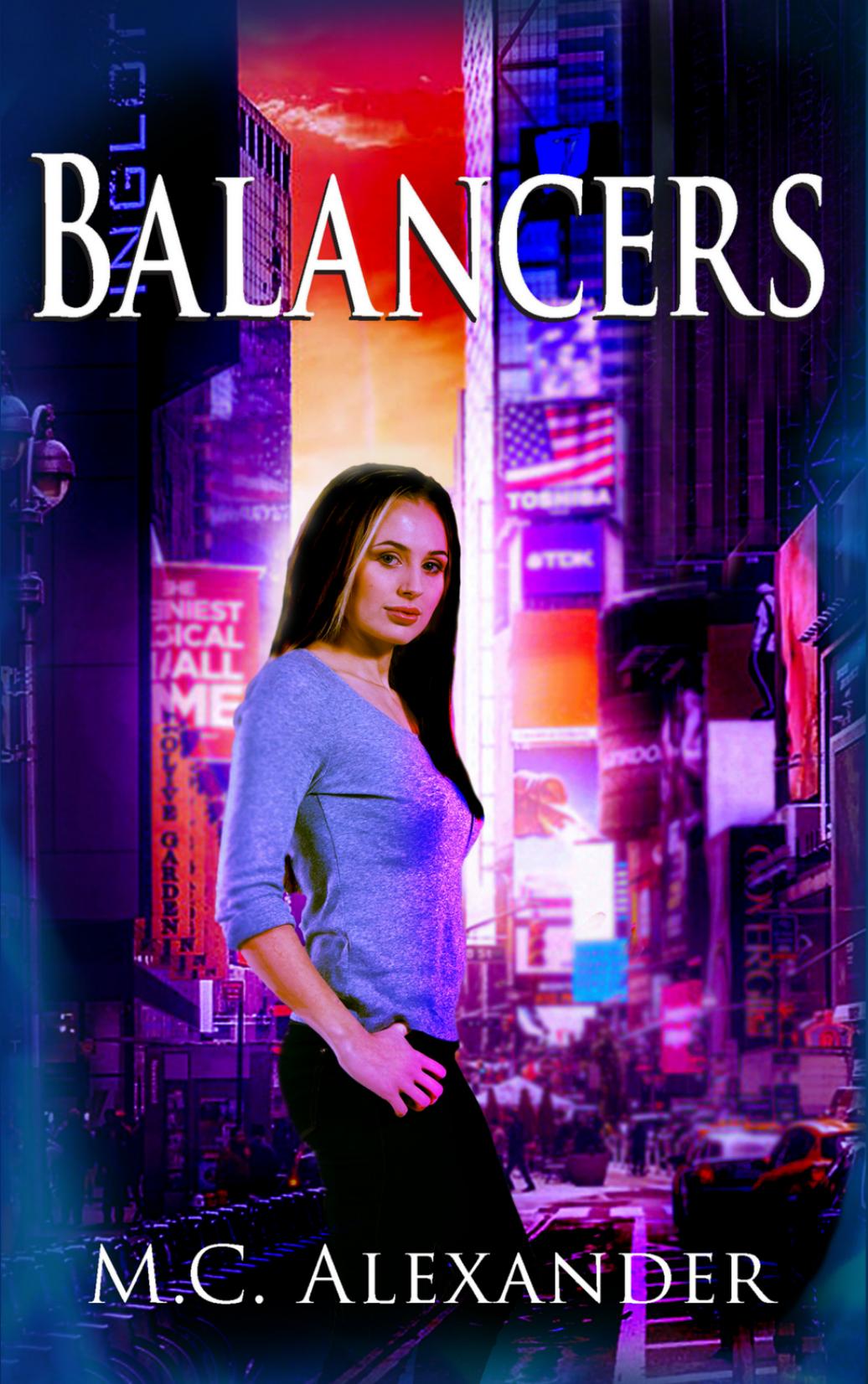


BALANCERS

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a grey long-sleeved sweater and black pants, stands in the center of the frame. She is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is a vibrant, colorful depiction of Times Square in New York City at night. The scene is filled with bright neon signs and billboards. Visible signs include 'THE NEAREST WALL ME', 'POLYVE GARDEN', 'TOSHIBA', 'AT&T', and 'EXERCISE'. The sky is a mix of red, orange, and purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall atmosphere is energetic and urban.

M.C. ALEXANDER

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Balancers

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For my cousin. I miss you.

One should see the world, and see himself as a scale with an equal balance of good and evil.

When he does one good deed the scale is tipped to the good - he and the world is saved.

When he does one evil deed the scale is tipped to the bad - he and the world is destroyed.

- Maimonides

Preface

The idea for *Balancers* came to me after being frustrated with not seeing justice being done. Yet another person reminded me about divine justice, that I had to leave it in God's hands. I do believe in this concept, and it does very much help us not to carry around the anger and hurt associated with the awful things people do to us. It did occur to me one day that perhaps there are people whose duty it is to see that divine justice done. In short, the overall premise for the book came to me in the midst of my own frustrations with people seeming to "get away" with the bad things that they do. I also thought of the other side of the scale, and how cool it would be if those same people were tasked with rewarding the good deeds people do as well.

Balancers is entirely a work of fiction which takes place in the real world. In order to make that world seem as real and approachable as possible, I have used actual locations, landmarks, and towns. That said, there are many aspects of the environments which are not real or accurate. For instance, I specifically chose to set part of the book in Wayne, NJ because I like the town very much. I used it for the exact reason that it does *not* happen to suffer from the socio-economic problems I describe early on in the book. I saw no need to use a town that truly does struggle with such problems, which I felt might further stigmatize that town or immortalize in this book a

problem which they might yet solve.

I hope you enjoy this story as much as I enjoyed telling it.

Prologue

It was yet another Monday. Mr. Moss started his week the way he started every other week. His job was nothing more than that: a job. His job gave him no satisfaction or validation. It left him wanting for enough money to meet his ever-increasing debt. Every single Monday he felt like he was frantically rowing a boat away from an enormous waterfall, and his arms were growing weary of it. He was sick and tired of everything and everyone around him. He couldn't remember the last time he felt truly happy. He didn't even remember what that felt like.

The only pleasure he ever derived from his weekly incarceration in that bleak, corporate Gulag was to take out his frustrations on the poor saps who worked underneath him. *If I have to suffer, why shouldn't they?* he thought. The little abuses Mr. Moss would dispense were a small price for these young upstarts to pay. They were the same dues Mr. Moss had to pay when his own supervisor crapped on him in those first years with the company. He was only dishing it out the same way he had taken it.

The newest employee bothered him the most. *That smug little Indian girl temp with the bizarre name. What was it again?* he sneered in his head. *Oh yes, Nandini. What the hell kind of name is that?*

Nandini Anand had only been temping at the office for a couple of days, but ever since her arrival, Mr. Moss had been having a

hellish time. He figured she must bring bad luck everywhere she goes. He was frustrated with her accent, and he had absolutely no patience with her inability to understand plain English. Why would the company let someone so stupid work for him?

The same day she started her training there, some jerk co-worker kept removing the staples from his stapler, and changed the audio notification for his incoming emails to a ringing desk bell sound that didn't play for a full eight minutes after the notification first popped up on his screen. It took him all day to figure out why his computer was making that annoying sound. He remembered the day clearly, because that was the day he had screamed at Hammond during the weekly morning marketing meeting. Hammond had made a simple mistake, but Moss had been inconvenienced by it. He accused Hammond of being an incompetent screw-up.

A couple of days later, he fired a useless college intern who didn't know how to use a simple spreadsheet program. She had left the office in tears. He probably could have taught her how to use it, but it was easier to get rid of her. When he arrived home, his garage door opener didn't work. It was only six months old. He had to climb in through the garage window and press the manual lift button. The garage door went up perfectly. He tried the button on his remote opener again, and nothing. Stupid garage door company must have put an old battery in the remote.

Initially, Mr. Moss didn't associate these misfortunes with Nandini. Why would he? They had nothing to do with her. Stuff just happens. But stuff kept happening, and it seemed to have a knack for happening immediately after he had to deal with some idiot at work. Sure, the way he dealt with those idiots might have been in ways which Ms. Manners would not have approved, but idiots shouldn't be tolerated. They should be dealt with harshly.

