



GEOFF
LOFTUS

NO TRAVELER
RETURNS

A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL

No Traveler Returns

By

Geoff Loftus



Books by Geoff Loftus

Double Blind (2012)

Engaged to Kill (2012)

The Dark Saint (2013)

The Jack Tyrrell novels:

Murderous Spirit (2016)

Dark Mirage (2016)

The Last Thing (2017)

Dangerous Purpose (2018)

No Traveler Returns (2020)

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No Traveler Returns 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 London and 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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“ . . . the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of. . . ”

Hamlet, Act III, Scene I

William Shakespeare

My home was empty. I stood in the living room and remembered where the furniture had been. Memories of my wife Maggie flooded over me—our years of living in this apartment. Followed by memories of my years living alone in these rooms. Okay, let's not moan and cry, Tyrrell. You are, in theory, a big boy. My reflection in the living room window confirmed that I was all grown up: six-feet two, broad shoulders, brown hair, blue eyes. Maggie had often told me I was pretty darn attractive. Stop it, Tyrrell. I suppressed the urge to check the apartment one last time. The place was empty. Time to go.

I closed the door, locked it, slipped the key off my keychain, and pushed it back under the door. Exactly as the landlord had instructed. His apartment. My home. Now my former home. I walked out onto the front stoop of the brownstone and down the steps. I paused at the bottom, staring at the step where Maggie had been killed. Move along, Tyrrell. Nothing to see here.

At West End Avenue, I almost turned uptown to head to Kim's place. But that was not an option. Kim Gannon and I were on a break. Whatever the hell “break” meant. We weren't going out anymore. We weren't seeing each other. We weren't even talking on the phone or

texting. No communication. However, we had not officially broken up. We had stopped short of ending our relationship. Although being “on a break” and *not* “broken up” seemed like a distinction without a difference to me. I headed downtown to West 72nd Street then turned left and east toward the subway station at 72nd and Broadway.

It was a crisp October night, and much as I enjoyed the brilliant weather, all I wanted was to go home to my new apartment in Greenwich Village, make myself a cup of cappuccino, close my eyes, and listen to the music of Bill Evans. Just drift along the current of emotion that Evans's piano set in motion. And everything would have gone as planned if I hadn't been walking on that particular block of West 72nd Street at the exact moment that some big jerk decided to grab a woman's arm. But grab her he did and, despite her loud protests, wouldn't let go.

And that meant I had to get involved.

The guy was tall, about my height, dark hair slicked back in a style that was briefly popular after the movie *Wall Street*, a five-o'clock shadow that I guessed was what he thought of as facial hair. He was dressed in a very expensive, dark-gray suit with a shirt so crisp and white it hurt to look at it. The woman was a brunette with shoulder length hair, probably around five feet two, tiny compared to him, wearing a black bolero jacket, scarlet blouse, and light-gray slacks.

They were standing at the curb on West 72nd Street next to a black Lincoln Town Car that seemed to be

waiting for them. I guessed they had just come out of a new, upscale bistro simply called Upper West. The woman tried to wrench her arm free, but the big guy wouldn't let go. I couldn't see her face because her back was to me, but the man's expression was unpleasant. To put it mildly.

“Come on,” he said in a tone unlikely to persuade a reluctant woman, “let's go back to my place.”

“Let go of my arm, you prick,” she shouted.

I had been walking west toward them, and when I first realized there might be an issue, my Sir Galahad instincts kicked in, I quickened my pace and stopped at their sides.

“You got a problem, buddy?” the man said through gritted teeth.

“No, I don't,” I replied. “But I think you should let her go as she asked.”

“Who the hell are you? Butt out.”

“Excuse me, but you're a foot taller and a hundred pounds heavier than this lady. Please let her go.”

He sized me up, gauging whether he could take me. There was no way for him to know what my training and experience were. Too bad for him.

“Or what?” He was torquing up his ego to fight. “You going to play the hero?”

“Only if you play the idiot.”

He dropped her arm and swung at me. A long wind-up, sloppy punch that I dodged with a quick move of my head.

