

From the author of *MURDEROUS SPIRIT* and *DARK MIRAGE*  
A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL



# The LAST THING

GEOFF LOFTUS

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By

**Geoff Loftus**







## ***The Last Thing***

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*The Last Thing* 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 my Dad,  
who was my first writing teacher and  
introduced me to Charles Dickens*

**Abbe Faria:** Here is your final lesson . . .  
God said, "Vengeance is mine."

**Edmond Dantes:** I don't believe in God.

**Abbe Faria:** It doesn't matter. He believes in you.

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**Mercedes:** I don't know what dark plan lies within you. . . .  
But God has offered us a new beginning . . .

**Edmond Dantes:** God?

**Mercedes:** Don't slap His hand away.

**Edmond Dantes:** Can I never escape Him?

**Mercedes:** No, He is in everything. Even in a kiss.

***The Count of Monte Cristo (2002)***

Screenplay by Jay Wolpert,  
based upon the novel by Alexandre Dumas père





# 1

I knew it was a gun.

There was a flash of light above and in front of me, to my right. I'd seen that flash before, in Afghanistan, when sunlight bounced off the lens of a rifle's telescopic sight. It meant the shooter had been careless in taking a position or didn't have a better option than facing into the sun. Careless or not, that flash of light tied my gut in a knot.

I was walking uptown on Hudson Street in the West Village but stepped close to a maple tree for cover and to survey the scene. Adrenaline made me breathe quickly; I wondered how much time before the shooter fired.

To my left was the Episcopal Church of St. Luke in the Fields, a beautiful old church and school set in a miniature park that occupied the entire block stretching west of Hudson. Diagonally opposite me across the intersection of Hudson and Grove Street stood Heritage Baptist Church. The flash had come from the roof of the Baptist church. I looked around and saw people strolling, enjoying a late Saturday afternoon in early May. No obvious targets anywhere.

Then the doors of St. Luke' opened, and a dozen or so people in very nice suits and elegant spring dresses poured out on the front steps, all facing expectantly into the

church. It was a wedding. They were waiting for the newlyweds to emerge from church.

I glanced up at the roof of the Baptist church. No flash of light, but I could have sworn I saw a man's head rise above the roof's parapet.

The newlyweds were the target.

Jumping from behind my tree, I ran up the sidewalk, waving my arms, and shouting at the top of my lungs, "Back inside—GUN! GUN! Back inside!" I plunged into the crowd at the church entrance, shoving people aside and pushing them back through the doors and shouting, "Gun! Get back, get down, GUN!"

Some of the wedding guests began to rush inside St. Luke's, others scattered onto the sidewalk, and some stood frozen in place—they couldn't have been easier targets than if they had bullseyes on their clothes. I saw a slender figure in white just inside the church doors. I jumped up the steps, waving my arms and shouting at her to go back. She quickly retreated deeper inside.

*Thwpt! Thwpt! Thwpt!* Bullets whistled past my left ear and slammed into the church door, barely missing the bride.

I lunged over the threshold, grabbed the door handles, and pulled the doors shut. Spinning back to the sidewalk, I glanced up at the roof of Heritage Baptist and saw a dark blur of something moving.

This was the moment when I would have drawn my gun and run across the intersection, yanked open the Baptist

church doors, charged inside, and caught and captured the assassin. But, since I don't make it a habit to stroll around Manhattan on springtime Saturdays with my handy-dandy Ruger automatic, I didn't have a weapon. However, the gunman above clearly did.

The smart play would have been to stay where I was and call 9-1-1. Instead, I shouted at one of the cowering wedding guests, "Call 9-1-1!" and ran across Hudson Street toward the church. An old Ford 150 pickup truck with a front bumper duct-taped to its grill almost flattened me in the middle of the street. I twisted out of the way with inches to spare as the pickup whizzed past. The driver grunted, "Asshole!" and flipped me the bird. Geez, man, cut me a break, I'm unarmed and chasing a sniper.

