

GEOFF LOFTUS

MURDEROUS SPIRIT



DO UNTO OTHERS...

A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL



**Saugatuck
Books**

EXCERPT from *Murderous Spirit*

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Murderous Spirit is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people is unintentional and coincidental. While a serious attempt has been made to portray the details and geography of the New York metropolitan area accurately, 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 Margy
Who is the answer to my prayers each
and every day*

And

*Thanks to
Charles Dickens for "A Christmas Carol"
Philip K. Dick for "Adjustment Team" and
George Nolfi for "The Adjustment Bureau"*

It was my fault that my wife was murdered. Right on the front steps of our home. I was shot, too, and almost killed. I deserved it. Maggie did not.

We were walking home from a movie. A romantic comedy. Maggie thought it was fun; I hated it. But I was in such a foul mood those days that I could have gone to a double feature of *Casablanca* and *Play It Again, Sam* and hated them both. No matter what I saw or did, I would have hated it, because I hated myself.

I was a U.S. Marshal, and I had accepted a bribe. There you have it: the unvarnished ugliness at the core of my being. Despite years of service with the Marshals and before that in the U.S. Army Special Forces, I had taken money from some loathsome criminals who planned to kill other loathsome criminals who happened to be in the Marshal Service's witness protection program.

Please don't think I jumped up and said, sure, I'll take your money. I wasn't that easy. Like a lot of veterans returning from Afghanistan or Iraq, I suffered from PTSD. And like a lot of us, I had a hard time admitting that I had a

problem and seeking help for it. Instead of therapy, I drank. I drank a lot. I hung out in bars that cater to Federal agents of all sorts: DEA, FBI, Treasury, and Marshals.

Just as there are bars for Feds, there are bars for cops and for bad guys. Both the good guys and the bad guys are aware of this. It makes it easier for law enforcement to find suspects in bad-guy bars. At the same time, it's easy for the criminal element to identify those in law enforcement who might be approachable regarding bribery—odds are that at least one federal agent who gets soused on a regular basis is susceptible to an offer of easy money. And since I was avoiding therapy, which was bitterly ironic since my wife *was* a therapist, I self-medicated with booze in the same place most nights: Dugan's Pub. Instead of going home to Maggie, I told her I was working late on a case. I often did work late, and she believed me. Now that I think about it, she probably was pretending to believe me. It was a lie of convenience that we shared. If I was honest with myself—something that was difficult in the extreme—I had to admit she had tried to help me. Suggestions that we go for long walks, where there would be nothing to do but admire the scenery and . . .

. talk. Suggestions that we drive into the country and admire the scenery and . . . talk. Suggestions that we spend the evening at home, listening to music and . . . talking. Maggie had a mischievous sense of humor and a great line in flirtation, but heaven forbid we should just . . . talk. For crying out loud, she was a *therapist*. She was a caring and concerned person, and she would have figured out what a mess I was. I couldn't have that.

Well, the first few times Dommy G approached me about passing information to him, I waved him off with an obscenity or two. Dommy G was short for Dominick Something, but nobody used his actual last name because of his “family” connections. The scuttlebutt was that the G stood for garrote, which he was rumored to have used on occasion. Dommy was tall with wavy, dark hair slicked back over his ears, shirts that he never bothered to button up as far as he should so that long curly chest hairs spilled into view, and a gold Rolex that clunked on the bar whenever he leaned on it. He wasn't just a piece of mob muscle, at the same time, he wasn't capo material. Dominick was smart enough to know he was a mid-level thug. Regardless of his mob status, I didn't report him to

my supervisors, which is what you're supposed to do when criminals attempt to bribe you. He continued to proposition me to do him a favor while he did me a favor: "Come on," Dominick said, "you hate protecting scumbags like me. So give me the information I want, and I'll eliminate a couple of them for you. Less work for you." My cursing must have been losing its effectiveness because he repeated his offer again and again.

One night, I pushed my \$20 bill across the bar, and the bartender pointed in Dominick's direction and said, "He's buying."

I should have left the \$20 and paid for my own drinks. Told Dominick where to go. And informed my superiors.

Instead fate intervened and pushed me farther in the wrong direction: Maggie was accepted into a prestigious program at New York University. We weren't poor, but graduate work in psychology at NYU doesn't come cheap. Some *pecunia ex machina* would be very handy, especially since the deadline for payment was soon. I rationalized that it was okay to accept the bribe—I didn't work in witness protection so I couldn't actually deliver the information and

betray the Marshal Service. Oh sure, I occasionally delivered the witness protection subjects—many of them criminals—to a handler. But the path to their actual ultimate destination, their newfound lives of comfort and security, had several steps. I was just a way station in the process. But after delivery, I hadn't a clue what happened to them—it was impossible for me to give the mobsters what they wanted. So, if I took the bribe, I'd just be stealing from some very bad people. Didn't seem particularly immoral to me.