I put my hands up, palms facing him, and said, “Hey, let's just stop. You've let go of her, and there's no need for this to go any farther.”

He swung again with another long right-handed punch. I ducked away and pounded him in the stomach with a left uppercut. He doubled over in pain, gasping for breath. He staggered against the car, planted both hands against the rear passenger window, straightened himself out, turned, and came at me again, trying to land a left jab. I sidestepped him and slammed a hard, short right to his cheek.

The big guy dropped to his knees then flopped face-down onto the sidewalk like a circus clown taking a fall.

I turned to the woman and was shocked to realize that I knew her. It was obvious from her wide eyes that she had recognized me, too.

“Jack?”

“Laurie?”

“Jack Tyrrell. I can't believe it.”

“Laurie Mandelbaum,” I reciprocated with her full name. “As pretty as ever.” I pointed to the guy on the sidewalk, “Sorry, but I don't really like your taste in men.”

“It's been all downhill since you.”

“Ouch. Sorry to hear that. Sorry for you, I mean.”

“You don't have to worry about me. My luck may be changing. After all, I ran into you just now.”

“I guess you could say that. Is the limo here for

your date?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"You saved me from finding out."

I grinned, "Fortunate that I happened by." I stooped next to the big guy, wrapped my hands around his upper left arm and tugged up. "Come on, let's get into the car."

He struggled to his feet and let me guide him to the limo. The driver stepped out as we approached and held the rear door open. I deposited the big guy on the back seat with a complete lack of care or gentleness.

"Where to?" the driver asked.

"His home."

"Where's that?"

"You'll have to get him to tell you."

"He's freakin' unconscious."

"You must have had to get addresses from drunks before."

"Yeah, sure, but . . ."

"But nothing. Get this bum home."

The driver shut the door, climbed into the limo, and pulled away from the curb. I turned to Laurie, who was still the attractive, dark-haired, brown-eyed, curvaceous woman I had fallen for in college. Of course, her looks didn't give a clue to her best attributes: a quick wit and sharp intellect.

"Well. Fancy running into you after all this time."

"It's been twenty years, hasn't it?" she asked.

“A bit more than that.”

“Thank you for saving me from that guy.”

“Chivalry is not dead.”

She smiled. “You didn't know it was me when you stepped up, did you?”

“No, I didn't recognize you from behind.”

“Can I buy you a drink by way of saying thank you?”

“How 'bout a cup of coffee?”

“Sounds good. Do you know Café Sabatini?”

Café Sabatini was where I had met Kim Gannon. And the idea of renewing an old acquaintance at the place where I'd first fallen for Kim . . . well, it didn't really appeal to me.

“Let's go to Buonasera. It's on 69th, just west of Columbus.”

“Lead the way,” she said.

As we sauntered along West 72nd, I asked, “So . . . the guy we just dumped in the limo—first date?”

She smiled ruefully, “No, second. I guess he thought that meant he was entitled to some action.”

“How dare he!”

She laughed, “Yes, the nerve of some men.”

“Not me.”

“No, never.” She patted my arm as we walked. “Actually, that wasn't your style. You were a nice guy. What's the matter? What's with that face? You look like you swallowed something awful.”

I laughed, “No, it's just that no man wants to hear a woman say he's a nice guy. It means she's written him off.”

“Sorry, but I think we've already been through all this.”

“You mean once you've broken up, you've written off the relationship?”

She nodded. “Changing the subject, I guess you did go into the Green Berets once you were in the Army. Judging by the way you just handled Michael.”

“Ah. Well, yes I did go into Special Forces, but believe me, I didn't need any training to handle Michael.”

“There's more to him than what you saw.”

“Oh?”

“Oh. Among other things he plays racquetball a couple of times a week and does mixed martial arts training. I'm not an expert, but I don't think everyone could have handled him as easily as you appeared to.”

“And you know about his athletic abilities from some of your second-date discussions?”

She grinned and slapped my arm as if we were engrossed in a flirtatious conversation while walking along a high-school hallway. “Never mind Michael. I heard you became a Marshal after the Army, is that right?”