I reached the front door of the Baptist church, pushed the door open an inch, paused, then kicked it open hard. I dove inside and rolled toward the back pews. I lay there for a moment, breathing hard, and listening carefully.

Nothing.

Then I heard hurried footsteps pounding down stairs. The steps echoed throughout the church. I couldn't tell where they were. But I had a feeling whoever was running down the stairs had a rifle. I crouched low behind a pew and scanned the ground floor, hoping I could spot the shooter before he spotted me.

The footsteps stopped. I heard the sound of a heavy latch like an emergency door handle being lifted, then the door slammed shut. The shooter had exited the building on

Grove Street.

I bolted through the main entrance back out to Hudson and turned left, running to the corner at Grove. At the instant I reached the intersection, a man was on the corner opposite me on the south side of the street. He paused and looked directly across the street at me. He was tall, slender to the point of being skinny, and had short brown hair. He wore blue jeans and a pale green polo shirt, and he was wearing a long, black-leather backpack, strapped over only his right shoulder. I would have bet large amounts of cash that his rifle was in the backpack—and, as long as it stayed in there, no one would get shot.

Our eyes locked for a second, and then he plunged into the traffic on Hudson Street, running out to the middle of the avenue and heading downtown through the uptown flow of vehicles. Without hesitation, I ran after him, dodging cars, ignoring the honking horns and plentiful curses, and running as fast as I could. He was fearless, zigging and zagging through the cars and trucks, barely missing his being smashed flat. I scrambled after him, but he was too fast for me even with the weight of the gun on his back. He was pulling away when a horn honked at my side. The driver side fender of a Honda Pilot slammed my left thigh, spun me around, and sent me toppling to the ground.

I lay on the road, stunned at first, then I flipped over on the ground, and glanced under the oncoming automobiles. I saw my quarry's feet disappear around the corner at Barrow Street, heading west. I put my hands on the

pavement and shoved myself to my feet, took a single step in pursuit, and fell to the ground. My left leg was numb and useless.

“Oh, damn,” I muttered under my breath.

\* \* \*

“I’m pretty sure nothing’s broken,” the EMT said. He had slit my blue jeans all the way to my hip, found a massive, technicolor bruise, but nothing else.

I was lying on a gurney in the back of an ambulance directly in front of St. Luke’s. There were three ambulances at the scene with their EMT crews attending to the wedding guests but, miraculously, I was the most seriously injured person. My mad dash to the church door seemed to have prevented anyone from being murdered.

In addition to the ambulances, there were police cruisers and unmarked cars filling the street. As I swallowed four ibuprofen tablets and sipped some water, I noticed a short, stocky African American man in a gray suit walking toward me.

“Is that Jack Tyrrell?”

“Charlie Winfield? Did you catch this?”

He smiled, “I’ve always been lucky.” He put one foot up on the ambulance’s bumper and leaned on his knee. “I haven’t seen you since you were still in the Marshals, right?”

“Yeah. We were on a task force together about seven . . . eight years ago.”

“I heard you retired.”

“Took disability. I got shot.”

“Can't be too disabled—you did a hell of a thing saving these people.”

“Well, like you said, I've always been lucky.”

He checked with the EMT, “Is he strong enough for some questions?”

She smiled and nodded.

“Wanna run this down for me, please?” he asked, yanking a notepad out of his jacket pocket.

“Sure, I was walking uptown on Hudson . . . oh, crap, I just remembered something. Can I make a quick call?”

“Really? It's not like you need a lawyer.”

“No,” I grunted in laughter, “I have to call my . . . uh, girlfriend. We're supposed to meet—” I waved my hands at the scene outside the ambulance—“and thanks to this I'm going to be late.”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “Call her.”

I pulled my phone out of my jeans pocket and dialed Kim Gannon.

“Where are you?” she answered.

“Well, I've been . . . uh, unavoidably detained.”

“Oh, really? And how have you been detained?”

“I was walking past St. Luke's on Hudson, and there was a shooting—”

“Oh my God, are you hurt? Are you all right?”

“Yes, I have a few bumps and bruises. Nothing major.”