The elephant in this particular room of my drunken head was that Dominick and company wouldn't appreciate being ripped off by me. But I dismissed these fears. I'd survived war in Afghanistan; a couple of mobsters didn't frighten me. Besides, were they really stupid enough to risk the inevitable manhunt that would follow the whacking of a law-enforcement officer?

The deal was \$50,000 up front with another \$50,000 when I handed over the information. One night I met Dominick a couple of blocks from my usual bar. He handed me a plain white shopping bag with a shoe box inside and said, "Here's a pair of the loafers we were talking about:

12½ D, right? Let me know if they don't fit. Be sure to call me." He walked off without another word.

The bag felt heavier than a pair of shoes. \$50,000 in \$100s is a bit bulky. I felt very pleased with myself for having earned that much money by lying to criminals. Very pleased. For about five minutes. Then it hit me that I had dishonored everything I had ever stood for as a Marshal and a soldier and a husband—everything my wife believed about me.

I couldn't live with myself or with my wife, who cared so much about others she had become a therapist. Whose sense of humor was sly and surprising. Who had brown hair, blue eyes, and a small scar over her left eye from a childhood fall from her bike. Maggie was disproportionately self-conscious about that little scar. She shouldn't have worried: it was barely noticeable. She was beautiful.

After the movie, we had walked along West 76th Street, heading west away from Columbus Avenue and toward our home on the third-floor of a brownstone. The June night was pleasantly warm, a light breeze rustled the leaves, and we were both dressed for the weather: Maggie

was wearing a light yellow T-shirt, mine was a dark blue, and khaki shorts. Her legs were much prettier than mine. We had strolled down the sidewalk hand in hand. It had taken every bit of mental fortitude I possessed not to yank mine from hers—it was beyond me why she would want to hold my hand. Yes, the hand I'd taken the bribe with.

It had also been impossible to enjoy a stroll on a wonderful June evening with my wife when I was spending most of my mental energy scanning every doorway and window and rooftop, wondering if someone was about to kill me. I had been stupid and immoral enough to take money from criminal scum, and reneging on my deal with the scum left me in a state of fear. Not to mention the phone call I had received earlier that day: I picked up the phone and said, "Hello." A man's voice replied, "Well? We're waiting."

As we had climbed the stoop to our building, Maggie released my hand and fished in her purse for her keys. There was a noise, like the tearing of a piece of paper, and in a fraction of a second, something smashed into my right shoulder and slammed me against the door frame. As I fell, another something hit my leg.

There was a distant sound of footsteps pounding away, slowly fading out of hearing.

I lay on my back, sprawled on the landing at the top of the stoop, breathing hard. I touched my shoulder and felt a jagged tear in my shirt and skin. My fingers came away covered in blood. I gazed up and realized the glass in the door was broken.

Where was Maggie? I slowly rolled to my stomach until I could see down the stoop. She was crumpled at the bottom, her legs on the sidewalk, her torso on the steps, all of her covered in blood. Her head lay on one of the stone steps, her face toward me, her eyes wide open and sightless. I tried to call her name but couldn't collect enough breath to make a sound.

She couldn't be dead, she couldn't. The bullets were meant for me—I had taken the bribe but never delivered. This was payback for me. What had I done to my Maggie? My breathing was more strained as I pushed myself over the edge of the landing and down the steps. Every nerve in my body screamed with pain. I rolled down the last steps and came to an uncontrolled stop with my head in her lap.

She didn't move. I reached out and took her hand, gave it a gentle squeeze. Nothing. I whispered her name. No answer.

The sound of sirens filled the air, and I blacked out.

* * *

My beautiful wife did not deserve to be murdered.

It took months for me to recover physically. I only remembered being shot twice, but it was four times. Lost a lot of blood, but nothing vital was damaged. Still, not what you'd call a good time.

When you've been shot in what looks like a professional hit attempt, the Marshals Service is remarkably understanding about your taking long-term disability. All you need is the right kind of note from your doctor—and four bullets passing through your body makes it very easy to get the right kind of note.

I spent the next five years on disability, not working, angry with God, feeling sorry for myself, and justifying the worst behavior I was capable of. I supplemented my disability income with a bit of detective work from time to time: I found cheating spouses, did half-assed security consulting (and sometimes industrial sabotage) for businesses that were too small or too cheap to

hire someone good, and occasionally collected debts that were not legal obligations. Maggie would have been extremely disappointed in me, but then again, I'd been disappointed in myself ever since I took the bribe. There was no way in hell that I could justify taking money from very disreputable people for illegal behavior. Even though I hadn't delivered—I never had access to the witness protection information I was supposedly selling—that didn't make me any less guilty for accepting a bribe from human slime.

