushed against the several different possibilities; not in this lifetime, not with someone like him.

She settled back in her chair and began the wait, listening to the sounds of her own breathing and the pounding of her heartbeat as it tried to race the minutes ticking slowly by. At five-thirty, Irene pulled her purse from the file cabinet and got up. Turning around, she viewed her surroundings with an almost wistful look. Her new office. Only a few days ago it had been teeming with amazing and dreamily exotic expectations. But now... now it had a frigid, morgue-like atmosphere. Nothing was left here for her anymore. Her infamous legacy would soon be splattered across the nation by the media. Once she pulled the trigger, she would forfeit her identity. She would no longer be Katherine Irene Cunningham, Jr. Assistant District Attorney. She would just be some crazy woman with a gun.

This time, she clearly heard the excited whisper of her metallic friend, nestled inside her purse, as it reminded her that it was time. Irene leaned over and flipped off the light above her desk and walked out.

She reached his office at precisely six o'clock and, after stepping into his lobby and then finding his door closed, she unsnapped the flap of her purse and knocked on the door, staring at the shiny brass nameplate.

Thomas Barkley District Attorney

She tried to steady her trembling knees and urged her unwilling body to move as she twisted the doorknob and pushed the door open. A blast of coldness enveloped her as she entered the room. For a second, she wondered if this was how it really was in hell: instead of blazing infernos, an infinity of forlorn coldness that slowly drove you mad. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled. She stared at a brass lamp on his desk, noticing that the green shale hood seemed to dully illuminate the surrounding area with an eerie lime glow. Irene focused on the back of Barkley's executive chair, and assumed that he was alone. She guessed he was looking out of the window and peered through the plated glass window beyond his desk. The skyline of downtown Santa Monica was simply breathtaking at this time of the evening. Silently, she bade him enjoy the scenery while he could.

"The Gifter comes," she heard him say.

Plunging her hand into her purse, she curled her fingers around the gun and pulled out the .357. She pointed it at the back of the chair, but then hesitated as the thought of shooting him in the back suddenly galled her. Like he's going to give you any kind of chance, she cautioned herself. She spread her feet apart, arms extended, elbows locked in front of her, just as they'd taught her in shooting class, and attempted to hold the gun steady. Her hands trembled violently as she pulled back on the hammer. The gun mechanically sounded a double click, echoing loudly in the silence of the office.

Silently Irene said goodbye to her family, aimed carefully at the center of his chair and squeezed the trigger. Not once, but three times.

Amplified echoes of the pistol's blasts rolled around the cavernous office, bouncing off the walls and pounding her eardrums. Her head began throbbing with a tremendous ache above both temples. She told herself that she'd done it, she'd actually done it, and then quickly stepped through the acrid, choking wafts of cordite swirling around her. Irene promised herself that she couldn't leave until she was sure.

As she neared his chair, she eyed the tiny cluster of bullet holes in the back of the chair with grim satisfaction. Her insides tingling with an oddly perverse sense of pride, she congratulated herself on her accuracy, and then reached across the desk and spun the chair around.

She gasped. Her knees buckled. She was falling; she clawed desperately at the edge of the desk. The gun slipped from her hands and thudded onto the desk. Irene stared in disbelief at the man's stark white head of hair, his arms dangling over the sides. Her mouth opened to form a question, but the words wouldn't come. Horrified, she watched as three crimson stains slowly grew larger on the front of Randy Hargrove's starched white shirt. With a scream building up in her throat, she realized that Barkley had decided not to wait for her to get to him.

"Now look what you've gone and done, Irene," she heard a familiar voice say from the shadows of the room. "What will the police say when they discover you've shot poor Randy?"

Irene whirled and then gasped as Michael stepped into the circle of pale light surrounding the desk. His eyes glinted with a ghostly, hollow look in the shadowy office light. Stunned, a sudden paralysis gripping her tightly, she saw him walk up and then carefully pick up the gun with a handkerchief. He faced her, his normally handsome face twisted into a perverse expression of disdain. Irene desperately tried to guess how Michael had known she would be here. She knew of only one way.

"Figured it out yet?" he said. He smiled, but Irene could see that the warmth, the kindness and concern from before, had vanished.

She told herself that had she bothered to examine things a little more closely, checked her emotional needs at the door, she might have spotted the danger before it was too late. Her mind reeling with confusion, she slowly shook her head. He laughed, a rumbling sound that grated like sandpaper across her already frayed nerve endings.

She watched him stroke his chin in thought.

“Where should I start?” he said to himself, and then glared at her. “You’re probably wondering why I’m here, but then you’re such a smart girl, I’ll bet you’ve already figured that out by now. Think about this. Why would a new employee, especially a flunky like you, ever be invited to a political shindig like the one I took you to? I hate to tell you this, darling: you may be drop-dead gorgeous, but you’re sure as hell not Cinderella.”