“What happened?”

“Kim, I can't really go into all this at the moment. The detective in charge is already doing me a favor by

letting me make this call—” Charlie smiled “—I wanted to let you know that I’ll be late.” I glanced at my destroyed pant leg, “Actually, my pants got torn. I’m not properly dressed for anything other than a sidewalk hot dog stand.”

“I think you’re going to tell me a fascinating story about all this when you get the chance.”

“Of course.”

“Why don’t I meet you there? Then we can go to your place, you can get some pants, and we can figure out what to do with our Saturday night.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’m in front of St. Luke in the Fields at Hudson and Grove.”

“I’ll be there in about five minutes.”

“Perfect. I should be able to fabricate a really good story by then.”

“You’re not as funny as you think you are.”

“But you like me anyway.”

“See you soon.” She disconnected before I could make another sarcastic remark.

I tucked the phone back into my pocket and said, “Thanks for letting me make the call.”

“No problem. Glad to hear you’ve got a relationship. That’s good.”

“Very good.” I swallowed more water. “About the shooting, I don’t really have a lot to tell. I was walking uptown, on the St. Luke’s side of the street, on my way to meet my girlfriend. Sunlight glinted off of something on the roof of the Baptist church, and I knew it was a gun.

“The wedding party was about to emerge from the church, so I ran into it, screaming, waving my arms, acting like a mad man, yelling at everyone to get down, there’s a

gun. I got up the steps, waved the bride back inside, and bullets flew past me into the door. Three shots, I think.”

“Three shots,” Winfield agreed. “Then you ran across the street into the church, right?”

“Yes.”

“Unarmed?”

“Yes.”

“You're not very bright, are you?”

I laughed in spite of myself, “Give me a break, Charlie, it was a heat of the moment thing.”

“Hmmm, heat of the moment. Okay. What then?”

“Once inside the church, heard footsteps running down stairs someplace, but I couldn't figure out where, then I heard a heavy door open and shut. It was that heavy sound of an emergency latch. I figured the shooter went out on the Grove Street side. I was closer to the Hudson Street entrance and ran out of the church that way.”

“And then chased the shooter, against the traffic, down Hudson, until a car bumped you.”

“Hey, it was a good-sized car.”

“It was a Honda.”

“A Honda Pilot, an SUV, not some tiny Civic.”

“Of course, it was,” he replied with a complete lack of concern for my well being. “Anyway, you got hit by the car, and the shooter got away. Right?”

“That's about it.”

“Got a description?”

I closed my eyes and thought about the man I had chased. “White male, about six feet, lean build, skinny practically. Maybe 160 pounds. Short, dark brown hair. Couldn't see his eye color. Blue jeans, light green polo shirt.



And a black-leather backpack, looked custom-made to fit his rifle after a quick disassembly of the weapon.”

Charlie flipped his notebook closed and handed me his business card. “You know the drill, call me if you think of anything else.”

“Will do. I'm sure you're already on this, but our man's probably on a couple of traffic cams—”

“Yeah, yeah. Already getting the video; we'll run him through facial recognition. If he's got a record, we'll find him.”

“Sorry to tell you how to do your job. Just trying to compensate for my stupidity in chasing an armed assassin without a weapon of my own.”

“What?” asked a very surprised female voice. Kim stepped around the side of the ambulance. “You did what?”

“How did you get in here?” I asked, “This is a crime scene.”

“I lied. I told the officers I was your wife.”

Charlie grinned and offered his hand, “I'm Charlie Winfield. I'm handling this case. Jack and I worked together once upon a time.”

She gave him a dazzling smile. Kim was a stunning woman, with long red hair and brilliant blue eyes. Her smile literally made me weak at the knees. “I'm Kim Gannon.” She jerked her thumb in my direction. “I used to be his girlfriend.”

“Until you realized he was a thrill-seeking jerk?”

“Hey—” I tried to interject but was ignored.

“Yes, until then.”