“I became a Deputy in the U.S. Marshal Service.”

“Excuse me—a Deputy. But that's pretty impressive.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“Please, spare me the humble act. First you were in

an elite military service then you joined an elite law-enforcement service.”

“Okay, fine, you're right: I'm Superman. What about you? If I remember correctly, you went to law school.”

We crossed Columbus Avenue, immediately going downtown toward West 69th Street. Neither one of us paid any attention to the trendy stores. With Manhattan's ridiculously high rents, stores tended to close before they had time to mount a going-out-of-business sale. Even though it was a Thursday night, a work night, or as I still thought of it: a school night, twenty- and thirtysomethings strolled along the sidewalks checking for a place to go for a late dinner or a drink. They were in the perfect neighborhood for it.

“So, did you become a lawyer?” I asked.

“Yes, but I don't practice law.”

“Well, that was three years of your life wisely invested.”

“Actually, it was. I work for Regerman & Linklater. It's an accounting and audit services firm. I'm a tax specialist.”

“I'm gonna guess that you're not talking about filling out people's 1040 forms.”

“No. I'm an analyst for tax laws and policies. I track how the politicians are bloviating and follow what the IRS does when it implements the tax laws that Congress passes.”

“Sounds a wee bit dry.”

“It can be. But I also do work on international banking laws. I get to travel to places like the Cayman Islands and Switzerland.”

“Now that sounds good. Assuming you get some time to enjoy the places you're visiting.”

“I make sure that I do.”

We turned east on 69th Street and found Buonasera. The front door was down three steps. Inside, the café was a long wall of a blond wood, with a facing wall of mirrors and a glass-enclosed pastry case in front of it. Recessed lighting cast a soft glow throughout the place. Buonasera lacked Café Sabatini's old world charm, but the lighting made it properly atmospheric for a conversation between former lovers. Assuming I was capable of having a nice, friendly chat with the first woman I ever fell in love with. For crying out loud, Tyrrell, just talk and smile. How hard can that be? Even for you.

We sat down at a glass-topped café table along the wooden wall.

“Did you meet Michael through work? Match.com? At the gym?”

“Yes to all three!” she laughed. “He's been stalking me.”

We both chuckled. But as the significance of the word “stalking” sunk in, our chuckles died out.

“Poor choice of words,” Laurie said.

“You were making a joke.”

“Bad joke.”

“It worked at first.”

“I met him at a seminar on tax law.”

“Was he the only other person in the room who was under fifty?”

She laughed, “No. Not at all. But he and I laughed at the same jokes the presenters made. We chatted during a coffee break, he mentioned how lucky he was to have gotten into the seminar—he tried to register after the seminar was closed out but got in somehow. And yes, we discovered he has done some work for my firm.”

“Ever see him around the office?”

“No, we're a pretty good-sized firm, and he specializes in establishing international holding companies for our clients—not my area. But it was another connection for us. Anyway, combine all those factors: seminar, jokes, work with my firm, and here I am two dates later.”

“I'm assuming he didn't have much to drink on Date No. 1.”

“No, he did not.”

“And there's no prospect of Date No. 3?”

“Absolutely not. You saved me from a fate worse than—I'm not sure, but *worse*.”

“Worse, ooh. Well, I always felt you were worth saving.”

“But you didn't know it was me when you intervened.”

“I'm compulsively chivalrous.”

A young woman with long, dark hair came to take our order. Laurie ordered coffee. I asked for a cappuccino. Much as I wanted a cannoli, I refrained. I didn't want to appear piggish in front of Laurie.

“So, do you live in Manhattan?” I asked.

“Yes, here on the Upper West Side.”

“Really? Me, too, until recently. Where and how long have you been here?”

“I'm on 86th Street between Central Park West and Columbus. Pre-war building with a doorman. I've been there for sixteen years—I got custody of the place when I got divorced. Repainted and redecorated the whole apartment.”

“Not a trace of your ex in the place.”