My failure to deliver on the bribe was the most probable reason someone had fired eight times at Maggie and me. Probably with a refurbished M21 sniper rifle with sound suppressor. At least that's what the ballistic evidence pointed to. The gun was never found. I was hit in the shoulder—that bullet went through me and smashed the front door window—in the ribs, puncturing my right lung, and twice in my right leg. Maggie was hit three times, twice in the chest and once in her left arm. The last bullet ricocheted off the stone stoop into the night. Neither it nor the weapon were ever found.

Given the type of weapon and the quality of the shooting, the killing was considered a hit directed at me, with Maggie as collateral damage. Like most law-enforcement agencies, the Marshals Service will move heaven and earth to find someone who attempts to kill one of their own. And the Service did exactly that on my behalf. But since I wasn't going to give myself up and tell them about the bribe—getting shot and losing my wife seemed like sufficient punishment to me—the investigators had no motive. No physical evidence except the bullet fragments. No suspects. Maggie's and my case went into the unsolved files where it probably would have stayed forever.

Fortunately, justice was meted out. By a random piece of luck, Dominick Gianetti, the guy who had bribed me—and been enraged by my failure to give him the info he was paying for—was killed barely a week after Maggie was murdered. I was still in the hospital. If only he had been shot *before* she was. His death didn't make things right regarding Maggie. Nothing would ever make that right. Or so I thought.

The fifth anniversary of her death found me still living in our apartment, now mine, which had stayed the same since she had died. Our living room had cream-colored walls and a lot of naturally finished wood furniture: bookshelves along the wall by the door, a couple of Woodstock recliners, and a couch, upholstered in a maroon-rust herringbone pattern. The bay window overlooked 76th Street. The brick fireplace had been unused since, well . . . you get the idea. The living room ended in a large counter that marked the beginning of the kitchen. A tiny hallway ran toward the back of the apartment where the bathroom and bedroom were. The whole place could have used fresh paint. Not to mention a fresh attitude on the part of the tenant.

I handled the anniversary with my usual aplomb. I started drinking around noon, which probably doesn't sound *too* unreasonable until I mention that I got up at about 11:45 A.M. I had gone into the bathroom, swallowed two aspirin, and stared at myself in the mirror. I'm six foot two, and the mirror wasn't set high enough for me to see the top of my head. But I knew my hair was sandy brown with a few streaks of gray. Bloodshot blue eyes over

unshaven cheeks. Not a pretty picture. I had exited the bathroom and walked a few steps into the tiny kitchen where, to quote Johnny Cash, “. . . the beer I had for breakfast wasn't bad, so I had one more for dessert.” To ensure it was a truly nutritious breakfast, I ate a couple of pieces of dry toast with the beers.

When I got seriously hungry in the middle of the afternoon, I left the apartment, walked down the stoop where Maggie had died, and went west to a deli on Broadway, where I bought a roast beef on rye sandwich with a little mayo and a bit of black pepper. A small bag of potato chips and a six pack of beer completed the meal. I went home and ignored the spot at the bottom of the front steps where my wife had bled to death. Safely inside my apartment, I ate my food and drank my beer while channel-surfing between sports and news. I didn't really give a damn what was on TV, but I wanted the noise to block out my mulish, drunken self-pity.

In the early evening, I switched from Budweiser to Johnny Walker Black and had Chinese food delivered. Probably Kung Pao Chicken, but by then I was disgustingly drunk, and I don't remember. At some point in the middle

of a weather report on some channel or another, I passed out on my couch.

Maggie woke me up. 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.”

“I thought you missed me.”

“I do, but you’re not really you . . . you’re not really the one I miss.” I paused and tried to consider the meaning of what I had said. “Did that make sense?”

“Yes.” She was sad and disappointed, and for a fraction of a second, I wanted to take her in my arms and comfort her. But only for a tiny speck of time—you can’t comfort an alcohol-created hallucination. And my head hurt so badly I wasn’t sure I could take her in my arms.

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 stood up and staggered to the little kitchen where my bottle of Johnny Walker sat on the counter. I grabbed a clean glass out of the cabinet above, picked up the scotch, and was going to pour myself a glass when Maggie's words echoed, "Please don't drink for the next twenty-four hours. Please?" I stared at the spot on the living room floor where my hallucination had been. Why the hell should I not drink for a hallucination?

But I couldn't bring myself to pour. I put the bottle back on the counter, the glass back in the cabinet, went to the bathroom to wash up, and then, finally, blissfully to bed.