Nandini accidentally spilled coffee on his laptop the same day he had pushed the elevator 'close' button when someone called for him to hold the door. Then, during that rainstorm when he drove by a puddle and splashed the people waiting for the bus, his umbrella was stolen from the holder next to the front lobby door. The last straw was when Nandini, who for some unknown reason was helping out in the Personnel Department that day, stumbled across Mr. Moss's file and then 'accidentally' revealed in an email to the entire office that his legal first name was actually Peter, not John. He went by his middle name of John in order to avoid the obvious snickering about his name. He hated that his parents named him Peter and that the kids in school picked right up on it and started calling him Pete Moss. Now, everyone at the office was doing it. He really started to dislike Nandini intensely. While his recent miseries couldn't actually be blamed on her, he was sure the universe had somehow sent her into his life to make him even more miserable.

Chapter 1

In the quiet stillness of her darkened apartment in Hell's Kitchen, Alessandra Genovese lay motionless. The windows were opened a crack, just enough to let a cross breeze of cool air float over the bed. The ambient noise of the city didn't bother her. Sometimes she even enjoyed it. Normally sleep would not evade her like this, but her imagination was running wild. It had not been a wonderful day. At the grocery store, she got to the register and realized she had forgotten the pasta sauce. The bottle was visible on the shelf just beyond two women waiting impatiently with their carts full of groceries. Alessandra walked as quickly as she could past the two waiting women, grabbed the jar, and headed back toward the register.

The woman behind Alessandra lowered the cell phone she was on, and scrunched her face up into a hateful sneer. Her obnoxious fire-engine red lips parted to reveal tar-stained teeth, and in a raspy voice she growled, "Are you absolutely sure you have everything now? Some of us want to actually get out of this store before we die, you idiot."

Alessandra stood in a stupefied daze, staring incredulously at the woman. She searched her brain for a reply, but nothing came. She had only held up the line for about fifteen seconds, so what was this woman's problem? The ugly woman with the

yellow teeth sensed an advantage, and seized it.

“Are you gonna do something, or just stand there looking like a stupid moron?”

Alessandra exhaled slowly and closed her eyes, trying to will the woman out of existence. She shook her head and turned back to the register. She handed the pasta sauce jar to the cashier. The awkward tension hovering in the air had made everyone uncomfortable except for the ugly woman. The red curtains of her lips opened to reveal a satisfied grin.

Alessandra put the bagged groceries into her cart and walked out of the store, refusing to even look in the offensive woman’s direction. The incident had stayed with her throughout the day, filling her with both anger and regret. There was anger over the mistreatment she received, and there was regret that she had not said something in her own defense.

As she lay restlessly in bed, Alessandra replayed the event in her mind. Over and over she heard the woman’s harsh, raspy voice in her mind. She found herself saying all sorts of witty things like, “Gee, I’m so sorry I took a whole fifteen extra seconds away from your oh-so charming and fulfilling life. You must be in a rush to get outside and light up yet another cigarette so you can sound even more like Harvey Fierstein with a heavy cold.”

In Alessandra’s imagined scene, the woman looks shocked and appalled, and everyone in the store points and laughs at the ugly woman. In another fantasy, Alessandra doesn’t bother to say anything, but the woman gets to her car only to find the battery is dead. In another, after dishing out a droll comeback, Alessandra watches as the woman runs out of the store crying.

Alessandra awoke the next morning feeling like she hadn’t rested at all. Her angst over the awful woman had spoiled what

little sleep she managed to get. She poured herself some black coffee and sat in her favorite chair. She sipped and sighed, hoping the poison of her encounter would not linger in her mind all day. After all, Brady was coming over and she was going to cook him a nice homemade Italian dinner. Brady Wexford was no more Italian than he was a Maasai tribesman, but he seemed to enjoy Alessandra's pasta dinners. Well, at least he enjoyed her attempts at it.

Brady's father was the wealthy CEO of a large corporation in Manhattan, and Alessandra constantly felt pressure to give Brady the best quality in everything. She frequently spent more than she was able to afford, on the most seemingly simple of things. Brady's father had not been so overt as to call her a gold digger to her face, but she certainly felt it whenever she was around him. Her highly attuned intuition told her that Brady's family would never think she was good enough.

Why should they? Alessandra's upbringing wasn't nearly as easy as Brady's seemed to have been. Her family always struggled with financial problems. She had never even seen the kind of wealth Brady's family had accumulated. She couldn't fathom how a person could actually have more money than they knew how to spend. Thankfully, Brady never mentioned their financial differences or made Alessandra feel like it was a problem for him. She really liked being around Brady. When they met late one night at the Olympic Diner, she had no idea his family was wealthy. He looked like your average Joe college student at one of New York's many universities.

Alessandra had earned a scholarship to attend the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She had gotten through her first semester with flying colors, and was now getting close to finishing her second

semester. Brady had been told by his father that he would be attending law school at Fordham University, which happened to be a few blocks from Alessandra's school. While he was in school, Brady got to live in a swanky three-bedroom Upper West Side apartment near Lincoln Center, but he never made Alessandra feel badly about her tiny little Hell's Kitchen apartment.

Brady was always politely firm in his interactions with others, getting his way most of the time in any discussion or debate. His personality was an excellent fit for law, and Alessandra had bonded with him over various concepts of criminal justice. They had also bonded over the diner's famous Reuben sandwiches.

It had taken Alessandra a few months to get used to the noise, the daily struggles, and the environment of life in New York City. Meeting Brady had helped her get settled more comfortably into Big Apple life.

It didn't take long for Alessandra to actually start enjoying the noise and everything else that accompanies life in the city. Occasionally she would miss home and call her family. She would always try to call when she knew her little sister would be home. As long as Alessandra could remember, she had always looked after her little sister Daphne.

In her early youth, Alessandra's parents divorced because of her mother's drug addiction problems. Her father fought for, and eventually received, custody of both girls and their older brother Tony. Her father did the best he could on a meager income, making sure his children at least had their basic needs covered. Beyond that, there was not much left to go around. The family sacrificed and struggled, but they weren't unhappy.

They lived in Wayne, New Jersey, close to the meat processing plant where her father worked. She hadn't ever known what it was like to have money because, in her world, they never had any.

The area in which they lived had problems with drugs and gangs. Bad things happened to good people with enough frequency that soon it wasn't much of a shock to Alessandra. It was just part of life.

When they were in grade school, Alessandra would always walk Daphne home. Sometimes Daphne wanted to feel like a big girl and walk alone. Alessandra would occasionally let Daphne walk several steps ahead, but she always kept her little sister in sight.

"I can still see you, Lessie." Daphne would say. "Why can't you just let me walk home by myself? Why do you always have to watch over me like a hawk?"

Despite the bad, there was one constant good: the police. The police officers in her town were kind, supportive of their fellow community members, and generally looked out for people. They were part of the community family. She looked up to the police and thought of them as an effective force for good. After high school, she set her heart on joining the police and helping to make her community a better, safer place to live.

When Alessandra graduated high school, you wouldn't have found anyone more proud than her sister Daphne. When Alessandra rejoined her family outside of the stadium where the graduation ceremony was held, Daphne had run to Alessandra. She had thrown her arms around her big sister's neck and exclaimed, "I'm so proud of you, Lessie! I love you!"

A couple of months before Alessandra left for college, Daphne started to complain about severe joint pain and headaches. It was difficult for Alessandra, because she couldn't do anything to ease her sister's pain.

"Don't be sad, Lessie," Daphne would say when Alessandra accidentally let her poker face down. "If you didn't watch over

me like a hawk so much, you wouldn't have to see me like this.”

The day Alessandra left for college in New York, she could see the sorrow and pain in Daphne's eyes. Daphne had tried to hide it, but in vain. Alessandra knew her little sister was hurting, but for whatever her reasons for doing so, Daphne never wished to share that pain with others. Whenever Alessandra would call, Daphne would sound cheerful on the phone. Then, when Alessandra would talk to her Papa, he would tell her privately that Daphne's pain and depression were both getting steadily worse.

When Alessandra came home for Thanksgiving, she noticed a strange rash on Daphne's face. Daphne had deflected, dismissing it as typical teenage acne, but Alessandra wasn't buying it. The rash looked like a butterfly stretched across Daphne's nose and cheeks, and wasn't present anywhere else on her face or body. Alessandra also felt how hot Daphne's body was when she hugged her goodbye the next day.

