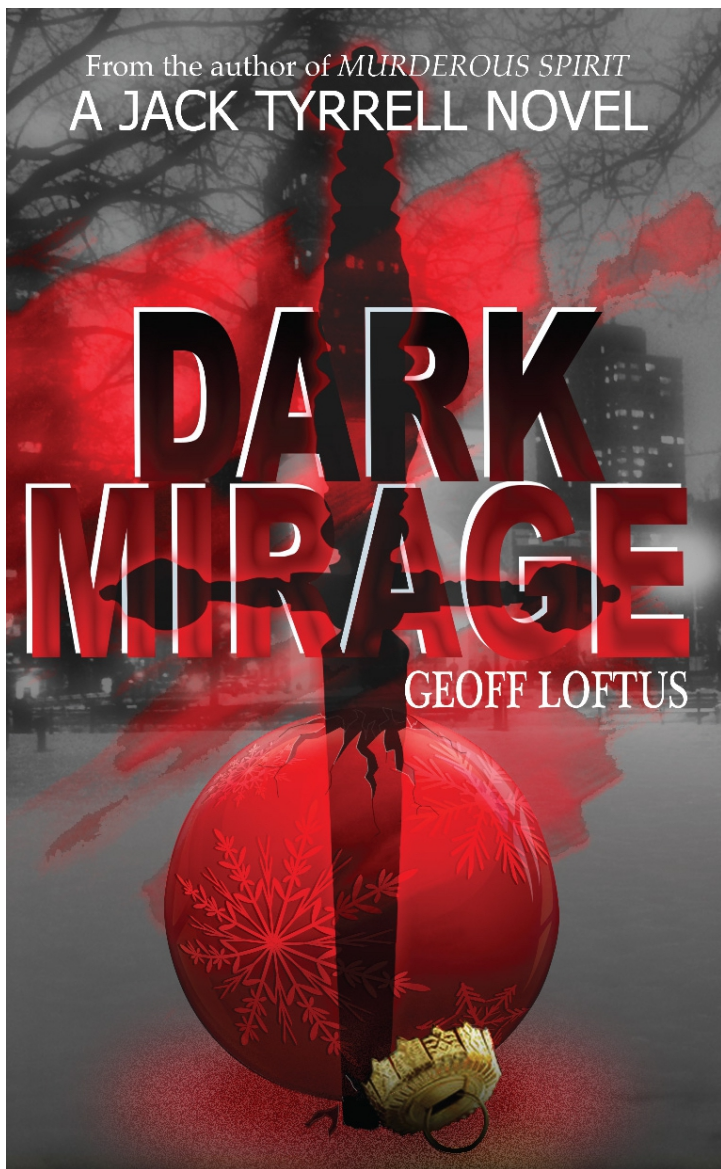


From the author of *MURDEROUS SPIRIT*
A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL

DARK MIRAGE

GEOFF LOFTUS



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By

Geoff Loftus



Saugatuck
Books

Dark Mirage

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Dark Mirage is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people is unintentional and coincidental. A serious attempt has been made to portray the details and geography of the New York metropolitan area accurately, but the needs of the story may have driven me to exercise poetic license, even with some actual places and buildings. I hope the reader will excuse this.

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*For Stephen Pitts,
An everyday hero—I'm humbled to be your friend*

NIGHT – MANHATTAN: CENTRAL PARK WEST

MARISSA CARVAJAL WOKE UP SOAKED IN BLOOD. Her head was pounding, her throat was raw, and she was still drunk even as she slowly regained consciousness directly into a hangover. It was impossible to think or feel anything except for the pain in her skull, but she gradually became aware that everything was wet: the sheets, the pillows, her naked body.

She forced her eyes open. The bedroom was almost pitch black, with a tiny sliver of light seeping from a thin crack between a door and its frame. Marissa didn't know where she was. Didn't know how she had gotten there. There was a vague, quick flash of memory: She had climbed into a taxi with a man. A tall man with a chiseled chin and sandy hair. But that was all she remembered. Was that earlier this evening? Or earlier this week? She was too drunk to locate the memory accurately.