Irene gasped. What he said made sense. Barkley had wanted her there; for some reason needed to ensure she was at the dance. But why? Abruptly she realized that had Michael not invited her, she would never have known about it; she would never have gone. He had expertly served her up to Barkley with all the callousness of a waiter plopping down an after-dinner mint.

But what Michael was telling her seemed to imply that somehow Barkley had known about her for a long time. She asked herself how; how could Barkley have known, at what point had he become aware of her existence?

Suddenly she remembered her first conversation with him. She’d felt the connection; she’d felt his presence just by talking to him on the phone. Something told her that somehow he’d been able to do the same. Her body began to tremble uncontrollably.

“Why?” she croaked.

“Why you?” Michael replied, his voice suddenly bitter. “Why did old Thomas suddenly change his plans in mid-stream? Why did he go back on his guarantee and suddenly pick you to take Randy’s place? Why, after all the work I’ve done for him—changing the records, making sure his precious little program got off the ground? Why he decides that suddenly I’m not good enough? I have no fucking clue.”

Irene furiously tried to anticipate what the next move would be. Barkley wanted her, needed her alive for some kind of elaborate scheme—but why frame her for murder? What could she possibly accomplish, locked up in the bowels of some prison? She thought about GIFTER.

“The program,” she whispered. “What about the program?” Michael shook his head, his expression seeming to indicate genuine

awe, and then stared at her, a wicked grin crossing his face. Irene flinched inwardly, hoping she could keep him talking, keep him occupied just long enough to come up with something. She quickly glanced at the doorway and then back to him.

“I’ve got to hand it to the bastard,” he said with a murmur. “GIFTER’s a stroke of pure fucking genius. It was like he knew what the results would be even before he started it up, like he’d rehearsed it all his life. The timing was perfect; the country’s ripe for a plan like this. On the one hand, you’ve got fat-cat government officials promising to escalate the war on crime, but then the poor schlock on the street paying the taxes starts screaming for relief. And what about the liberals looking for a way to solve the overpopulation and the inhumanity in the correction facilities? I don’t have to tell you they’re letting the scum out on the streets in record numbers, do I? The whole nation’s going right down the shithole and nobody has a fucking clue, until Barkley shows up and starts producing results. Ain’t it amazing?”

Irene doubted that Barkley had instigated the program simply because of his intense desire to serve humanity. Something dark and ominous was lying just beneath the surface of what Michael was telling her, something that she sensed Michael knew but had chosen not to share with her. She reminded herself that any new discovery here might easily slam the door closed on the possibility of getting out of this alive. Quickly she weighed her chances: her life for the information. Would Barkley still need her as badly if she knew what he was really doing, or would she become such a threat that he had no choice but to kill her?

Irene leaned slowly against the desk. Michael followed her with a steady gaze. She watched him lean forward expectantly, on the balls of his feet, his body coiled and tense, ready to surge forward if necessary.

Irene wondered why he was waiting, and for what. Here they were; she’d just blown away the Assistant District Attorney, and now Michael was chatting with her as if he’d met her at the water cooler. She glanced at Randy, his mouth open as if to scream, his eyes wide, an expression of horrified surprise permanently etched

onto his face. Suddenly, her heart began to thud painfully in her chest. She moaned inwardly, trying to convince herself that there'd been no way she could have known, no way she could have guessed that Barkley had orchestrated Randy's death by her hands. All this time she'd thought Barkley had killed him. But the horrible truth of it all was that she'd been the one to pull the trigger.

"So now what?" she said weakly, beginning to feel the strain tugging at every muscle in her body.

"Now what, you ask, Miss Cunningham?" A rich baritone voice floated across the room from the doorway to her right.

Slowly, she pivoted and stared at a silhouette standing just inside the open doorway. The silhouette moved, gracefully drifting through the shadows, until Thomas Barkley appeared in the glow of the desk lamp.

He nodded to her politely, a knowing smile forming on his face. Suddenly she could feel his power, beckoning her to rush to him, be saved by him. For several seconds he simply stared at her, his gaze scanning her, seeming to reach into the depths of her own personal world, igniting passions she'd long ago forgotten. With a sharp intake of breath, she fought the almost overpowering need to open her mind to him. She was grateful when he slowly turned his head and gazed at Michael.

"Forgive me, Miss Cunningham," he replied softly. "All of your questions will be answered in due time, but first I must attend to some matters of extreme importance."

Irene watched him stretch out his hand and saw the gun fly out of Michael's grasp. Like a miniature Halloween ghost, covered by the handkerchief, the gun quickly darted into Barkley's outstretched hand.