Daphne insisted that she was fine, but Alessandra couldn't stop thinking about the change in Daphne's physical state. Her baby sister moved much more gingerly than she had in the past. She had been walking around like a frail old woman, not like the vibrant teenager she should have been.

Now at college, Alessandra buried herself in her Criminal Justice studies. She was doing well at school, making new friends, and learning so many interesting things about the law. She was getting to know the ins and outs of her new neighborhood, including the best places to get cheap pizza slices and which little shops had the largest bagels for the lowest price.

She was dating Brady, and they were happily exploring this new and exciting city together. She was even beginning to feel like New York was her home. She had enjoyed a beautiful

Christmas holiday season, complete with visits to Rockefeller Center and a romantic carriage ride through Central Park.

The family had gotten together for an unforgettable New Year's Eve party at the home in Wayne. Daphne even seemed like she was in high spirits. Everything seemed wonderful, and shortly afterward, Alessandra headed back to her apartment and started back at school. She was only two weeks into her second semester classes when she got the call.

It seemed that Daphne had put up a brave front, but the pain finally overwhelmed her. She was slipping ever deeper into the abyss of depression, and she had hidden it well from her friends and family. One day Daphne went by herself to the doctor's office, but she didn't come home. Her Papa searched for Daphne all over the city, for two frantic and seemingly interminable days. The police joined in the search, but Daphne had simply disappeared. Papa didn't know if she had chosen to run away, or God forbid, had chosen something darker.

Daphne's body was found in Packanack Lake. Some kids walking near the water noticed it on the shore line. She had overdosed on pain medication and drowned. It was January. No one would have gone swimming that time of year. Plus, Daphne was fully dressed. There was no note, no indication that Daphne had taken her own life. The family suspected that the pain and darkness had finally become too difficult for Daphne to bear.

At the funeral home following the memorial service, Alessandra and her father held each other for what seemed like an hour. She squeezed her eyes closed as he held her head gently in his rough, labor-hardened hand.

"I'm so sorry I wasn't here, Papa. Maybe I could have been there for her at the moment she needed me most. I wasn't there to watch her, to help her. I'm so, so sorry."

She knew Daphne wouldn't want her to weep, but Alessandra couldn't stop the warm, steady sting of tears streaming down her cheeks.

Papa whispered, "Daphne was in so much pain. You couldn't have done anything to help her. Remember what Father Davis said, '...and there shall be no more pain, neither sorrow, nor crying.' She is in God's loving hands now."

Alessandra felt her body stiffen in his embrace, "God's hands? How could God let this happen?" Her voice trembled with sorrow and anger, "It's not fair. It's not right! Daphne was the kindest, most gentle soul in the world. She treated everyone with love and mercy and respect. What kind of a loving God would take her away from me like this? What kind of God wouldn't even let me say goodbye to my baby sister?"

"The very same God that saw her suffering," Papa said patiently, "and mercifully wanted for that suffering to end. She didn't want me to tell you. She made me promise. After Thanksgiving I took her to see a specialist."

He paused, not sure whether to tell Alessandra what he knew. He decided not to keep it a secret any longer, "Daphne had lupus."

He felt Alessandra's body tighten again. He took Alessandra's head out of his hand and held her at arm's length in front of him.

"Hey. Look at me, *cucciola*."

Alessandra didn't want her father to see her crying. She didn't want anyone to see it. Her family was known for their strength, and she didn't want to show weakness even at this terrible moment. With her head still leaning down, she glanced around at the other family members attending the memorial. Her brother Tony was sitting in a corner, wearing his dark blue

U.S. Marine Corps Blue Dress 'A' uniform, and being consoled by two of their cousins. Once Alessandra knew no one was watching her, she wiped the tears from her cheeks and looked up to meet her father's patiently waiting gaze.

He gave her the warmest smile he could muster. "We cannot always know the path God will lead us down. I know in my heart that God had a reason to take my little girl from me."

His throat closed on him. He bowed his head, speaking to himself as much as he was speaking to Alessandra, "I have faith in God's plan for all of us."

Alessandra sighed and shook her head, though she shared the same faith.

"Hey," Papa said, regaining her gaze. "I love you," he said, and lowered his own head to hide his own tears welling up.

Alessandra looked desperately at his lowered head, hoping he would bring his gaze back up to meet hers. When he didn't, she kissed the top of his head and let out another tear. "I love you too, Papa."

* * *

Back in her apartment, Alessandra found herself sitting with her feet up in the chair, embracing her own legs. The corners of her mouth were drawn in, and tears were beginning to burn her eyes. She looked around at her postage stamp of an apartment and thought that Daphne never even got a chance to see it. Her breathing started to get heavy, and her heart started to feel like someone was trying to pull it out.

Enough. She looked up and blinked a few times to force the tears back in. She looked down at her coffee mug.

NICE BUST

JOHN JAY COLLEGE OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Alessandra smirked and sighed. Daphne had gotten her that mug as a going away present. *I'm so proud of you, Lessie. You're really going after your dream!* she had said. Now the mug was empty. Empty inside. Nothing left to give. Alessandra's smirk faded.

She rubbed her eyes. More coffee. She headed into the kitchen and poured herself another cup. It was Saturday and there were no classes. Brady was coming over later for dinner. He could afford to eat anywhere he wanted, but instead chose dinner Alessandra made in a tiny corner kitchen that would probably fit in a space smaller than his shower.

She sipped her coffee. Whenever they went out to eat, it was at places like the diner. It was almost as if he purposefully avoided ritzy places so that she wouldn't feel badly for not being wealthy. He did say once that, for her birthday, he would take her to Delmonico's and wouldn't accept 'No' for an answer. She demurely agreed to endure being seen in public patronizing such an establishment, but only because it was her birthday.

That memory made her smile. Brady liked her wry humor. He never complained about her small apartment, or the modest places they went. He also never flaunted his family's wealth in front of her, and never made her come to his much larger three-bedroom luxury apartment unless she asked. Thankfully for Alessandra, Brady didn't take after his father. He was never petty, unlike that horrible woman at the grocery store.

Her smile dropped. Her eyes narrowed. She started playing out the scene again in her mind and found herself speaking aloud, saying what she wished she had said in the moment.

“Are you so ugly and miserable because no one likes you, or does no one like you because you’re so ugly and miserable?”

Alessandra savored the thought of the ugly woman being put in her place on the spot.

She poured the rest of the coffee down the sink and told her plant in the kitchen window, “What good would that have done? She would have just said something even more nasty back at me. This city is full of angry, horrible, selfish people who would rather die than admit they’re wrong or show one iota of grace to another human being.”

A soothing blip permeated the room. Alessandra walked the six steps it took to reach her ‘living room’ (which was a mere five steps from her bedroom) and picked up her phone from the coffee table. It was a message from Brady.

My father set up an appointment for me tonight, so I have to cancel our dinner plans. Sorry.

Alessandra’s face became flush with annoyance and anger. She thought, *Typical. His Dad made him cancel his plans with me. God! Brady is such a coward when it comes to his father.* She was even more irritated because now the whole episode at the grocery store had been for nothing. *That despicable woman got to be a jerk to me, and for my troubles, I get to eat here alone on a Saturday night. Great. Thanks a lot, Mr. Wexford.*

Chapter 2

The Olympic Diner was busier than usual this morning. There were no booths available, so Alessandra sat at the counter drinking her club soda and tapping her nails on the countertop. It was unlike Brady to be late, but the city's wide variety of travel methods weren't always cooperative. She wondered if he was taking a private car or if he had actually chosen to travel via the subway. That would have been surprising, as Brady rarely took any mode of transportation which required him to be exposed to the general public for any significant amount of time.

The meeting with his father had been at a restaurant in Brooklyn, so he'd stayed overnight at his family's barely used, yet lavishly furnished and decorated, "convenience" apartment in Park Slope. Sometimes when Alessandra would sit inside her cramped five hundred square foot apartment in Hell's Kitchen, she would mutter about the waste of space Brady's family kept in Brooklyn. They were never there. They only used it when they wanted to visit with people in Brooklyn, or attend some sort of social event in the area. Nearly every day of the year the apartment stood empty and unused near the northern end of Prospect Park. She never dared to ask if she could stay there. They already thought she was only with Brady to try and get to

his family's money. She imagined such a request would only serve to validate their presumption.