She rolled over, twisting in a puddle in the middle of the bed. With a start, she realized the wetness had awakened her. She pulled her hand up and looked at it in the thin shaft of light from the crack at the door—her hand, her entire arm, was covered in blood. She glanced down at her breasts and stomach and the sheets—everything was soaked in glistening blood.

Marissa gasped—the chiseled-chin man from the taxi was on his back next to her, naked, his eyes open and unblinking, blood covering his chest, throat, arms, and face.

Marissa staggered to her feet and backed away from the bed, whispering, “Oh my God . . . oh my God. Please, God, no. . . .”

She left bloody footprints on the carpet as she backed toward the light. She was panicked. Where was she? She knew that she had never been here before. She pushed through a door into the bathroom and locked it behind her as if that would keep her safe from the horror of the dead man.

She was gasping, panting for breath. Marissa caught her reflection in the mirror: she was bloody from head to foot. She stepped toward the door, considering returning to the bedroom, then turned back toward the mirror and glimpsed the marble shower stall in the reflection. She turned on the water, and as soon as it was hot, stepped inside and washed herself clean. As the water coursed over her, she wondered if she and the man had had sex, but she couldn't remember. After soaping—Marissa recognized the citrus-piney scent of Penhaligon soap, very expensive but wonderful—and rinsing off twice, she turned off the water, pushed open the glass shower door, grabbed a thick, Egyptian-cotton towel, and dried off. She dropped the used towel in a hamper to one side of the bathroom, wrapped herself in a dry towel, and walked back into the bedroom. Only as she crossed the room did it occur to her that the dead man could not have cared less if she was naked.

Marissa had left the bathroom door wide open, allowing light from the bathroom to spill into the bedroom.

She was relieved: her dress was draped over a leather chair in front of a large, high-def TV. Her bra and panties were on the floor. She had another brief flash of memory: She was kissing the chiseled-chin man as they staggered drunkenly toward the bed. He pulled her clothes off, dropping them randomly on the floor and the chair in a path from the door to the bed. There was a quick cut in her memory: She was naked on the bed, and the man stood by the bedside, took off his clothes, tossed them at a chair near the window, and lay down beside her. She snapped out of the memory and checked: his clothes were in a heap over the chair. The blood hadn't splattered to that side of the very large room. She dressed rapidly, found her heels on the floor inside the bedroom door, stepped into them, glanced around the room to make certain she was leaving nothing behind, and walked out.

She went down a hallway, through an enormous living room toward what she guessed was the front door. She paused to glance through the wall-to-wall windows of the living room. The apartment was probably on a floor in the twenties, with a spectacular eastward view over Central Park. Marissa saw the entrance to the park's 86th Street Transverse only two or three blocks north on Central Park West. One of those grand, pre-war buildings with twenty-four-hour doormen. And a security camera in the lobby. Maybe even one in the elevator. She turned back toward the bedroom. Oh my God, did I kill him? I couldn't have . . . could I? Why did I kill him? Why? And how, how could I do that . . . God, please no, please. . . .

But she was alone in the apartment with a murdered

man. She was hit with a wave of nausea as she realized that she would certainly appear guilty to the police. She was breathing hard as if she'd just run a marathon, trying to figure out what to do next.

You have to get out, she told herself. Now.

The front door had a security peephole at about her eye level. At a right angle on the wall next to the front door was another door with no peephole—a closet. Her coat was hanging next to a man's overcoat with a scarf draped over the hangar's hook. She grabbed her coat, the man's scarf, then reached up to pull a black, wide-brimmed fedora from the shelf. She slid into the coat, wrapped the scarf around the lower part of her face, pulled the hat down low over her eyes, dug her gloves out of her coat pockets, and pulled them on. As she was about to pull open the front door, Marissa noticed a small, lacquered table with a stack of mail on it. She searched through the bills; all were addressed to Jackson McGill.

Marissa dropped the mail and slumped back against the wall. Jackson McGill. New York's answer to Richard Branson. Wealthy beyond counting, successful at everything he put his hand to (including women), and covered as often by the celebrity press as by business journalists. She realized that the dead man matched the news pictures of Jackson McGill.

Marissa whispered, "Oh my God." She took a deep breath, straightened up, grabbed the front doorknob, opened the door, and stepped into the small hallway.

