



**GEOFF
LOFTUS**

**CASUAL
SLAUGHTERS**

A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL

Casual Slaughters

By

Geoff Loftus



Books by Geoff Loftus

Double Blind (Published in 2012)

Engaged to Kill (2012)

The Dark Saint (2013)

and the Jack Tyrrell novels:

Murderous Spirit (2016)

Dark Mirage (2016)

The Last Thing (2017)

Dangerous Purpose (2018)

No Traveler Returns (2020)

Fracture of the Soul (2020)

Casual Slaughters (2022)

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Casual Slaughters 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 and Cold Spring accurately, but the needs of the story may have driven me to exercise poetic license, including with some actual places and buildings. I hope the reader will excuse this.

Cover design by Tom Galligan, Green Thumb Graphics.

Published by Saugatuck Books.

*For my editors,
Alice, Ted, and Tom*

*Thanks for your professional help
and more importantly,
your friendship*

. . . . So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads.

Horatio in *Hamlet*,
Act V, Scene II

William Shakespeare

Prologue

From Kim Gannon's Diary:

I don't know how to explain this, but when the man I'd fallen in love with told me that he worked directly for God, it freaked me out. Gone completely nuts freak-out. "God sent me to you!" is the kind of thing you hear from men on street corners, shouting Bible quotations into the air.

I wished there was a priest or minister or psychologist handy—someone I could talk to about this. But no such luck. It seemed like there were two options:

I could believe the man I love.

Or decide that he is insane.

My guy is a great guy. Truly wonderful. He's a decorated war veteran (a Green Beret!) and a former deputy in the Marshals Service. Since he left the Marshals, he's been a do-gooder of the first order. A handsome, six feet two with eyes of blue, honest-to-goodness hero.

But when he first told me he worked for God, or the Chairman as he called the Big Guy, it was not a good moment.

I was sure he was out of his mind. Way out.

Or maybe I was the one with mental problems.

Except that I'm not. I'm an Irish-Catholic girl who grew up in Westchester County, New York. Who went to Boston College for my bachelor's then onto NYU for my MBA. I'm one of three women who own and operate a very successful marketing and communications consultancy. I own my two-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side. I'm very fond of Bill Evans (a jazz pianist Jack introduced me to), rock 'n' roll, and Broadway musicals. Jane Austen is my favorite author. Is there anything that indicates mental instability in any of that? Anything at all?

But . . . despite how nuts Jack sounds and how sane I like to think I am . . . well, I believe him.

And that's why I'm writing this diary. I can't talk honestly with my family and friends and tell them the man I love works with an angel (yes, an angel) and the two of them work to help people by righting wrongs.

Despite the fact that I believe Jack, and please don't judge me until I finish explaining, I go through a lot of uncertainly and confusion. Who wouldn't entertain some doubts, at least once in a while, over a story like this? Entertain doubts is putting it mildly. Sometimes my fears careen into neurotic overload and make me worry that I'll end up as a New York Post headline: Dead Woman Found Clutching St. Jude Medal.

I was channel-surfing the other day and saw a few minutes of Bridget Jones's Diary. Bridget, played by Renée Zellweger, is a charming, funny, thirtysomething mess, trying to find a good man and the right job. In the midst of

her troubles, she seems to achieve some self-awareness and find a sense of control over her doubts and fears by keeping tabs on her feelings and the events of her life in a diary. Bridget doesn't get a happy ending because of the diary, but I think writing it helped her get to a place where she could find a happy ending. Anyway, Bridget inspired me to give it a try.

So, Dear Diary, let me try to explain Jack, who works for God. (This is my version of things. Jack's story would undoubtedly sound different.)

His name is Jack Tyrrell. Thanks to his time in Special Forces and the U.S. Marshals Service, he's a government-trained private detective cum troubleshooter. The reason he became a righter of wrongs was his late wife, Maggie.

Almost seven years ago she was shot on the doorstep of the brownstone where they lived. Maggie was killed because Jack took a bribe to provide some information about a relocated witness to the Mafia but didn't deliver.

As he explained it to me, his rationale for taking the bribe was that he knew he couldn't possibly deliver the information. The Marshals Service keeps witness security on a need-to-know basis, and Jack didn't need to know. Once the people who had bribed him realized he wasn't going to deliver, they went after him and Maggie.

Jack told me, "I should have known they would come after me. I'm to blame for Maggie's death."