"Hey Allie," said a voice in her left ear, jolting her out of her thoughts. "I'm here. I said hello and you didn't even hear me. Where are you?" Brady sat down at the counter chair beside her.

"Sorry. I was just thinking." Without bothering to hide the annoyance in her tone, she asked, "How did everything go with your father?"

Brady had learned quickly what that particular tone meant. "I'm really sorry about that, but you know how he is. Could we do dinner tonight instead?"

Alessandra sipped her coffee. "No, I have to study. The next several nights aren't going to be possible for me between school and other things. It really sucks that you bailed on me like that. He took you away from me the one night I could actually have some time with you. It's bad enough your father doesn't like me, but he didn't even have a shred of consideration for our plans. As usual."

"Wait, whoa. Relax. What do you mean he 'doesn't like you'? And what 'other things' are you talking about?"

Alessandra glared at Brady, then she sighed. "First, don't ever tell a woman to relax. How can you not know that by now? Second, are you going to sit there with a straight face and tell me you think your father has a high opinion of me? And third, I *do* have a life outside of you, you know. I haven't had a chance to talk to you about it yet, but I recently started volunteering for the Lupus Foundation of America. I'm helping them with fundraising for this year's Walk to End Lupus."

Brady opportunistically ignored the first two points. He addressed the third, "That's great, Allie. I know how important that cause is to you."

Brady knew he wasn't getting out of it that easily. He made a quick caress of Alessandra's cheek. She continued to glare at him, so he took his hand away and shrugged his shoulders.

"Look, I'm sorry about last night," he said. "There are plenty of other nights. You know you don't have to cook for me. We can always go out to eat. If it's a hardship for you, I can pay for both of us. It's not a problem. We can go wherever you like."

Alessandra put her coffee cup down hard, making the older woman on the other side of the counter look up from her breakfast. Alessandra gave her a slightly embarrassed smile, and turned back to Brady.

"You don't understand. It wasn't about the money, Brady. It was about me being able to do something for you that you couldn't just buy. I wanted to share my evening with you, and I went to a lot of trouble putting it together."

Brady didn't respond. He knew nothing he could say would make her be any less upset with him. Alessandra scowled. She picked up her fork and stirred the eggs around her plate. She knew she was being hard on Brady, perhaps too hard. Brady's father could be overbearing, and she understood how difficult it was for Brady to stand up to him. She also knew her grumpy state wasn't just about Brady.

She muttered, "God! The people in this city can be so nasty sometimes."

"What do you mean?" Brady sank his teeth into an "everything" bagel with cream cheese and washed it down with some orange juice. Alessandra winced at the combination. Alessandra sat silently for a moment, deciding whether or not to get into the whole story about the grocery store.

"I'm not just mad about the missed dinner. I had a really bad time at the grocery store yesterday. There was this woman in

the checkout line who was so ugly to me, and all just because I forgot one stupid thing. I had to run back to get it. It was only an aisle or two over, and it only took a few seconds, but she called me an idiot. It wasn't like I didn't know people were waiting. I ran as quickly as I could. I didn't deserve that. She was just so ugly about it. Her whole aura was grotesque."

Alessandra shuddered at the thought of her. With a mouthful of orange juice and bagel, Brady asked, "What did you say back at her?"

"Nothing," Alessandra said with mounting frustration, "so I felt exactly like the idiot she said I was. Why do people have to act that way? More to the point, why do they never seem to get what they deserve? She was so awful, and she just got to go on with her day. No justice, no consequence. It's not fair."

Brady scratched at his eyebrow. "You're right, it isn't fair. But people have the right to say and do whatever they want in this country. Unless something is actually illegal, they can pretty much be as horrible as they like. Hell, even when it is illegal sometimes they don't get caught, or their punishment is so inconsequential they aren't convinced that doing the bad thing is enough of a bad idea. People don't change if they don't suffer enough for their bad choices. You should have walked over to that woman and hit her in the face with a tomato."

Alessandra shook her head, then looked around at the people in the diner. They sat in their orange booths under the yellow lights, and she thought about what evil things any of them might have done to other people this week. No justice for the oppressed or the downtrodden.

Brady put his hand on top of hers. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that woman. That's one of the several downsides of living in this city. Sure, New York can be exciting, and most of the

people are nice enough. But when this many people are in such close proximity you're going to occasionally run into some of the bad ones. It's unavoidable."

Alessandra sighed, "I just can't stand it when people do horrible things to others. We get told in church that God will see that justice is done, but we never get to see it happen. My sister suffered horribly and died, and she was never mean to anyone. Bad people walk around doing ugly things to good people, and nothing bad ever seems to happen to them."

The older woman at the other side of the counter was listening to this conversation with increasing interest.

Brady stuffed in another mouthful of bagel, and through the corner of his mouth said, "Look, Alessandra, bad things happen to everybody. Well, except me, of course. I lead a charmed life."

He gave her a smug smile with cheeks full of bagel. Alessandra hated it when he said things like that. She was already annoyed at him for standing her up, and now he was being smug and annoying on top of it. She thought he looked like an arrogant chipmunk.

Brady's face suddenly contorted and he plunged his fingers into his mouth full of mangled bagel and cream cheese. He pulled out a chunk of half-chewed bagel, along with a long black hair.

"Oh, come on, man!" He flicked the offensive hair off his fingers. It landed on the floor behind the counter. "Hey! Waitress!" he shouted.

A grizzled looking older man walked over to Brady. In a gravelly voice, he said, "I'm the one who took your order, brought you your food, and refilled your orange juice. You look smart enough to figure out I'm not a waitress."

"Whatever," Brady muttered. "There was a huge hair in my

bagel. It's disgusting."

"Look, bad things happen to everybody," the waiter shrugged. He looked at Alessandra and gave her a small wink, then walked away. She furrowed her brow in confusion.

Brady threw his hands into the air in useless protest, then sat at the counter grumbling to himself. He opened up his bagel and diligently searched through it to make sure there were no more unpleasant surprises waiting for him.

Deep down inside, in a place she didn't want to admit was there, Alessandra chuckled to herself. It had been inconsiderate of him to stand her up, regardless of the reason. He could have told his father that he already had plans with Alessandra, but he chickened out and bailed on her instead. Brady hated bodily functions in general, so having some complete stranger's hair in his mouth probably ruined his day the same way that awful woman at the store had ruined Alessandra's.

The older woman on the other side of the counter smiled. She picked up her plate and her coffee cup, walked over behind Alessandra, and sat in the open seat on her right. "Hi. I'm Gabrielle. It's nice to meet you."

Living in New York even for just a few months, Alessandra had learned that this encounter might be friendly and innocent enough. She also knew that she might have a loony on her hands. It was usually a coin flip from one day to the next. You could meet a really nice person, but, usually it was safer not to engage with the potential crazy. It was probably a contributing factor to why most people avoided making eye contact there.

Barely looking at her, Alessandra said, "Nice to meet you. What can I do for you?"

"I couldn't help overhearing about your encounter at the grocery store," Gabrielle said, "That's truly unfortunate. The

woman sounded like a real peach.”

Alessandra was a little thrown off by the older woman’s eavesdropping, but said, “Okay. Well. It’s not really that big of a deal. It just hurt my feelings. I didn’t like that she was able to make me feel so awful and that I didn’t do or say anything about it. It ate at me all day long. It’s still bothering me.”

Gabrielle nodded. “It can be difficult to find closure or satisfaction when we are accosted like that. It’s also hard not knowing whether or not the offender suffers the consequences for their actions. The truly difficult part is having faith in God that justice will be done.”

“Yeah, but God,” Alessandra said with defeat in her eyes, “has not been very kind to me lately. Bad things are happening to good people all around me and the bad people are getting away with any old evil deed they can think of. They never get punished for it, either. There’s never any justice for the rest of us.”

Gabrielle turned fully in her chair to face Alessandra. “I overheard you mention justice before, too. You said it again just now, but I haven’t once heard you mention revenge. There is a difference, you know. Revenge is emotional. Real justice is dispassionate.”