There was only the one apartment on the floor. Marissa pressed the call button for the elevator and it arrived

with a quiet metallic thunk. The doors slid open. She tugged the hat even lower over her eyes and walked onto the elevator.

As she crossed the building's lobby, Marissa didn't look at or say anything to the doorman. She stepped out onto Central Park West and turned south. That was not the direction of her apartment, but she was taking no chances that McGill's doorman noticed which way she headed.

She walked quickly, unaware of the December chill in the dark, early morning air. The Christmas decorations on the front of many of the apartment buildings made no impression on her. She couldn't remember a thing from the evening before except for the vague flash of getting into the taxi with McGill, getting into bed with him, nothing else. Did I kill him? I must have . . . I must have . . . but I couldn't kill him. Could I? I didn't stab him to death. . . .

Marissa stopped completely still in the middle of the sidewalk. The weapon—she hadn't seen it anywhere. It was probably still there, lying in the bloody sheets or fallen under the bed.

Her fingerprints might be all over it. She took a few stumbling steps back toward McGill's building, stopped, turned back again. She couldn't go back. She gasped and began walking, almost running, eager to escape. She reached a corner and had to stop as a car turned off Central Park West into a side street. She checked her watch: It was 5:38 A.M.

In the early morning of December 13th, with the digital clock on my bedside table reading 5:38 A.M., I woke up without knowing why. I didn't have to go the bathroom (I'm not that old, yet); I didn't have a splitting headache from too much to drink; and my late wife Maggie was not calling me to wake up. More's the pity.

I lay in bed, awake and alert, listening. But there was nothing. What the hell, I thought, might as well make some use of this moment. I got out of bed, went into the bathroom, used the facilities, and put the toilet seat down when I was finished—Maggie had gotten me into the habit. I checked the dark apartment in case someone was there. Nobody. I stood still in the middle of the living room and listened intently. Nothing. In my bedroom, I checked and listened again. Nothing. I couldn't figure out what had summoned me from a deep sleep.

“Maggie?” I whispered. I didn't expect an answer. My wife had passed away more than five years ago. Which didn't stop me from calling to her. “Maggie?”

There was no answer. I went back to bed, laid down, and stared up through my dark room at the ceiling.

Once upon a time, my wife was murdered on the front steps of the Manhattan brownstone where we lived. I was shot, too. Four times to be precise. Lots of blood. And pain. But I survived. Maggie was dead within seconds of the bullets ripping into her.

I had been a U.S. Marshal and taken a bribe. I wish

there was a way to whitewash that evil fact, but there isn't. I was a criminal with a badge, taking money from some very bad people to do a bad thing—sell out witnesses in the Witness Protection program. Since I didn't actually possess the information regarding witnesses and, therefore, couldn't deliver it to the folks who'd bribed me, I had rationalized that what I did was a stupid idea but not a terrible, immoral act.

That was bullshit. Taking a bribe was wrong no matter what. No matter how I tried to rationalize it or minimize it, it was wrong.

Even worse, the ugly types bribing me had no sense of humor when it came to my failing to deliver what they had paid for. So they put four bullets in me. Three more bullets hit Maggie. She died on the spot, on the stoop of our brownstone on the Upper West Side. After her death, most nights I lay on my bed in the dark, staring at the ceiling, drunk and exhausted, unable to sleep. Barely able to breathe because my guilt over my wife's killing was immense.

For five years after Maggie's murder, most nights I had passed out drunk. Sometimes I had passed out on the couch and managed not to roll off. Other nights, well . . . I had ended up on the living room floor or the kitchen floor or the bathroom floor. Even when I had woken in the bathroom, it didn't mean I had brushed my teeth or even gone to the bathroom before passing out. Almost no matter where or when I woke up, my mouth had felt as if it were stuffed full of musty, dusty carpeting. Some nights my pants had been dry; other nights they had been soaked from my urinating in my unconscious state.

On the June night of the fifth anniversary of my wife's murder, I had enjoyed the good fortune of passing out on the couch and not wetting myself. Maggie had woken me, appearing to me in the middle of the night and saved my life. Yes, that's right: she had appeared to me, like Marley's ghost in *A Christmas Carol*.

I heard her softly calling my name. My eyelids were so heavy I could barely open them. I blinked, expecting to see an empty apartment, believing that her voice was a dream. But she was standing a few feet away from me.