Charlie nodded. “I can't say I blame you. But, in all fairness, I should point out that your guy here did save a

bunch of lives. Hard to know how many.”

“What?” her voice went soft, and she turned to me.

I shrugged, as much as you can shrug when you're reclining on an ambulance gurney, “Right guy in the wrong place.”

“Look, I hate to say nice things about Tyrrell, but he reacted in a split-second without any fear and saved a bunch of people. He deserves a little credit.”

“Even if he ran—unarmed—after an assassin?” There was a tiny hint of a smile as she asked the question.

“Even if. But that's only my opinion.”

“Is it all right if I climb inside?”

“It's fine by me,” he said. The EMT waved Kim aboard the ambulance.

“I'll see you later, Tyrrell,” Charlie said.

He walked toward St. Luke's where crime scene techs were carefully digging bullets out of the front door. Kim climbed up into the ambulance, leaned over, and gave me a long, slow, open-mouth kiss.

“I feel a lot better,” I said.

She kissed me again.

“Want to help me out of this thing?”

“Don't you need to go to the hospital?”

I shook my head, “The doctors will tell me nothing's broken, the bruise will hurt like hell for a few days, don't put too much weight on the leg, and don't go to weddings where shooting is part of the ceremony.”

“That last part makes a lot of sense.”

“Yes, it does. Now let's get out of here.”

Kim asked the EMT, “Should he go to the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“But he's not likely to die if he doesn't, is he?”

“No. I've seen people in worse shape refuse to go to the hospital.”

Kim helped me step down out of the ambulance. I have to say my left leg only hurt a little. A little bit like a major league ballplayer had taken a very large bat to it. And it only hurt when I bent my knee. Or flexed my hip. Or put any weight on it. Or wriggled my toes. Or wriggled my nose. Okay, the last part was probably psychosomatic, but almost every part of me was stiff with pain. Much as I hated to admit it, I couldn't have walked more than a few steps without Kim's help.

“Excuse me, Mr. Tyrrell?” a young, fresh-faced officer inquired of us. He must have been out of the police academy for at least thirty minutes.

“That's me.”

“Detective Winfield asked me to give you a lift anywhere you want to go.”

“Thank you,” Kim said quickly. “Would you take us to West 76<sup>th</sup> Street?”

“Absolutely. Can you make it to the cruiser over there?” he was pointing uptown on Hudson, where a couple of cruisers were parked behind heavy-plastic barricades.

“I'm not that badly hurt,” I said, “yes, thanks, I can make it to your car.” I turned to Kim, “Do I look that bad?”

“You look like a hero.”

**DAY – MANHATTAN: ST. REGIS HOTEL**

THE ASSASSIN LET HIMSELF INTO HIS ROOM and lay the black-leather backpack down on the bed. Who the hell was that guy? He wondered.

It had seemed like a perfect set-up. Thirty seconds from firing, and that man appeared out of nowhere and ruined it. Was it random chance?

Because of the flurry of activity before the shooting and the ensuing foot chase through traffic, the assassin hadn't been able to get a good look at the other man's face.

But there was something vaguely familiar about him. He couldn't have been a target from a previous assignment—the assassin had never missed until that moment at St. Luke's.

And, the man had remained cool under fire. Was he law enforcement? Or military? What were the odds that a man like that would wander into the target area? Who the

hell was that guy?

The assassin went to the mini-bar, grabbed two tiny bottles of bourbon, poured them into a small glass, and drank, slowly swallowing until he finished. He went into the bathroom, rinsed the glass and placed it on the left side of the sink. He was precise about everything.

He returned to the bedroom and sat next to the backpack. He rubbed the leather and took a deep breath, exhaling in a long, soft whistle. Time to find a new place to stay. Time to begin the process of researching the next target.

\* \* \*

The police cruiser pulled to a stop right in front of the steps leading to the front door of the brownstone on West 76<sup>th</sup> Street where I live. Kim and I were in the back seat, where the recently arrested sit, and the officer had to get out and open the door for us. Kim stepped out, and I slid over the seat, put my right foot out the door, and froze.