“Not a trace,” she smiled.

“That's a nice—and pricey—neighborhood. You must have done well.”

“I have. And my ex was making good money when we bought it.”

“But since your marriage ended he's a mere shell of a man and earning nothing?”

She laughed, “That's not what I meant. He's doing fine, I guess. We were together eight years, no kids, and now he lives in San Francisco.”

“Do you ever talk?”

“No. No point.”

“And you got the apartment, which is the important thing.”

“Correctomundo.”

I laughed in recognition of a word I had heard Laurie utter hundreds of times when we were a couple. Our coffee and cappuccino arrived. I waited for her to put milk in her coffee, and we both took first sips and sighed in satisfaction.

“Where do you live?” she asked.

“Until yesterday, on West 76th Street. For about twelve years.”

“We've been living in the same neighborhood for a decade and never run into each other?”

“Well, it's not exactly a tiny neighborhood . . .”

“Still, it wouldn't have been all that crazy for us to run into each other.”

“I guess so.”

“But you said until yesterday. Where do you live now?”

“I just moved to a place in the Village. On Grove Street. Between Bleecker and Bedford.”

“Talk about a nice neighborhood. How'd you manage that? Or are you paying an exorbitant amount of rent to live in a broom closet?”

“A friend of my business partner owns the place and was transferred to London. So it's my new home for the next three years.”

“Wow. That's great.” She drank some more coffee. “What brought you back to your old neighborhood? Just wanted to take one last look at your old place?”

“Yes, exactly. Or as you say: correctomundo. I just needed to do a walk through before I returned the key to the landlord.”

“Would you mind backing up and filling in the blanks between college and now?”

“You want that in twenty-five words or less?”

“Yes, please give me the short version,” she instructed, grinning.

“After graduating from Fordham and completing ROTC, I was commissioned a Second Lieutenant and went into Special Forces—”

“Were you in combat?”

“Afghanistan. Two tours.”

“Are you . . . are you okay? I mean, did it work out for you? I can't imagine it was easy, that's not what I'm saying . . . I just--”

“I came home alive and in one piece with a couple of medals. Lots of guys were nowhere near that lucky. After the Army, I went into the Marshals Service, did pretty well there, met Maggie, got married, and we were on our way to happily ever after when she was killed.”

“She got killed? An accident?”

“More like 'on-purpose.’”

“That's . . . a whole lot of information you kind of breezed through.”

I paused to consider just how much else to explain.

“What do you want me to say?”

“It seems as if you're skipping over something.”

I hesitated. This was the Laurie I had loved in college. Smart. Insightful. Cut right to the heart of any issue.

“Forget it. I shouldn't pry,” she said apologetically. “We haven't seen each other in forever, and it's not fair for me to expect you to open up about what really went on in your life.”

“It's okay. Really, it is. This stuff is just hard to talk about.”

“I'm sorry, why don't we forget all about it?”

“Because you cared enough to ask.”

She hesitated, searching for the right words. “I'll listen to whatever you want to tell me. But only what you *want* to tell me.”

I sat there, frozen, feeling as if this was one of those hold-her-hand-and-gaze-soulfully-into-her-eyes moments. After the hand holding and the soulful gazing would come revelations of my deepest self to her. Except, I didn't really know Laurie all that well. We had been everything to each other once upon a time—a very long time ago. Now, we were in the midst of a promising reunion, exchanging confidences, building a relationship at a dizzying pace that was motivated by our past. But our past had ended with our breaking up. Followed by no contact whatsoever for twenty-four years. And . . . I would have sworn I could my inner voice whispering to me: “What about Kim?”

Tyrrell, you and Kim are on a break. Maybe that

means you are temporarily split. Maybe it means you are on the slow train to Splitsville and permanent separation. Either way, you are not together. At the very least, you are on a break. A break. It's all right for you to have a deep, meaningful conversation with a woman. Hell, it's all right if you—okay, stop right now, Tyrrell. Way too soon to be thinking about anything intimate going on between you and Laurie. Way. Too. Soon.