Alessandra thought, *Well, if she’s a loony, she seems to be an intelligent one.* Alessandra thought about what Gabrielle said. “Sure, I suppose. Part of me wanted to take revenge on that awful woman. But, I knew it wouldn’t be right. I don’t want her to be injured or anything. I just don’t like that her actions go unpunished.”

Brady looked up absently from his now fully dissected breakfast. “Um, who are you? Alessandra, is she bothering you?”

Alessandra shook her head. “No, she’s just talking to me. Go back to your inspection.”

He gave a disgruntled snort and returned his full attention to the offending bagel.

Gabrielle smiled sweetly at Alessandra. “You feel like the scales of justice are never tipped in the favor of good people. Something like that?”

“Exactly like that.”

“Okay. What if I were to tell you that God actually does keep those scales of justice balanced?”

Alessandra replied sourly, “That’s a sweet thought, but I heard that all my life in church. That’s not helpful.”

Gabrielle pressed on, “You don’t spend every moment with the person who did you wrong. You only assume nothing bad happens to them because you aren’t there to see it. That’s why people never feel satisfied that justice is being done.”

Alessandra pondered the notion. “Yeah, I know I can’t see everything that happens to people, but how can we ever be sure that bad people get what’s coming to them?”

Gabrielle’s eyes glowed with an almost maternal warmth, and she gave a little smile. “Do both good and bad things happen to you?”

“Of course.” Alessandra admitted.

“Then can you not assume that both good and bad things happen to everyone else?”

Alessandra shifted in her seat, turning more toward Gabrielle. “Yes, but not getting to see justice done really stinks. Sure, that woman might have crossed the street and stepped in some homeless guy’s urine, or maybe later that day she ran into someone who treated her even more rudely than she treated me.”

“Or maybe someone put a hair in her food.” Brady’s head shot up and he narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Gabrielle. She

smiled at him and shook her head.

She continued speaking to Alessandra, “Revenge is cyclical. One person gets revenge against another, and that victim then takes revenge in return, and so on. It never ends. It also fills the person taking vengeance with poison. Justice works differently. True justice is balance. It is the righteous outcome of both good and bad behaviors. Good choices get rewarded, while bad choices have consequences.”

“Okay,” Alessandra said, now fully engrossed, “then tell me this: I’m good to others, I volunteer, I treat others with respect and kindness. Why is it that so many people do bad things to me, and I can do nothing to see justice done?”

Gabrielle smiled. “Again, you talk of justice instead of revenge. That’s encouraging. May I ask, what is it you do for a living?”

“I’m studying Criminal Justice at John Jay.”

Gabrielle nodded her approval, “Are you planning on joining the police force when you graduate? Perhaps a federal law enforcement agency?”

Lately Alessandra’s thoughts on the subject had been scattered. The dream of her youth was to be a cop, but the more she experienced the aggressive and irritable underbelly of the city, the more she wanted to move to some remote cabin somewhere and tell everyone else to get bent.

“I’m not sure,” Alessandra answered. “I get so disheartened by how terrible people can be, that I just want to run away. It’s not the actual criminals of the world that are driving me batty. It’s the inconsiderate jerks who treat others like garbage. They keep getting away with it, and I can’t seem to get away *from* it. Actual criminals can be prosecuted, and if necessary, imprisoned. Unfortunately, being a general asshat isn’t a crime.”

Gabrielle nodded. “I completely understand. I felt the same way when I was younger. I didn’t like how cruel others could be, so I took action. During the civil rights marches of my teenage years I protested against the oppression of minorities. I protested for women’s rights, and I protested against the draft during the Vietnam War. No matter how much I marched, how much I protested, how much I raged against the injustices of the world, nothing I did seemed to make any difference. At least, it didn’t at that time and in the moment. But, the effects of my efforts and the efforts of others were cumulative. There’s still so much work to be done.”

Gabrielle took the last sip of her coffee and wiped her mouth with her napkin. She folded the napkin up into the empty cup and said, “I ended up taking a somewhat different path to see justice done.”

“What path is that?” Alessandra asked.

Gabrielle paused. She raised her hand and asked the waiter for her check. “What if I were to tell you there is a way to see justice done in the moment? Not on criminals *per se*, but on regular people who are choosing to act badly or without regard to how their actions might affect others. And, what if I also said that such justice could be facilitated in a subtle enough way so as not to bring retaliation or revenge against you?”

“Ha!” Brady bellowed. The ladies glared at him in unison.

He said, “You think you can get people to stop being miserable jerks? You want to fight against the injustices of the world, but only as a sniper instead of as a foot soldier? You may not want to get your hands dirty with real crime, but let me tell you something: The law may not always be just, but in the big picture, it gets the job done.”

He looked directly at Alessandra. “If you really want to make

a difference, be a cop. Be a special agent. Get out there in the field and put the actual criminals behind bars.”

Gabrielle nodded at Brady patiently. “You are completely right. Police and other law enforcement agencies are all very much needed and respected in the fight against the criminals of the world.”

She turned to Alessandra, “My young friend, if you feel called to join one of those law enforcement agencies, you should certainly do so. They need more people like you. You would be making the world a better, safer place.”

Gabrielle took cash out of her purse and placed it into the brown leather check presenter.

“That said,” Gabrielle continued, “if you happen to be interested, there are other less... traditional... ways to serve the greater good. The maintaining of balance between good and evil has many layers. There are soldiers, law enforcement, and others who work out in the open and at the forefront of the fight against the worst evildoers. They are critically important, so I don’t want to dissuade you from seeking out that path.

“That said, you seem to have a rather passionate distaste for the regular people of the world who perform their petty and oppressive acts against others. There are those of us who take a slightly subtler approach to balancing the scales of justice. It can be both fulfilling and enjoyable.”

“How on earth does something like that exist?” Alessandra asked. “Isn’t it God’s job to see that justice gets done?”

“Yes, but have you ever wondered how God actually facilitates that justice?”

Alessandra’s brain suddenly felt like it had just opened a door that she never knew had been closed, or which had even existed before.

Gabrielle saw the concept was sinking in. “Think about us as God’s minor infraction law enforcement division. We get instructions on where to be, and what people we are to pay back for their cruel or thoughtless acts. Sometimes we are given guidance on what circumstances to create in order for the punishment to be enacted. Sometimes we even get to come up with the punishment itself.

“Even better, we also get to be the ones who reward the good deeds of others. We help the divine give reward to the good and kind acts people do.”

Brady laughed out loud. “Wow. You’re a total nut case.”

Alessandra wheeled around on her bar stool. “That’s not nice, Brady. She isn’t causing you any harm, and you just insulted her.” Brady threw his hands up again, this time in resignation.

Alessandra’s interest was definitely aroused. She looked back around the diner at the people there. The idea that she could actually be the one to see justice done seemed too good to be true. The court system in the United States was certainly not always effective. Criminals regularly got off on technicalities. Sometimes innocent men and women were incarcerated based on insufficient evidence or false testimony. In Alessandra’s opinion, there was little that was actually “just” about the justice system. As she reached over for her coffee, she noticed something on the counter next to her cup. It was a business card. It had but a single word printed across it:

BALANCERS

She stared at it blankly. She turned it over. Written in the center of the card in a simple, small font were just two words: *Blockhouse One*. She had no idea what that meant. Was that supposed to be an address of some kind?

Brady's voice jolted Alessandra out of her trance. "Where did she go? Who in the heck was that wacko?"

Alessandra looked up. Gabrielle was gone. Only her card remained. Alessandra dropped the card into her purse.

"I don't know, Brady. I guess she's yet another in a long line of distinguished New York City lunatics."

Chapter 3

Alessandra was looking forward to enjoying a beautiful New York spring day. The flowers and the lunatics would both soon be emerging from their winter hibernation. The squirrels would be running freely all over Central Park, while dogs wanting to chase them would lunge desperately against their leashes. All of the typical characters would be out enjoying the sunshine. People would be playing, running, biking, taking pictures, having a picnic, sauntering back and forth eating dirty water dogs and churros. Illegal street vendors would line The Mall selling caricatures, bootlegs, and cheaply printed photos of New York landmarks and celebrities. There would be that special, inescapable blend of aromas: roasted nuts, horse urine, blooming flowers, all mingling with that classic concrete dust and old funk of the city. Yes, it was springtime in Central Park.