It had been almost six years since my wife Maggie had been murdered on these steps. Shot by an assassin from a rooftop opposite our building. A set-up very much like what had just happened at St. Luke in the Fields.

I was unable to step out of the cruiser, my eyes locked on the bottom steps where my wife's body had come to rest. Every single day when I went in or out of my building, I had a moment of awareness, a moment when I

had to recognize the spot where Maggie died.

The memory always saddened me. But today, after what had happened at St. Luke's, it terrified me.

“Jack? Are you all right?” Kim was extending her hand to me to help me out of the car.

“Do you need some help, sir?” the young officer asked.

“No, no, thank you. I'm fine.”

To Kim I said, “Would you mind if we go to your place?”

“No, not at all,” she grinned, “but don't you need some pants?”

I forced a smile, “Oh yeah, I guess I do. Listen, you wait here, I'll go change, and then this officer can drive us to your apartment. Is that all right?”

To the officer, I said, “Do you mind?”

“Not at all, sir.”

“Give me your keys,” Kim said, “I'll go up and be back faster than you and your bum leg.”

The thought of watching her go up the steps twisted my stomach in a nervous ball. I wish it had been golf-ball sized; I might have been able to deal with that. But my fear was generating a beach-ball size knot of terror. Come on, Tyrrell, I thought, get a grip.

“No, I'll go. Don't worry, I won't take forever.”

She was perplexed but nodded, stepped back from the door, allowing me to exit the vehicle more easily. She slid back onto the seat after I vacated it. The officer

remained standing by the vehicle.

Okay, Tyrrell, walk up these steps smooth and steady. Over the course of my life, first in the Green Berets and then in the U.S. Marshal Service, I'd had to push through pain on a number of occasions. I'm actually pretty good at acting normal when I'm in pain. But this left leg was a challenge. The muscles were stiff with cramps, and climbing the brownstone's steps was like hiking up Kilimanjaro with a sack of cement mix tied to my leg. But I made it to the top and the front door. I scanned the opposite rooftops. No sign of any lurking assassins. I gave Kim a small wave and went inside.

I hobbled to my apartment as quickly as I could, unlocked the door, went inside, and changed out of my torn jeans into a pair of loose-fitting cargo pants. Switching pants was a hell of a lot more challenging than usual. I didn't notice the décor—virtually unchanged since Maggie had died, although I was aware that the sunlight pouring through the bay window overlooking 76<sup>th</sup> Street was lovely. I walked without too much of a limp back down to the street.

The police officer was kind enough to hold the cruiser's door for me, as I joined Kim.

She asked, “All set?”

“Yes, thanks.”

She was quizzical, but said nothing.

“Where to, ma'am?” the officer asked.

“West End Avenue and 80<sup>th</sup>. Northeast corner. We'd walk normally—”

“But this isn't normally,” he said. I could see him grinning in the rearview mirror. “It's my pleasure, ma'am.”

About three minutes later we were stopping in front of Kim's, a twelve-story prewar apartment building with a brick exterior and tiny, ornamental stone balconies above the fourth floor. Kim helped me out of the car and stuck close by my side into the marble-floored lobby and toward the ornate, Art Deco elevator doors. I wasn't so committed to my tough guy persona that I didn't lean on her. But I'm six feet two, and she's about eight inches shorter and a hundred pounds lighter so I only leaned on her enough to steady myself but not enough to crush her to the floor.

The doorman didn't know what to say or do, and he hovered by our sides and said and did nothing. Kim waved hello to him as the elevator doors slid shut.

Kim's corner apartment was on the tenth floor and faced west and south. We walked into her large living room/dining room. The décor was simple and modern, taking advantage of the immense amount of light from the windows. A small hallway stretched off of the living room and led to two bedrooms.

I dropped my arm from around Kim's shoulders, limped to the couch, and collapsed. She crouched in front of me, gently pulled off my shoes, and lifted my leg to a throw pillow she had put on a coffee table.

“Is that good?” she asked.

“Perfection.”