"Jack," she whispered, "I need to talk to you."

She was in the same light-yellow T-shirt and khaki shorts she had died in, but there was no blood. And she was surrounded by a warm glow, almost as if her body were in a halo.

"Jack, are you awake?"

"Maggie?"

"I'm here."

"You can't be. It's just not possible. Not. Possible. NOT." I pushed myself off the couch and took a half-step toward her. She stepped back the same distance, her halo moving with her. "Are you . . . are you . . . I'm sorry, but you're . . . dead. Is this a dream?"

"No. I'm really here. We're really talking."

I shook my head—a truly terrible idea when you've had as much to drink as I had in the last twenty-four hours. "I've been drunk before . . . even had some hallucinations, but this . . . this is the worst. No, best—it's good to see you, to talk to you, even if you're not real. I've missed you so much."

"I miss you, too."

I didn't know what to say. Should I offer her a drink or a seat? Ask her how she was? "I, uh . . . well . . . I . . ."

She cut me off, "I hate what you've become. You're more than this."

"Sorry, but I'm not trying to impress a hallucination —"

"Stop that," she interrupted me. "You're throwing your life away. You're capable of more."

"Says the ghost. Or the hallucination. Take your pick."

"You're drunk, but I am not a hallucination. I'm here to help you become what you're supposed to be."

I collapsed back onto the couch. "Oh, geez. I don't think I need my drunken subconscious delivering a self-help lecture. Forget it. Not interested. Get lost."

Maggie paced a few steps toward the bay window overlooking 76th Street then came back to face me. "Please don't drink for the next twenty-four hours."

"Why? What difference will twenty-four hours make?"

"Please? I'll come back tomorrow night, come back when you're capable of understanding that I'm really here and not an alcoholic hallucination."

"You are the damnedest dream I've ever had."

"If you love me, don't drink, and I'll return tomorrow."

And she was gone.

Maggie didn't fade away, and she didn't pop invisibly out of sight. She just . . . disappeared.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. “That was a doozy.”

. . . I had spent the next day avoiding a drink because the ghost of my murdered wife had requested that I be sober for our next meeting. Despite the lack of booze, I hadn't been jittery or hungover—I had been in a state of anxious, yet happy, anticipation that Maggie was coming to see me that night. And she did. . . .

“You didn't drink today.”

“I wanted to see you again.” I sat up.

“You believe in me now. I'm not just a drunken dream?”

“Maybe you're a symptom of some kind of mental break, I don't know.” I found it impossible to believe she was really there, standing in my living room in her halo, but I was incredibly happy to see her. “I'm glad you're here, whatever you are. I've missed you.”

“I know, but the man I loved was someone I wanted to have a family with—now you're a . . . ” her voice faded, unable to finish.

“A bum? A guy who drinks too much? Who's throwing his life away running errands for people on the wrong side of the law?”

“Yes.”

I took a deep breath and confessed, “That started before you died.”

“You took a bribe.”

“Yes.”

“Why? Why would you do such a thing?”

“I've asked myself that a thousand times, and I still don't have a good answer.” I paused to swallow and then

take a deep breath. "I . . . I saw too many awful things in Afghanistan. Maybe I was suffering from PTSD, I don't know. And . . . I was angry that we had fertility problems, . . . I was ticked off with my bosses, I hated the mob guys I was escorting into witness protection. And since I had no intention of passing on the info the bribe was paying for, I didn't feel like it was as horrible as it was."

"That's all rationalizing," she said gently.

I nodded. "I was angry and felt sorry for myself because of the war, and because of our issues, and my work . . . my drinking . . . I acted out. It was an angry, terrible thing to do. It was an incredibly stupid thing to do—I'm . . . sorry." I paused, trying to collect myself. "I got you killed, I never . . ." I swallowed hard a couple of times. "I'm so sorry," I muttered through my tears.

Maggie took a step closer but stopped short of touching me. "You didn't kill me. You are not the evil person who murdered me. You made a very bad choice, but someone else killed me."

I wiped the tears from my cheeks.