Stunned, rooted in place by disbelief of what had just happened, she could only watch as Michael's face twisted into an expression of wide-eyed shock. He tried to back away from Barkley, but it was as if the D.A. had managed to slink between the advance of time itself, one moment standing between her and Michael, the very next alongside the young man, gripping him by the back of the neck. Michael screamed, a hoarse cry of pain that hammered against Irene's eardrums. She wanted to close her eyes, desperately

wanted to look away, but the pure fascination of what was happening captivated her. Suddenly Michael fell to his knees and then became still, Barkley's hand still gripping the back of his neck. Irene couldn't believe the immediate change in the man. It was as if he'd suddenly been shot with a tranquilizer dart. He seemed completely calm, his gaze vacant, staring dreamily off into space.

"I'm afraid you have outlived your usefulness, Michael, do you not agree?" Thomas said. Horrified, Irene watched the young man nod his head. She saw Barkley lift up the gun. Then Michael slowly reached up and folded his hand around the handkerchief, his finger resting on the trigger.

"Take care not to disturb the prints, son," Barkley murmured.

"No," Irene screamed as Michael lifted the pistol and rested it against his forehead, just between his eyes. "No, Michael," she screamed again.

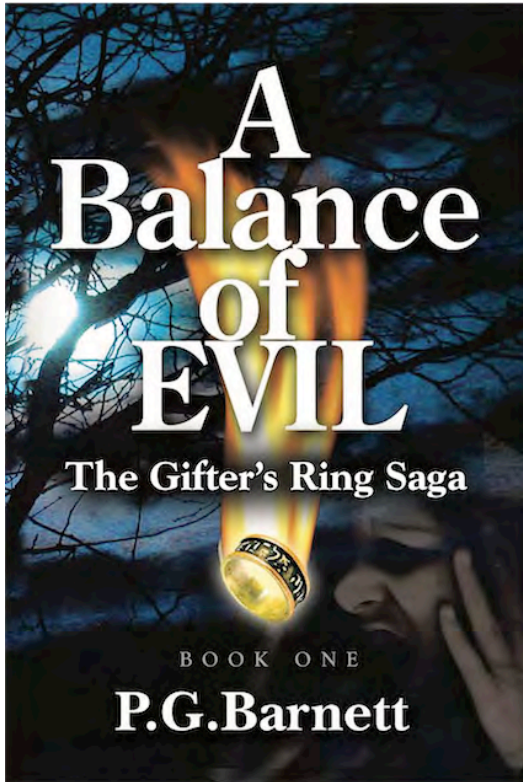
Thomas Barkley turned and stared at her, his gaze filled with hatred. "Perhaps now you will truly understand," he replied.

Suddenly Michael pulled the trigger, his head flying out of Barkley's hands as the impact of the bullet exploded his face into a bloody mist. Irene flinched, but then realized that Thomas was continuing to look at her, his gaze unwavering, menacing.

From deep within, she felt something beckoning her, screaming at her that there was a way she could deny him. Find the power inside, she heard the voices whisper in her head. The power will protect you from him.

Irene closed her eyes and gave herself up to the voices. Terrified, she felt herself pulled along the strange, enigmatic hallways of her own mind, the pathways of her own past. Deeper and deeper she drifted, guided in her frantic search for a haven by a power she did not understand. Finally, she found herself deposited in front of a small yet somehow vaguely familiar hideaway. Feeling a safe, protective aura stretch out of the hideaway and envelop her, she rushed inside. Frightened and alone, she huddled within her own psyche. She was sure that he would follow when he realized what was happening.

Suddenly she felt him, sensed his power moving into her as it began to spread through the channels of her mind, violating her memories, slashing each precious thought in turn and then moving on to the next, invalidating the things that made her who and what she was. She heard her daddy's voice, but desperately tried not to think about anything. She imagined where she was to be nothing more than a room filled with darkness. Total, pitch black, nothingness. Then she imagined little bits and pieces of herself fading away into the darkness. The harder she concentrated, the less of herself she saw, until finally, the last bit disappeared into the folds of her consciousness. Drawing from a power she had never been aware she had, Katherine Irene Cunningham discovered a way to cease to exist. She never knew it when he finally gave up and left her, because alone in the disconnected darkness, floating through the channels of her own mind, she couldn't have known. Simple awareness was a luxury that she could not afford right then.



When a member of the Brethren attacks Irene, both twins, although struggling with their own unique challenges, discover they must join together. It soon becomes apparent to the twins their only hope for survival will be to use the power of the Gifter's Ring to destroy the Brethren.

A Balance of Evil

by P.G. Barnett

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