Alessandra decided a walk in the park was just the thing she needed to clear her head. She rifled through the weathered secondhand armoire that served as a closet, got dressed, and headed out to the bus stop. She boarded the crowded bus and looked for a seat. A fit young man with a briefcase on his lap saw her coming, but looked away in order to avoid eye contact. *Nice, Alessandra thought to herself, thanks for being a gentleman.*

She grabbed hold of a strap and hung on. As the bus continued on its route, a very pregnant woman got on. Alessandra looked to see if the young man would at least give up his seat for her. He decided instead to fix his gaze out the window as she passed, despite it being obvious she was looking for a place to sit.

More than a few stops later, the young man finally got up and exited the bus. Alessandra saw an elderly man boarding. She stayed near the now empty seat to ensure he could sit there, which he did. He gave her a kind smile and a tip of his flat cap. The bus lurched and started inching itself along its route.

Alessandra looked out the window and spied the young man cursing and running after the contents of his briefcase. The case had somehow opened on its own, just in time to catch the gust of wind sweeping between the buildings and around the corner. A beautiful young Indian woman walked calmly in the other direction, smiling joyfully to herself and enjoying the lovely spring weather.

Alessandra got off the bus and headed into Central Park. She loved how peaceful the park always felt. It was almost as if she wasn't in the city at all. There were people scattered all around, seizing the opportunity to enjoy the first warm weather they'd had in months. Flush with the ecstasy of spring, many people forgot they were supposed to be self-serving, irritable New Yorkers. Some of them even smiled at the other people sharing the park.

Alessandra walked along the path leading down from Strawberry Fields toward Bethesda Terrace. As the breeze pushed her long black hair away from her face, she closed her eyes and took in the sounds of nature and people all around her. A faint guitar in the distance played an old Beatles tune, as the nearby blackbirds seemed to joyfully whistle along. Heaving a satisfied

sigh, she continued down the path. She waited for the walk signal. Once it changed, she started over the crosswalk.

“GET THE HELL OUT OF THE WAY!” a voice bellowed from her left. The bike rider hit his brakes and swerved back and forth, cursing at the pedestrians for being in his way. The handlebar of his bicycle clipped a man escorting his young daughter through the crosswalk.

“Hey! You hit me! And you ran a red light! Get back here!” the man hollered back at the biker, who promptly raised his middle finger in the air and belligerently rode on. Some bicycle riders chose to use Central Park as their own personal velodrome, and not a single hair on their bodies cared that other people were in the park and had the legal right of way. Alessandra had never been hurt herself by these inconsiderate and dangerous bikers, but she knew people who had. She looked up the rules one time on Central Park’s web site, and confirmed that bicycles were considered vehicles and were subject to the traffic rules of the road. That meant they were supposed to stop for traffic lights and yield to pedestrians in a crosswalk. She also learned that, crosswalk or not, pedestrians always had the right of way, though they were encouraged to use traffic lights and crosswalks for the purposes of safety.

She thought about the biker, how he had just hit someone and gave them the middle finger to boot. *What a jerk!* she thought. Her mind was brought back to the conversation with that woman in the diner. She took out the card from her purse and flicked it back and forth in her fingers, thinking, *I’d sure love to see him go to the bathroom and come out to a flat bicycle tire.* She returned the card to her purse and sighed.

She crossed over and down into Bethesda Terrace, then over Bow Bridge and up into the Ramble. The Ramble was her favorite

place in the entire city. She loved to sit in the Ramble and read, losing herself in a story and in nature. Today she felt too irritable to just sit, so she made her way up to the castle and back down through the Shakespeare Garden. She heard a resounding “Yes!” and turned to see a young woman passionately embracing a young man as he rose up from one knee.

Alessandra smiled and her heart jumped a beat. She started to wonder about Brady and where their relationship might be going. She definitely liked him, but did she love him? Neither of them had said those words yet, and they’d been dating for a few months. Was that some kind of sign? They were certainly both too young to start thinking about marriage or anything, but where were they heading?

Her hike was starting to make her thirsty, so Alessandra headed back toward the road to find a food cart.

“Bottled water, please.” She reached into her pocket to get some money out. She heard a scream followed by a crashing sound. Her head jolted up in time to see that same obnoxious biker rolling around on the ground, with one hand holding his knee and the other holding his head. She started to walk over to help him, but Alessandra stopped in her tracks as the biker started yelling at an older woman standing nearby.

“You hit me with something! I know you did it!” he screamed at the top of his lungs.

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the woman said, extending a hand to help him up.

“Get away from me!” He slapped her hand away violently and got up. He got closer to her and screamed, “Something hard hit me in the head, and you were the only one around!”

Alessandra recognized the woman immediately. It was Gabrielle, the older woman from the diner.

Gabrielle tried to calm the biker. “Sir, maybe if you had been wearing a helmet-”

“I don’t need a helmet, you old cow! Stay out of the damned road!” he yelled in her face. Gabrielle backed up a step, looked down, and pointed to the ground.

“Is this what hit you?” She bent down to pick up an acorn. “I saw it fall from the tree. Maybe you should go yell at the tree. Perhaps you should scream profanities at the squirrel who dropped it. You should definitely go and give that squirrel what for.” Gabrielle tossed the acorn over her shoulder and walked away, leaving the man quivering in his anger.

“Screw you, lady!” he yelled after her. He did a quick inspection of his bike, then picked it up and rode away down the road. Alessandra went back to the cart and purchased the water. She ran back up the road after Gabrielle, but didn’t see her on the road anymore.

“How does she do that?” Alessandra said out loud to herself. She jogged up a little more onto a bridge, and spotted Gabrielle below, on the Bridle Path. Alessandra ran to the other side of the bridge and down the lawn onto the Bridle Path.

“Gabrielle!” she called, and ran up beside her.

“Well, hello, Alessandra,” she beamed.

“That jerk biker ran into a guy walking with his daughter further down the road,” Alessandra said, shaking her head.

“He should probably get into an anger management program, eh?”

“Yeah, seriously,” Alessandra chuckled. She walked a couple of steps, then paused. She stepped in front of Gabrielle, blocking her path. “Wait. How did you know my name? I don’t remember telling you at the diner.”

“We know everything about you,” Gabrielle said coldly,

and walked around Alessandra, continuing up the Bridle Path. Alessandra's mind turned cartwheels and a knot hit her square in the stomach. She turned and stared at Gabrielle who was walking away, seemingly oblivious to the bombshell which had just exploded behind her. Alessandra nervously caught up with Gabrielle.

"Look, I don't know who you are and who this 'we' you just mentioned is. Are you following me or something?" Alessandra clenched her fists, trying to convince herself of her own courage.

Gabrielle stopped and glanced nonchalantly at the nearby rocks peeking out of the ground. "I'm not following you. I was already at the diner when you arrived. I was already here in the park when you ran into me. Perhaps I should ask if you're following me."

Alessandra hadn't thought of that, and she stood there hoping words would magically come to break the awkward silence.

Gabrielle sensed the tension needed breaking and with a smile said, "Did you get the card I left for you?"

"Y-Yes. What does *Balancers* mean? Is 'we' the Balancers?" Alessandra pulled the card out of her purse. "What is Blockhouse One? Is that some sort of meeting place?"

"Something like that. Do you have time to take a walk with me?" Gabrielle asked. Alessandra nodded, and the two continued walking together up the path.

"It's like I told you in the diner," Gabrielle continued. "When people do evil unto others, some of us are called to act in order to ensure that justice is served. Sometimes we punish the aggressor, other times we do a really nice thing for the victim. There are often times when we do both. The man with his little girl could have been seriously hurt by that biker. That man is going to have a chance encounter in Bethesda Terrace with one

of my colleagues.”

“Colleagues? You mean a Balancer?” Alessandra interrupted.

“Yes. The Balancer might tell the little girl that her dress is beautiful and give her a flower. They might pay a musician busker to play the man’s favorite song so he can dance with his daughter. I’m not sure what they’ll do for them. That’s not my assignment. I was assigned to the biker. His actions were dangerous, thoughtless, and selfish. They caused someone pain, and he was unrepentant about it. So, I felt it would be fitting for an acorn to get dropped on his head.”

Alessandra laughed. “So you *did* hit him with the acorn!”