“Do you want something?”



“Some water? And ibuprofen?”

“Coming up.”

She disappeared into the kitchen, then went down the hall to the bathroom, and returned with a pair of water bottles and a clenched hand. She stretched out her clenched hand and dropped a couple of ibuprofen into my upturned palm.

Kim waited until I had swallowed the pills then asked, “What happened at your place?”

“Uh, nothing. I didn't want . . . I, uh . . .”

“Yeah, right,” she drawled sarcastically. “What happened?”

“I'm sorry. I . . . had this intense flash of memory, I could see . . . Maggie at the bottom of the steps.”

Kim walked around the coffee table, sat next to me, and took my hand. “Did the shooting at the church remind you of what happened to Maggie?”

I nodded and exhaled slowly. “It was a similar set up. Shooter on the opposite rooftop, firing at people on the steps. But Maggie and I weren't in a crowd, and . . . it really isn't the same, but . . .”

“It brought back memories.”

“Yes.”

“And it frightened you.”

“Yes.”

We sat quietly for a moment, holding hands.

“Would you like a cappuccino?” Kim asked.

“Yes,” I smiled. We had met over cups of

cappuccino at Café Sabatini.

She let go of my hand, patted my shoulder, and went into the kitchen. I heard water being poured into the reservoir of the espresso machine, the fridge door open as she fetched milk, the hissing of the machine as the espresso dripped, then the louder hissing as Kim used the steam wand to foam the milk.

She returned with two cups and a plate with two biscotti.

“Just right,” I said, sipping my cappuccino and feeling deeply satisfied. “The perfect prescription for the man who's been hit by a car.”

Kim took my hand again, which I guessed meant we were about to resume our serious conversation about my irrational fears of a rooftop gunman.

“What are you afraid of?” she asked.

“I don't want anything to happen to you.” I thought that over for a second. “That's not quite right. I don't . . . I don't want to lose you.”

“And I don't want to lose you.”

I took another sip of cappuccino. It was really good, but the main reason I drank more was that I wanted a bit of time to express my thoughts. I have a proclivity for stumbling all over myself when I attempt to express my feelings, and this seemed to be a moment that required clarity of thought and word.

“I know we haven't been going out for a long time,” I said, “but it's been amazing being together. I didn't know I

could feel this way again. You . . . you have given me hope. You've made me realize I could be happy again. Truly happy.”

Her eyes were tearing, “Gee, I think I'm undercharging you for my services.”

“Your price is beyond rubies.”

Kim looked perplexed, so I added, “From the Book of Proverbs in the Bible.”

She shook her head in mock dismay. “Are you going to say more things to touch my heart and make me cry?”

“Yes. Although the crying is optional.”

“Yeah, right.”

I took a deep breath and said, “I love you. I know it's only been five months, but I can't imagine my life without you. I didn't know I could ever feel this way again.”

“But . . . ?”

“How do you know there's a 'but'?”

“I can hear it in your voice.” She waited patiently, and when I didn't go on, she said, “But . . . you still can't let go of your wife.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you loved her with all your heart. Because you miss her every day. Because you blame yourself for her death and letting go of her would be a betrayal.”

“Holy moly,” I said slowly. “That was awfully. . . .”

“Accurate?”

I nodded. “Everything you said is true, but . . . I want to let go. I *know* it's not a betrayal, but. . . .”

“You *feel* like it's a betrayal.”

“Yes. But how do you know that?”

“Jack,” she gently squeezed my hand, “I told you before, I was married for five years and thought it was the real deal. Then it turned out that it wasn't at all. But as real as that relationship seemed—before the bad times and the divorce—I never felt this way until you. And you've said you can't imagine your life without me. But even though we've been swept up in this intense relationship for five months, even though we've been together almost non-stop since Christmas, we haven't slept together. I don't want to sound like I'm easy, but I would never have thought I could be in a relationship this intense, this good, and not have ended up in bed by now.

“If everything is that good between us, then something must be blocking us. What else could it be but Maggie?”