Laurie said, “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you so uncomfortable.” She glanced around Buonasera then said, “I should probably get going.”

“Wait,” I reached for her hand and held it. “Please don't go.” I took a deep breath and launched into the real version of my past. “I came home from Afghanistan with PTSD and never really dealt with it. Being in the Marshals helped, being with Maggie helped, but they were psychological band aids. I drank too much, I hung out with awful people, I took bribes. Maggie was shot by some of the awful people I dealt with, and I spiraled into five years of a drunken, full-blown depression.”

“Oh my God. I had no idea, I'm so sorry,” she whispered huskily. “What happened? You seem . . . you seem pretty together now.”

“Appearances can be deceiving.”

“Stop it.”

“Sorry. Every so often the wisenheimer in me pops out,” I said. “Yes, I guess I am pretty together now.”

“So what happened to you to change everything?”

“I had . . .” I stopped and considered what I was about to say.

Tyrrell, are you really going to tell this woman you haven't seen in two decades that your wife's ghost appeared to you and changed your life? That Maggie's spirit introduced you to your guardian angel, Harry Mitchum? That you and Harry work for the Chairman, aka “God,” righting wrongs for other people?

As I pondered these significant realities, it occurred to me that maybe—just maybe—there was an easier way to explain what had happened to change my entire life.

“I guess you could say I had a spiritual experience. I don't know exactly how to say what came over me, but something hit me, and afterward I saw things differently, I stopped drinking, and I started doing good. Helping people out.”

“Is that what you do for a living? Help people out?”

“Kinda. I'm a security consultant for some corporations and ego-centric celebrities. They pay me very well. And that allows me to do a lot of pro bono work.”

Laurie raised her right eyebrow. “In this context, what does 'pro bono' mean?”

“Well . . . I help people who can't go to the police.”

“I hate to be particular, but aren't the people who can't go to the police called 'criminals?’”

“Sometimes, but no, that's not the kind of people I'm helping.”

“Okay, who are you helping?”

“Okay . . . I can't name names, but, for instance, I helped a veteran who suffered from PTSD and was being manipulated by some gangsters into doing some very bad things—”

“You ended his criminal ties, got him help, and he lived happily ever after. Right?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Wow. Really?”

“Yes. Really.”

She mulled that over while she took a long sip of her coffee. “How do you find these people?”

“My partner Harry finds them.”

“How does he find them?”

“I don't know.” I admitted then smiled, “It's like magic.”

“Is this the same partner who found you an apartment in the heart of Greenwich Village?”

“The very same.”

“He really *can* do magic.”

“Yes, he can.”

“Why did you decide to move?”

I sipped the last of my cappuccino. “I . . . I needed to say goodbye to a bunch of memories. It was time to move on, and I couldn't really do that *and* stay in my old apartment.”

“I'm sorry to hear about your wife.”

I nodded. I never really knew how to respond to

people's expressions of sympathy regarding Maggie's death.

"It hasn't been easy, has it?" Laurie asked.

"No. But . . . it's gotten a lot better."

She thought that over for a second. "You've met someone, haven't you?"

"You're still scary sometimes."

"Me? Scary?"

"The way you see right to the heart of the matter. It can be unnerving."

"And you're still very good at evasion."

"What am I evading?"

"I asked if you had met someone, and instead of answering me, you complimented me on my insight. But neither confirmed nor denied meeting someone. So?"

I shifted uncomfortably, picked up my cup, remembered that I had finished my cappuccino, and suggested, "How 'bout if I walk you home?"

"Yes, please. And you're still being evasive."

I signaled the waitress for our check and reached for it when she brought it to our table, but Laurie slapped the back of my hand.

"Not so fast," she said with mock sternness. "I'm buying you a drink to thank you for saving me."

"Saving you from the dreaded Michael."

"A rescue is a rescue."

She left a fat tip on the table, paid the check at the register at one end of the pastry case, and we exited

Buonasera to 69th Street. We turned left and walked in silence until we turned uptown on Central Park West. The glorious pre-war apartment buildings on the western side of the street and the trees and the stone border wall of Central Park on the far side made for a very pleasant evening stroll.