Gabrielle put up her hands in innocence. “I didn’t throw it at him, I promise. I did happen to hip check the tree as I walked by, though. The acorn *happened* to be in the right place at the right time, and was about to fall anyway. If that biker hadn’t been flying so recklessly down the road, it wouldn’t have even hurt him. He was so infuriated that he instantly turned his head to yell something nasty at me, and as a result he crashed his precious little bicycle.” Gabrielle let a tiny smirk peek out.

Alessandra walked silently in thought next to Gabrielle for a little way. She then asked, “You said you were assigned to the biker. What do you mean? Who assigned you?”

“We’re given assigned tasks at certain times. We go to the places we are told to go, and do what we are told to do. I was sent to a certain place to observe an aggressive biker in the park. When I saw that biker clip the pedestrian and then act like a total jerk about it, I knew that was the person I had to balance against.”

“But you hit him with an acorn,” Alessandra said. “Doesn’t that qualify as revenge instead of justice?”

“No, I don’t believe it does. The biker didn’t hit *me*. He hit the

man walking the little girl. I acted on the pedestrian's behalf, without the pedestrian even knowing about it. Justice was done on the biker, who proportionately felt the same pain he caused."

Alessandra continued walking with Gabrielle past the reservoir, toward the north end of the park. They talked about different ways the biker should have behaved, and different choices he should have made. They discussed the subtlety of decision making and intentions, and how easily one person's actions can adversely affect another. They talked about Gabrielle's various experiences as a Balancer. They even talked about Daphne and how much Alessandra missed her.

They kept on walking, further north. They came upon a small lake and stopped at a small wooden bridge next to a beautiful waterfall. Alessandra said "I haven't been this far north in the park before. It's really beautiful."

"It is," agreed Gabrielle. "I enjoy how peaceful it is here. There are far fewer tourists on this part of the park. At least as long as you don't go too far toward Fifth Avenue and run into the Conservatory Gardens. They're usually packed this time of year."

"You know," Alessandra mused out loud, "you still haven't told me how you know my name. Did you get some sort of assignment to seek me out? It's a little weird you all have been, I don't what to call it, scouting me? How did you find me?"

Gabrielle laughed out loud. "Honey, we haven't been scouting you. The first time I ever met you or even had a thought about you was in the diner."

"Then how do you know my name?" Alessandra asked.

Gabrielle stopped and turned to Alessandra. She took her dramatically by the shoulders, looked her intently in the eyes and said, "The guy with you at the diner said your name."

“Oh,” Alessandra said, and laughed, feeling rather foolish.

“Come on. We’re almost there,” Gabrielle said with a grin.

“Almost where?” Alessandra asked.

“Blockhouse One, of course,” Gabrielle replied and started walking again. Alessandra looked after her with surprise. She ran and caught up quickly to walk alongside Gabrielle. As they approached the North Woods they saw the biker coming around again. He was at the end of the largest downhill in the park and was flying through at high speed. He saw Gabrielle and gave her the middle finger. Then, he flew through a red light and forced a woman with a baby stroller to jump out of the way.

Alessandra shook her head in disbelief. “He just won’t learn. What are you going to do to him now?”

“Nothing,” Gabrielle said. Alessandra looked confused. “I haven’t been told to do anything further. I imagine another one of my colleagues will get the assignment.”

They continued on. The path began to ascend up into the hillside. Gabrielle stopped near the northern end of the park. Alessandra was winded from the uphill climb. She locked her fingers together on top of her head and breathed heavily.

“Thanks. I needed a break,” she wheezed.

“Well, don’t stop now. We’re here,” Gabrielle said and pointed. Perched atop the rocky schist was an old looking structure. It was square and nearly featureless, with weeds surrounding it and ivy clinging to the stone walls. It was a single story structure, built level into the angled rock foundation on which it stood. Alessandra thought it looked positively ancient.

Together, they made their way to the building’s side, where a small set of concrete steps led up to a door with a locked steel gate. Gabrielle reached into her pocket and extended her hand out to Alessandra. In her palm rested a key.

“If you truly want to be a part of this, unlock the gate with my key and step inside. Once you make the decision to join the Balancers, you’re opening yourself up to a whole new world. I can’t promise you all the answers or anything like that. Heck, I can’t even promise it will make you happy. But, you’ll at least get a front row seat to the fight against evil, and to the rewarding of good.”

Alessandra looked at the key in Gabrielle’s extended hand. It was silver, well worn, and tarnished with age. Yet, the teeth of the key seemed to be in perfect condition. Alessandra felt a momentary hesitation. She was just finishing up her first year at John Jay, and was on her way to the job she had dreamed of since she was a child.

She thought about the good she could do as a police officer. She also thought about the many flaws in the criminal justice system which so often had disappointed her. Too many times, criminals got around being held accountable either because of high priced lawyers, evidence tampering, or just the sheer bureaucracy of the bloated system.

There was also something different about Gabrielle. She showed such peace and contentment in doing this work. Alessandra loved the idea of serving justice directly to people in the world who mistreated others. She also loved the idea of rewarding good people secretly for their actions. The thought of that made Alessandra’s heart happy. That was a feeling she hadn’t had in a while.

“I think I’m ready.” Alessandra paused, then stood tall. “No. I know I am. I have always wanted to help others and see justice done. I want to be a part of this.”

She took the key from Gabrielle’s hand and headed up the stairs. She unlocked the gate and entered Blockhouse One.

* * *

Alessandra stepped in and looked around expectantly at Blockhouse One. There wasn't much to see. In fact, there was pretty much nothing but dirt and out of control weeds. There was a flag pole in the center, and a few square indentations in the stone walls.

"Good afternoon," a voice said, "come on over." Alessandra turned around, startled. In the back corner sat a grizzly, disheveled old man. He was perched happily upon a beat-up camping chair. Next to the man sat a mangy ball of matted hair and teeth that at some point might have resembled a small dog. Life had definitely chewed these two up and spit them out. Alessandra stood for a moment, staring at the motley pair.

The man looked up and smiled, saying "I won't bite, and neither will Chew-Barka here, will ya boy?" The dog panted and wagged his ratty tail.

Alessandra juggled apprehension and curiosity in her gut. Her instincts told her to stay clear, but there was something calming and somehow familiar about the man.

"Do you know why I'm here?" she asked.

The man nodded and smiled. "Of course I do, Alessandra."

Her eyes widened. How did he know her name? She felt her shoulders and neck stiffen a moment, but then relaxed. Gabrielle must have told him.

She paused and waited for him to speak. He sat there, a serene smile relaxing on his face. Chew-Barka stopped panting and tilted his head at Alessandra, then let out a burp and licked his lips.

Feeling uneasy, she finally said, "I'm... not sure what I'm supposed to do here. Do I ask you questions? Do you give me

instructions?”

The man chuckled to himself. “Let’s start with an introduction. That’s the proper thing to do, isn’t it? I’m Nicholas. I’m here to give you guidance. I will give you information to help you restore balance to the scales of justice. For now, you’ll be helping with the little injustices, nothing on any grand scale. If you excel and display the ability to remain objective and dispassionate in dispensing justice on behalf of others, then we might start giving you larger assignments.”

“What do you mean larger?” Alessandra asked.

“Well,” Nicholas replied, “like most things in life, different acts of injustice have different levels of consequence. Someone slamming into another person on the street without apologizing is going to be treated much differently than someone who cheats someone out of their money. The latter might have evidence of his actions planted for the right person to find and notify the police. The former might just find himself stepping in dog poop he swore he didn’t see on the sidewalk a moment ago.”

Chew-Barka’s tail wagged. Nicholas gave him a wink.

“So, to begin with, I’ll be a small-time operator?” Alessandra quipped with a grin.

“Something like that,” Nicholas nodded. “We merely want to see how you handle your own balance while in the act of balancing on behalf of others. It’s important that you never permit your emotions to dictate your actions. There is a very good reason that Justice is often depicted as blind. It must be objective at all times.”

Alessandra nodded. “I understand. Gabrielle also said we get to reward people who are kind. How does that work?”

“In much the same way,” Nicholas said, pleased to hear Alessandra was interested in both sides of the duty. “You will

be given signs, tip-offs as it were, to let you know how to be in a position to reward an act of kindness. Just like the consequences for bad choices, reward for good choices must also be done so that the person does not know directly. In some of the most rewarding cases, a person who has acted badly can even be convinced of the harm their actions do and wind up getting rewarded for choosing to change their ways.”