"You volunteered to serve your country, and you served well. You won a Silver Star and a Purple Heart. But those medals weren't enough when you came home and needed help to adjust. You buried your feelings and joined the Marshals and that meant you could continue to serve. But you never got any help. When we met and fell for each other, it was wonderful for both of us. I saw how funny you are, how caring. But the happiness of early romance masked a lot of your issues. Eventually, even with our love, your problems were still there. Because we were close, I couldn't

see what you needed and do anything to help you. And, since you didn't get help, you acted out. You made a horrible choice. But you're not a bad man, and you didn't kill me. Do you hear me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I still love you. That's why I'm here. I love you too much to watch you waste your life. I interceded on your behalf and got you a chance to turn your life around."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

She smiled again. "Hell has nothing to do with it. I'm talking about a second chance. Do you want it? Do you want to redeem yourself?"

*. . . Snapping out of my memories, I thought: Who didn't want to redeem himself? But her visit had been so . . . bizarre. I had to have been lost in a drunken delusion. As if I were some kind of weird, modern Ebenezer Scrooge and Maggie was a tantalizingly appealing version of Jacob Marley's ghost in *A Christmas Carol*. But it hadn't feel like a delusion. It had felt real. . . .*

"Do you want to redeem yourself?"

"What do I have to do?"

"Help others. Make things right for them. You've been wallowing in self-pity for five years when you could have been focused on helping others."

"Geez, don't hold back."

"It's true, and that is your fault."

I took a deep breath. "Okay, you're right. Whom do I help and how do I help them?"

"Harry will tell you what to do."

"Harry? Who is Harry? Maybe I should ask, what is

Harry?"

"He'll be your . . . ," Maggie hesitated, searching for the right word, *" . . . guide. He'll explain what you need to do for your second chance."*

"Oh." I was afraid to ask what I had to ask, *"What about you? Will I see you again?"*

She whispered, "I don't know."

"Please, please come again."

"I will if I can."

And she was gone. I sat on the couch, put my head in my hands, and wept.

Maggie's ghost had intervened on my behalf, the same way Marley's ghost helped Scrooge. She had found an opportunity for me to right the wrongs in the lives of other people. I was to employ the many skills given me by the U.S. Army Special Forces and the Marshals Service to do good for others. Like Scrooge, I would be redeemed by my own good, selfless acts. My wonderful Maggie had arranged for me to meet Harry . . .

Without any understanding of how I arrived there, I found myself on a beach, the waves breaking and rushing up the sand toward my bare feet but stopping inches short of my toes. The sun was setting and the sky was red with a beautiful, end-of-day glow. It made me think of the old adage: Red sky at night—sailor's delight. Looking around, I realized two things: I didn't know where I was and I didn't know the black man standing next to me. He was tall, slender, and wearing a well-cut, light-gray suit and a dark blue tie. His dark skin was without wrinkles and stretched smoothly from his cheekbones to his solid jawline. He could

have been anywhere from twenty-five to forty years old.

“Do I know you?” I asked.

*“I’m Harry,” he said. His voice was deep and firm.
“Your wife told you I was coming.”*

“I’m—”

He interrupted me, saying, “Jack Tyrrell. I know almost everything about you.”

“Really?” I packed as much sarcasm into the short word as was possible.

“Yes. For example: I know when, where, and how you were shot and how Maggie died.”

“Are you serious? Did you witness her killing?”

“Yes, in a way,” Harry said quietly.

“What does that mean?” I repeated in shock.

“It means, ‘Yes,’ I am completely aware how she was killed, how you almost died in the same incident, and your feelings of guilt.”

His calm demeanor made me angry. Or maybe it was his pronouncement that he knew about Maggie’s death and my guilt. I gazed out to sea and watched the ocean toss wave after wave onto the sand. How could I be on the beach? How could I hear the surf and smell the salty air? How could I be here? I was struck by a thought so overpowering I couldn’t believe it.

“Are you . . .” it was impossible to say the words, but I tried again, “are you . . . ?”

“No. But I work for Him.”

“Are you taking me somewhere?”

“No, I’m going to send you somewhere.”

“Where?”

“Wherever the Chairman wants you to go.”

“The Chairman . . . ? Is he . . . ?” I couldn’t phrase my question. Instead, I timidly pointed toward the sky.

“Yes.” Harry nodded. “I work for Him. I’m your Supervisor.”