The mobster who bribed Jack was murdered a few days after Maggie was shot—for reasons unrelated to Jack, but the important thing was that the mobster was dead and buried along with Jack's bribe problems.

Jack spent the next five years drinking a lot more than he should have and doing minor security jobs. According to him, he mostly used his size and reputation to pressure people into paying their debts.

On the fifth anniversary of her death, Maggie appeared to him in his living room. Like a . . . ghost. She visited him right in his living room and told him she was disappointed in what he had become. She had intervened with God on his behalf and gotten him a chance to turn his life around. Now he's a legitimate security consultant. And a righter of wrongs.

All because of Maggie.

If this sounds familiar, it should. It's basically A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. Maggie was Marley's ghost, and Jack was Scrooge, the lost soul.

So, dear diary, when Jack told me this story, I thought, "Oh my God, he really is crazy."

Then he said, "This may not help, but . . . I'm not asking you to believe what I say 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."

And I replied, "I still think you're crazy." Then I asked, "What was the chance Maggie got for you?"

"Maggie said she had arranged for me to meet

Harry Mitchum—”

“I know Harry! There's nothing crazy about him, except that he works as your partner.”

“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.”

I was completely confused. And heartsick. This was going from bad to worse by the second. “The Chairman?” I asked. “Who is the Chairman?”

Jack pointed his forefinger to the sky in a gesture generally understood to mean God.

The Chairman was God? Harry worked directly for the Chairman, and Jack worked with Harry, which really meant that Jack also worked directly for God?

How could I come to any conclusion other than that Jack Tyrrell, the man I had fallen in love with, was a complete, absolute, raving lunatic?

Jack said, “I'm sorry. I told you you'd think I was crazy. But . . . it's what I believe.”

“You—and your partner—work for God.”

He admitted that when I said it, it sounded off-the-wall nuts. I asked if there was a way to say it out loud that wouldn't sound too bad.

After a long moment during which he seemed to be looking for a reply (or knowing him, he was probably looking for a joke to lighten the moment), he said “I got nothing.”

My head was spinning. I said, “Your dead wife

appeared to you as a ghost, introduced you to an angel, and now you work for God. I've fallen in love with a guy who can't let go of his dead wife and works for God. Well, you were right, you do sound like a giant-size, deluxe jar of mixed nuts."

"You've fallen in love with me?" He responded. That's my Jack, always finding the golden nugget in the middle of the puddle of mud. To be fair, it was the first time I had told him I loved him.

"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."

I remember fighting back my tears, teasing him to make it easier for me to speak. "Oh sure, it's all about you."

"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."

I didn't retract it. I made each of us a cup of cappuccino.

When I placed his cup on the coffee table, I said, whispered actually, "You work for God."

"It's a minor distinction that probably won't help you deal with this situation, but I said that I believe I work for the Chairman."

"You're right, it doesn't help. And what's with calling Him the Chairman?"

"It's what Harry has always called Him."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure, but I think Harry uses a term that sounds powerful but isn't tied to any particular system of religious beliefs."

"Oh." As I recall I said something like: "You work for God, but He's going incognito as the Chairman."

"Again, I know this probably won't help, but I did tell you that you were going to think I was crazy when I was completely honest with you."

"Yes, you did say that." I was struggling not to burst into tears. "Thanks for being completely honest with me."

"You're welcome. I had to be completely honest with you. I've fallen in love with you too."

Tears welled in the corners of my eyes and down my cheeks. I wiped them off. "Could you maybe be completely honest and tell me that your real secret is that you were a miniature French poodle in a previous life?"

We both laughed.

"So, your job with Harry, or as I like to call it, 'your work as a government-trained private detective cum troubleshooter,' it's all about doing whatever the Chairman tells you to do?"

"Pretty much. Although I get to choose what jobs I want to take."

I was puzzled, "You don't just do what God—excuse me, the Chairman—tells you to do?"

“No. I get to choose. From what Harry tells me, free will is a very big deal with the Chairman. Very big. HUGE.”

“Are all of your clients given to you by the Chairman? No offense, but a lot of what you do seems pretty run-of-the-mill.”

“No offense taken.” Jack replied. My memory's a little vague about what he said next. Something like: “Most days I help businesses assess their security procedures and supervise internal investigations if they think their people are bribing foreign nationals or selling company secrets. I inspect physical plants and offices to be sure locks and alarms are well-designed and protect the premises—”

“Stop, please, it's not run-of-the-mill, it's boring.”