“I'm sorry, I really am. I don't want anything to come between us. I really don't.”

“But this is difficult.”

“*Very* difficult.”

Kim leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “I don't need you to let go right now. I'm not going anywhere. When you're ready, you're ready.”

“But I shouldn't take too long,” I said lightly.

“Sooner would be better,” she smiled in reply.

We sat quietly, eating biscotti and sipping cappuccinos. I tend to eat and drink as if I were a starving

wolf, which means everything disappears quickly.

“Want to finish my biscotti?” Kim asked, gently pushing hers closer to me.

I grinned. In the months we had been dating, this had become a ritual: I finished before she did, and then she offered me the remains of her entree or dessert.

“Yes, thank you,” I said and popped the last bite of the biscotti into my mouth. I chewed without haste then sipped the last of my cappuccino to wash it down.

“Listen, it's not only that I can't let go of Maggie. I mean, it's not just that I loved her and that my feelings aren't gone . . . oh God, I'm doing a terrible job explaining.”

Kim rubbed my arm, “Just fumble your way through. Eventually you'll say what you want to say.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I'm sure. But don't take forever.”

“You're very kind.”

“Yes, I am.”

Since the moment seemed like a kissing moment, I kissed her softly on the lips.

After, I took a deep breath and exhaled long and slowly. “Part of the reason it's hard for me to let go of Maggie is that my entire life is because of her. Because of what she did for me. My work . . . my work—”

“Your work as a government-trained private detective cum troubleshooter?”

“Yes, that wonderfully pithy job title you came up with for me.”

“Maggie inspired you to put your skills and experience to work, right? Isn't she's the one who introduced you to Harry?”

“Yes. But . . .” I never imagined the possibility of having this conversation. “I want to be completely honest with you about everything. But . . . if I'm completely honest with you, you'll be convinced I'm crazy.”

“Maybe you're rationalizing so you don't have to talk to me about some parts of your life.”

“I guess there are lots of people who would hide behind the old 'you'll think I'm crazy' line, but I'm not one of them.”

After a long moment, she gently asked, “Are you going to tell me or not?”

“I'm going to tell you.” I took a very deep breath and launched into my story. “I know I told you some of this before, but I have to start at the beginning. . . .” I took another deep breath.

“Jack, it's okay. Just say whatever you have to say. Just spit it out.”

Nodding, I said, “Maggie was shot and killed almost six years ago. On the doorstep of our brownstone. She was shot because I took a bribe but never delivered what I was paid to deliver.”

“Some information about a relocated witness, right?”

“Exactly. One of my rationales for taking the bribe was that I knew I *couldn't* deliver the info. Witness security

is need to know, and I've never had a need to know. But that was rationalizing. The kind of thing you tell yourself when you do something you know is wrong: it's okay to take money from bad guys, 'cause they're bad buys and deserve to be screwed.”

“But once they knew they were screwed, they went after you and Maggie.”

“Which, to be completely honest . . . I should have known they would come after me. I'm to . . . blame for Maggie's death.”

“You made a mistake,” Kim whispered.

“And Maggie paid for it.” I shook my head to snap out of my sadness. “The mobster who bribed me was hit a few days after we were shot—completely unrelated to us, but he was dead and buried along with my problems with him. I spent the next five years drinking a lot more than I should have and doing minor security jobs. Most of the time I was using my size and reputation to pressure people into paying their debts.”

“You were hired muscle? Is that the term?”

“Old-fashioned term, but basically correct.”

“But now you're a legit security consultant. How did you go from being muscle to what you do now? What changed?”

I stared at the ceiling and thought, please give me strength. “On the fifth anniversary of Maggie's death, she appeared to me.”

“She appeared to you? You mean, like a . . . ghost?”

“I mean exactly like a ghost. She visited me right in my living room.”

Kim didn't speak immediately. She stared out the window as she tried to come up with a reasonable response. “Jack, I don't want to be insulting, I really don't, but I have to ask: Did you have a lot to drink that night?”

“No more than usual.”