I found it hard to breathe. I walked around in a small circle, ignoring the tide line and the surf coming over my feet. “You work for . . . Him? And . . . I work for you?”

“We—you and I—both work for the Chairman. I’ll be the one conveying His plan to you.”

“Do I get to meet the Chairman at some point?”

“Everyone meets the Chairman eventually.”

“Could I . . . could you tell me what His plan for me is?”

“You’re going to right wrongs.”

“Now my job in this business is to right wrongs?”

“Yes. Maggie interceded with the Chairman to give you this chance before you die.”

“Why didn’t the Chairman give me this chance before taking Maggie?”

“He did.”

I stopped walking in a circle. “What the hell does that mean? Are you saying I had this chance and I blew it?”

Harry replied evenly, “The Chairman has given you many chances.”

“Have you come to me before?”

“No. But some of my colleagues have. The Chairman doesn’t give up easily—even when dealing with someone as obstinate as you.”

“Why didn’t He make me see the light?”

“That’s not how it works. We all have free will; we all choose how we live. You chose not to recognize my colleagues, and you chose not to listen to their messages.”

I sighed, staring at the ocean’s dark horizon against the less-dark night sky. Finally, I said, “Okay, what does this righting wrongs job involve?”

Harry said, “Your experience will be put to use in helping people—victims—that the law enforcement community isn’t able to assist.”

“How the hell am I going to accomplish what the NYPD or the FBI or any other agency can’t? I’m not Superman.”

“You will receive direction from me, something the police and federal agents don’t get. The Chairman will make sure you have the resources you need to solve cases and help people.”

“Why doesn’t the Chairman help these folks directly? Couldn’t He do it quick and easy?”

“He could, but then you wouldn’t have the opportunity to help them.”

I said, “The opportunity to help them—are you telling me we’re all supposed to take care of each other?”

His large, dark eyes met mine. “Yes.”

. . . Now you know how I met Harry Mitchum. One instant I was asleep, and the next, I was on a beach talking with Harry. Despite his friendly name, the mere idea of Harry was terrifying. Why? Well, I had come to believe that Harry was . . . well . . . an angel. I know the word “angel” makes me sound nuts. The possibility that I am completely and absolutely out of my mind is very real. I’m not asking

you to understand how this angelic presence works, because there is no way I can adequately explain it. I'm not asking you to believe. But this is the only story I have to tell. You don't need to understand because I don't understand Maggie's intervention or Harry's presence in my life. You don't have to believe.

But *my* story is that I believe that Maggie did intervene and that Harry is active in my life. I believe that Harry and I teamed up, saved a couple of veterans suffering from PTSD, and wiped out the New York operations of a very nasty Russian Mafia boss, who also got wiped out. (A note of clarification: I did the wiping out. Harry is not an *avenging* angel; he does not engage in that kind of activity.)

Helping others by taking on the Russian mafia—one of its New York City chapters, anyway—was crazy, frightening, and sad. Apparently the Chairman felt that my talents, honed by the U.S. Army's Special Forces and the U.S. Marshals Service, made me capable of helping in this kind of situation. And, I have to admit, that once all the death and fear had passed, once my goodbyes had been said to the people I helped, I felt good for the first time in five years.

When all of my dealings with the Russians were complete, when every last detail had been settled, I had asked Harry if I would ever see my wife again, and he had replied, "I don't know."

To be completely honest, I'm not sure if Harry really didn't know or if it was against the rules for him to tell me what he did know. Maybe I shouldn't call them rules, maybe they were guidelines. Incredibly strict guidelines. You

probably need to understand the rules or guidelines I operate under when I'm working with Harry.

I must do good for others, with no thought of myself. I can't right the wrongs of my past—that especially means avenging Maggie's death. The people I help will not remember me after I accomplish whatever mission Harry gives me. The whole process is about me giving to others. There's nothing in it for me. If that sounds like baloney to you, well, . . . it did to me, too. But frustrating as it is to be forgotten by people you've come to care for, selflessly doing right by others is stupendously satisfying.

Now, every night when I go to sleep (and I *go to sleep*, I do not *pass out*), I hope Maggie's soft voice will wake me again, and I'll see her one last time. Then I would be truly lucky.

No, not lucky. I would be blessed.