“I love walking along here.”

“It's a nice place to walk,” she agreed.

We resumed our silence until we crossed 72nd Street and were walking along side The Dakota, the building where John Lennon had lived (and died) and which had been the exterior of Rosemary's apartment building in the movie *Rosemary's Baby*. Diehard Manhattanites had been known to say they would gladly take the risk of living next door to the Devil if they could have Rosemary's apartment.

“You're right, I did meet someone. A woman named Kim.”

“Are you in love?”

“We got engaged in Paris. Very romantic.”

“Wow. Mazeltov.”

“We're on a break now.”

“Oh no. When did that happen?”

“Four days after we got engaged.”

She started giggling, “I'm sorry, I know this is bad for you, but . . . you're really terrible at the romantic stuff.”

I couldn't help myself: I laughed, too. “As usual, you know me too well.”

Laurie hooked her right arm through my left. I was

walking outside of her, nearer the curb as a gentleman is supposed to do.

“What does 'on a break' mean?” she asked.

“That's the \$64,000 question.”

“Come on, what do *you* think it means?”

“It could mean that our relationship is on hold. We're not moving forward *and* we're not ending it.”

“What do *you* think it means?”

We walked an entire block before I answered. “My fear is it means we're done. Finished. Ended. Kaput. She just didn't want to be harsh and say it.”

“You think she's trying to let you down gently?”

“Yeah, that's my guess.”

“How long have you been on a break?”

“Three months.”

“Have you talked?”

“Nope.”

“Did she send a card for your birthday in August?”

“No. Then again, neither did you.”

“Hey! I haven't seen you in what—twenty years?”

“Something like that.”

“I didn't even know where you lived.”

“Okay, I forgive you for not sending a birthday card.”

She was laughing, “You're impossible.”

I shrugged, hands out, palms up. “I'm just a regular guy struggling with the emotional disaster that is my life.”

“Yeah, right. That's you—just a regular guy.”

“That's probably the reason I'm on a break: I'm a regular, boring guy.”

“Somehow I find it hard to believe you're boring. You were never boring.”

“Maybe I've changed.”

She shook her head as we crossed West 86th Street and turned left to finish our short hike to her building. “You haven't changed into a regular boring guy. When I first met you, you rescued me from a drunk who was pawing me in front of Bobst Library. Tonight, we met again when you rescued me from a drunk who was trying to pull me into the back seat of a limo.”

“Wow, I really have a severely limited repertoire. I need some new tricks up my sleeve.”

“I'm glad you can still do the old rescue trick.”

“I guess it came in handy tonight.”

Laurie stopped beneath the forest-green awning of her building. We could see a doorman through the small, glass panes in the gleaming brass-framed door. I glanced across 86th Street, my eyes automatically following a yellow cab headed east. I stopped tracking the taxi as soon as I spotted the big guy. He was leaning against a tree, probably hoping to use it for cover. It wasn't large enough to hide him. It was Michael.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Geoff Loftus is the author of the thrillers *Murderous Spirit*, *Dark Mirage*, *The Last Thing*, and *Dangerous Purpose* (all Jack Tyrrell novels), as well as the thrillers *Double Blind*, *Engaged to Kill*, and *The Dark Saint*.

Geoff also wrote *Lead Like Ike: Ten Business Strategies from the CEO of D-Day* and was the 2010 Keynote Speaker at the Eisenhower Legacy Dinner at the Eisenhower Presidential Museum and Library. For nine years, he blogged at FORBES.com on leadership.

Like many authors, he once dreamed of writing the great American novel but instead tried to write the great American screenplay. The closest he came to that lofty achievement was writing *Hero in the Family* with John Drimmer for *The Wonderful World of Disney*. He has been a member of the Writers Guild of America, East for more than thirty years.

He lives in Scarsdale, New York with his wife, Margy and the family's beautiful Bichon Frise, Heidi. Geoff and Margy's son, Greg, lives in Brooklyn.