* * *

The day after the fifth anniversary of Maggie's death was the first really good day I'd had in the five years since we were shot. I woke up at a reasonable hour, showered, shaved, dressed in clean jeans and a gray Fordham T-shirt, walked to a diner on Columbus Avenue, and had bacon and eggs. I even drank a glass of orange

juice, my first without vodka in years. I walked all through Central Park, enjoying the smell of the grass and the beautiful park scenery, framed by the towering buildings along Fifth Avenue and Central Park West.

I couldn't begin to understand why I was in such a good mood, filled with a sense of promise. It was as if I had a hot date. Was I eagerly anticipating seeing Maggie again? As that thought hit me—and it hit me like a hammer coming down squarely on a nail—I stopped and swayed in the middle of the pathway around the Park's Great Lawn. I took a deep breath. What the hell was the matter with me? Could I really be looking forward to a repeat performance of the drunken dream I'd had last night? But without the aid of alcohol?

I dumped myself onto the nearest park bench. What a pathetic loser. Getting all pumped up about seeing a woman who'd been dead for five years. Why? What was motivating this joy? I stared at the trees on the far side of the Great Lawn without really seeing them. I had no idea how long I sat there, staring without seeing. Eventually, I realized the reason I was happy *was* the thought of seeing Maggie again.

Hallucination or not, last night was the best moment of the last five years of my life.

Hallucination or not, Maggie was absolutely right: I was throwing my life away. And now I was hoping my dead wife would return and save me from myself. I laughed at the idea that my life was such a mess that my best hope was an appearance by my wife the ghost.

After spending hours walking around the park, I went to my gym and worked out—the one good habit I’d maintained since Maggie’s death. To be completely honest, all the physical exertion helped with my anger. Although I don’t know how the gym equipment remained intact after I used it. Showered and freshly dressed, I went home with a pizza and Diet Coke for dinner.

When I walked up the front stoop, instead of making a conscious effort to look away from the spot where Maggie had died, my eyes on the top of the steps and the front door. I practically bounded up to my apartment and ate three slices of my pizza. I wrapped the leftover pizza in aluminum foil and shoved it in the freezer.

Cleaned the apartment. I can’t tell you how long it had been since I cleaned the place, but after a couple of

hours, it was spotless. All the bookshelves had been dusted, the dishes washed, the floors vacuumed, and the bathroom scrubbed and shiny. I even changed the sheets on the bed, not because I was crazy enough to think I'd be entertaining company, but because when you're cleaning from top to bottom, well, you change the sheets.

After that burst of activity, I didn't know what to do with myself. I watched the Yankees on television, and after the game ended in a New York victory, I watched *Casablanca*. I'd probably seen it a dozen times, but it was still fantastic for me. Poor Rick, pining away for Ilse, and then his life turns around when he takes on the Nazis. He doesn't get the girl, but he does find himself.

I finished *Casablanca* a few minutes after midnight. I don't remember drifting off to sleep on the couch. Maggie woke me up, softly calling my name. She was smiling when I opened my eyes.

“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 there she was, complete with pretty blue eyes and the little scar over her left eyebrow. I was incredibly happy to see her. “I’m glad you’re here, whatever you are. I’ve missed you.”

“I know, but you can’t use me as an excuse for what you’ve become.”

“You’re disappointed in me . . . ”

“Of course I’m disappointed. 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 don’t really know.” To tell the truth, I did know. But I wasn’t capable of being honest with myself, and I certainly wasn’t capable of being honest with Maggie, regardless of her current plane of existence.

“That’s not good enough,” she said.

I couldn’t look into her eyes; I lowered my gaze and stared at the floor.

“Why did you do it?” she asked.

“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?”

“I don’t know . . . I’m . . .”

“Are you kidding me?” her voice was sharp and her eyes flashed angrily. That was my Maggie. “Are you crazy?” (A question I was asking myself every thirty or forty seconds as I talked with this ghost or hallucination or whatever she was.) “You have a chance to turn everything around, and you’re not sure you want it! Do you have any idea how many people there are who wish they had this chance?” She paused, looking at me to see if her words had any effect. “Well? Do you want to redeem yourself?”

“I . . . guess so. I mean . . . yes, I do.”

She waited for a moment, obviously hoping I’d say more. “Don’t you want to know what you have to do?”

“Sure, of course. 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?”

“Don’t drink again for the next twenty-four hours. Tomorrow night you’ll be visited by Harry. He’ll tell you what to do.”

“Harry? Who the hell is Harry? Maybe I should ask, what the hell 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.”

I took a step toward her, but she maintained her distance from me. “Seeing you is the best thing that’s happened to me in five years.”

She smiled again, but her face was sad. “You have no idea.”

“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.

* * *