“This is all so incredible,” Alessandra said, putting her palm to her brow. “So all of this is to be done dispassionately, I get that. Am I allowed to enjoy myself, at least, whenever giving a consequence to evildoers?”

“There’s no harm in being satisfied with justice being served. It’s even okay to use humor and irony to see it done. Those are often the least harmful tools to help someone learn a valuable lesson about how they choose to treat others.”

Alessandra stood there a moment waiting for more, but Nicholas just sat there petting Chew-Barka. “Did you have any other questions?” he asked.

Alessandra shook her head. “Not really, I suppose. Oh, actually I do have one question. Who is the ‘we’ you referred to? Where does all of this come from?”

“Why, from Chew-Barka and me.” Nicholas looked at Alessandra and gave her a smug smirk. He raised a dismissive hand, “Don’t give it too much thought. I’ll be the one to guide you. Just go about your business. You will receive your instructions soon enough.”

Alessandra walked closer and extended her hand to Nicholas, who extended his own. She wasn’t sure if he was even real, and half expected her hand to pass straight through his. But, it didn’t, and she shook his hand with excitement. She looked at Chew-Barka and patted his head. She knew she had never

had a dog like that, but for some inexplicable reason, she saw a familiar love in his eyes. She dismissed the thought, thinking all dogs must be that way. She had always loved the dogs she had when she was growing up. Frankly, she loved her dogs more than she loved most of the people in her neighborhood. Her dogs loved her unconditionally and they were loyal to her. Perhaps that was what she felt was missing in her fellow humans. She remembered a bumper sticker she once saw, and smiled at Chew-Barka.

“Lord, help me to be the person my dog thinks I am,” she said. She gave Chew-Barka a scratch behind the ears for good measure, eliciting a grateful leg thump on the cold dirt underneath him. She looked at them both one final time, and made her way to the door.

* * *

Alessandra walked out of Blockhouse One and down the steps back into the Central Park world she knew. She looked around for Gabrielle, who was sitting on some rocks. Alessandra extended a hand with the key out to Gabrielle.

“Okay, so what happens now?”

Gabrielle took the key and put it back in her pocket. “You go home and do what you normally do. Go to your classes, live your life. Instructions will come at the proper time. At first, it might be difficult to pick up on the signs, but you’ll catch on soon enough. What did you think of your... guide?”

“He seems kind enough, and his dog is really cute. I grew up with dogs in my family, and I miss having one. My apartment building doesn’t allow them.”

The corners of Gabrielle’s lips came in for a curious smile, and

she nodded her head. Alessandra would have sworn she saw a hint of amusement in Gabrielle's face.

They started walking in silence downhill toward the path. Alessandra was trying to wrap her head around everything that was happening to her. The denizens of New York were out and about enjoying the spring weather. Some were playing tennis, some were jogging and biking. A group of rather scantily clad people were doing yoga together in a meadow. Squirrels flitted about from tree to tree. Birds chirped cheerfully at the most welcome warmer weather.

Alessandra asked, "So when do I get my own key?"

"Hmm? Oh. Check your pocket," Gabrielle said absentmindedly. Alessandra reached into her pocket and was surprised to feel a small, unexpected object there. She pulled it out and gaped at the shiny new silver key in her hand.

Gabrielle laughed and said, "When I first joined, that freaked me out." Alessandra shook her head with a wry smile and put the key back into her pocket.

They walked down the path together, people-watching and taking in the scenery. They walked through the crowded Conservatory Garden and then through the East Meadow. All the while Alessandra interrogated Gabrielle about the Balancers. They continued on down the east side of the park, sticking to the Bridle Path in order to avoid runners and cyclists getting in their daily exercise.

As they reached the back side of the Metropolitan Museum, Alessandra stopped to buy a couple of water bottles from a street vendor. They took the waters and sat on a nearby bench, with a plaque that read. *For my Bessie, who loved this park so dearly.*

Alessandra stared at the ancient obelisk towering over the area. It inspired her to ask, "Gabrielle, how long have the Balancers

been in existence?”

“I have no idea,” she said. “If it is, in fact, somehow connected to the divine, then I assume it must be pretty old. If we get our idea of balance between good and evil being maintained by God, then this might go back thousands of years. Psalm 28 verse 4 in the Bible says: ‘Give them according to their deeds, and according to the wickedness of their endeavors; Give them according to the work of their hands; render to them what they deserve.’ So, I imagine if it’s in the Old Testament, it has to go back quite a long ways.”

“But that doesn’t account for the Balancers,” Alessandra replied. “That seems like an instruction for people to take revenge. Where does it say that revenge should only be taken by God?”

“It’s mentioned in Ezekiel as well as Thessalonians, that God will repay the wicked for their evil deeds. In so many words, anyway. That’s where we come in. For lack of a better way to describe it, we’re a proxy of sorts for the divine powers. We enact the justice to repay both the wicked and the good for their deeds.”

“Is it just the Bible? Is the Balancers strictly a Judeo-Christian thing?” Alessandra asked.

“Not at all,” Gabrielle responded. “The Quran instructs its followers not to return evil with evil. It also says that goodness is for those who do good in this world. Surah An-Nahl verse 34 says: ‘So the evil of what they did afflicted them and that which they used to ridicule encompassed them.’ The Balancers are the divine help ensuring that the evil are afflicted by the evil consequences of their actions.”

Gabrielle took a sip of her water, then continued, “Now, different religious cultures think of sin in different ways, but in

the end it all comes down to either being good to others or being evil to others. We might treat a Hindu worshiper differently with respect to an ironic punishment for a sin, because that person's belief about sin differs from those in the Christian, Jewish, or Muslim faiths. In Hinduism, sin is more of a poison, and our different anxieties and mental problems stem from that poison. So, we might do things to give that person specific emotional responses tied to the sin he or she has committed. We might then follow that up with actions or even subtle conversations which will help them to associate the negative emotional state with the action they took."

"Wow," Alessandra said, raising her eyebrows. "It's getting pretty complicated. I never thought about justice in cultural terms."

"We're all different, and we all define how we view our actions based on our belief systems of what is right and wrong. We would not punish someone as harshly for doing something which they don't know is wrong, but which negatively impacts someone else. That would be more of a subtle slap on the wrist consequence mixed in with some good old fashioned classical conditioning. If they *know* that what they are doing is wrong and they do it anyway? Well, that's where we get to be much more creative and have fun with them."

Alessandra finished the last of her water, and put the cap back on. She took Gabrielle's empty bottle, got up from the bench, and deposited the bottles in the recycling bin. They headed further down East Drive just inside of the stone wall outlining the eastern edge of Central Park.

As they passed underneath an old stone arch, Alessandra said, "This isn't nearly as cut and dried as I initially thought. I like this, though. I really do. When you think about it, what we're

doing is a great service to the world and to humanity. I'm so glad I met you. What are the odds that you would happen to be at the diner that day?"

"Oh, sweetheart, I don't know how much of a coincidence that is," Gabrielle mused. "I think there are a lot fewer accidents and coincidences than we want to believe. I received a sign that morning to go to the diner. I didn't know why. I don't live anywhere close to that neighborhood.

"I was watching the morning news just after I awoke. There was a commercial for the Olympics, which were last year, so there's no reason a commercial would be airing now. Then, I looked out of my window, and a neon sign that was supposed to say "Dinner" had one of the n's flicker and go out. I checked the internet for Olympic and diner, and found the Olympic Diner right here in the city."

"Crazy," Alessandra said, shaking her head. "Oh, did you put a hair in Brady's bagel?"

Gabrielle laughed. "That was a long black hair. As you can see, my hair is much shorter and mostly gray now. I haven't had hair that long since the 70's."

Once they reached Gabrielle's bus stop, she hugged Alessandra. "Welcome to the Balancers, Alessandra Genovese." She turned and boarded, and Alessandra watched the bus drive away down Fifth Avenue.

As she turned to walk back into the park and head back to the West Side, Alessandra heard a man's voice angrily muttering to himself. He was rambling about the low-down dirty thieves in the city. It was the aggressive biker, trudging along and carrying his bike over his shoulder.

The seat was missing.