“Were you having an alcoholic hallucination?”

“That's what I thought. A hallucination. How could it be anything else? But Maggie said that if I didn't drink the next day, she would visit me again the next night.”

“And you stayed sober for the day?”

“I'm not sure if I met the definition of sobriety, but I didn't have anything to drink. I wasn't having any hallucinations.”

“And she came to you again?”

“She did. She told me she was . . . disappointed in what I had become. She wanted me to be the man she always knew I could be. She had intervened on my behalf and gotten me a chance to turn my life around.”

“This sounds awfully familiar.”

“It should. It's basically *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. She was Marley the ghost and I was Scrooge the lost soul.”

Kim turned away from me and sighed, muttering softly, “Oh my God, you are crazy.”

“Kim.”

She faced me, and I continued, “This may not help,



but . . . I'm not asking you to believe what I saw is true. I'm asking you to accept that I believe it's true. It's the central belief of my life—it changed *everything*.”

“I still think you're crazy.”

“I understand. I would if I were in your shoes.”

Kim stood up and paced back and forth across the living room. I would have joined her, but I was pretty sure that if I stood up, my bad leg would give way immediately. And while I may not know how to talk to women—our current conversation seemed proof of that—I was pretty sure that my sprawling on the floor of this particular woman's living room was not the way to persuade her that I wasn't crazy even though I claimed to have seen my wife's ghost.

After a couple of trips from one end of the room to the other, Kim came back to the couch and asked, “What was the chance Maggie got for you?”

“Okay . . . buckle your seat belt, we're in for a bumpy ride.”

“Wait a minute, now it gets bumpy?”

“Oh yeah,” I replied, swallowed, and continued. “Maggie said she had arranged for me to meet Harry Mitchum—”

“Your partner? I know Harry. There's nothing crazy about him.”

“He's not exactly my partner. More like my case manager. Or my senior partner. And . . . he's not a man, he's an ange—well, he . . . works directly for the Chairman.”

“The Chairman? *Who* is the Chairman?”

I pointed my forefinger to the sky in a gesture generally understood to mean—

“GOD?” Kim asked, stunned. “The Chairman is God? Harry works directly *for* the Chairman, and you work *with* Harry, which really means you work directly *for* God? *Really?*”

I shrugged and said in a low voice, “I told you you'd think I was crazy. But . . . it's what I believe.”

“You work for God.”

“You know, when you say it, it does sound really, off-the-wall nuts, but—”

“But what? Is there a way to say this that doesn't sound nuts?”

I pondered her question—one that I had mulled over again and again since Maggie first appeared to me—and found what I always found: there was *no way* to make my work for the Chairman sound sane and reasonable. I either believed, or I didn't.

“I got nothing,” I said.

“You work for God.” She stood up and began pacing again. “Your dead wife appeared to you as a ghost, introduced you to an angel, and now you work for God.” She looked at the ceiling, out the window, at the floor, and anywhere but at me. “I've fallen in love with a guy who can't let go of his dead wife, a guy who's an honest-to-goodness, completely out of his mind madman. About the *only* good news in this situation is that you're not one of those guys standing on the sidewalks shouting about God and your

relationship with Him.”

I waited a moment to make sure Kim had finished saying what she needed to say. As it turned out, she had a bit more, “Well, you were right, you do sound nuts: You work for God. You sound like a giant-size, deluxe jar of mixed nuts.”

“You've fallen in love with me?”

She stopped pacing, spun around, and asked, “Wait! Out of all the things I said, that's what you heard? That's what's important in the middle of this conversation?”

“Well, yeah, it is to me.”

She teased me as she fought back tears, “Oh sure, it's all about you.”

I chuckled. “You've fallen in love with me?”

“Yes, but that was a highly conditional statement. I will probably retract it in the next few seconds.”

“You can't. It's already out there.”

“I can do whatever I want about my feelings.”

“Yes, you can. Sorry.”

She resumed pacing, then scooped up our cups, and headed to her kitchen. “I need more caffeine. Do you want another cappuccino?”