“Ouch. All of those clients come to me by word of mouth.”

“What about the nasty clients who used you as hired muscle?”

“I haven't worked for any of them since Maggie—”

“Appeared to you as a ghost.”

“Yes.”

“Did all your legit clients come to you after Maggie appeared?”

“Right after my first . . . uh, case with Harry, clients started coming, which has allowed me to live very comfortably. Before you ask, yes, I think the Chairman sends the clients my way and that enables me to support

myself so I can do the big jobs He wants Harry and me to handle.”

“And those big jobs are . . . ?”

Jack winced, “Sorry, but I’m not really supposed to talk about that stuff.”

“Why not?”

“I’m supposed to right the wrongs that people suffer. I’m supposed to be selfless and other-directed. No honor, no glory, no rewards.”

“Using the special skills you acquired thanks to Uncle Sam?”

“Yup.”

I didn’t know what to think. Or say. Jack and I took a break while I tried to process what he had told me. Tried to convince myself that he wasn’t crazy. He seemed so sure when he explained Harry and the Chairman to me.

We stopped seeing each other for a few days, and I found myself wanting to believe. I wanted to. But I just couldn’t. It was nuts. After three or four days, I remembered what Jack had told me about C.S. Lewis, who wrote that faith is a matter of choice. And I realized that I wanted to make that choice.

I wish I could say it was as easy as that. It wasn’t. But I felt a small tug of emotion. A tiny opening of my mind and my heart. A little . . . something. A tiny little something, enough to pray. To pray for the willingness to believe.

Then Harry showed up. Popped up right here in

the middle of my living room. I'd say he beamed in, but there was no time lapse as he materialized. It was so . . . weird. Like magic. Or like I'm crazy. But I saw it with my very own eyes: one minute I was alone and in the next millisecond, Harry was there.

After that, I had no problem at all believing that Jack worked with Harry for the Chairman. But even after I came to believe, there have been some awful times.

The son of the Mafiosi who had bribed Jack felt that he had to avenge his father's death. And he decided the best way to punish Jack, who wasn't connected to the mobster's murder, was to kidnap me.

Being the kind of guy he is, Jack came to my rescue. It was pretty damn spectacular. Jack in action is a sight to behold.

Later, when he was recovering from gunshot wounds (the poor guy got shot a bunch of times, but all minor—although Jack says the difference between a life-threatening wound and a flesh wound is that “my wounds are life-threatening; your wounds are flesh wounds”), I told him I loved him, and we've been living happily ever after. Sort of.

There have been a few bumps along the way. But aren't there a few bumps in every relationship?

We're engaged now. And we're already trying to have a family. Why? Because we want to. (And we're not getting any younger.)

When I was young, five- or six-years old, my friend

Nancy and I would have make-believe tea parties. We'd sit out on the porch at my house and sip imaginary tea from empty tea cups. We wore white gloves and funny little hats from Nancy's grandmother's closet. Our dolls were our "children." Nancy's kids were very well-behaved. Mine required a lot more attention. At no point in these make-believe tea parties did we ever worry about what our husbands looked like or acted like. At least, I never did.

If I had, I can tell you right now that my imaginary husband would not have been an Irish Catholic, former soldier, former Deputy Marshal who now worked for God. Actually, I could have stopped at Irish Catholic. In grade school I was surrounded by Irish Catholic boys, and there was no way I could ever have married one of them.

Okay, if I'm being completely honest—and what's the point of writing in a diary and lying to yourself?—when I was having those tea parties with Nancy, I didn't see myself getting married to a guy like Craig, either. We met a couple of years after I graduated from BC and came back to New York. He was all charm and attentiveness while we were dating. He was good-looking and funny. And—once again, I'd only be this honest in a diary—he was a pretty good lover. Of course, I said "yes" when he proposed.

After a couple of wonderful years, I was convinced we were the real deal. Then it turned out that we weren't at all. Craig got a big promotion and turned into a workaholic.

And then it finally hit me: There was someone else. I found out the way everyone finds out their spouses are cheating: A text message came into his phone while he was in the bathroom. I hated acting like a nosey snoop, but . . . I checked his phone. Another couple of texts popped onto the screen. The kind of text messages that left no doubt at all about what was going on. No doubt. Craig was cheating on me.

And that wasn't all. He was experimenting with different drugs. Cocaine, meth, even some steroids, I think. His moods were all over the place. I was never sure whether he was going to be Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde. Usually some version of Hyde.

I moved out of our apartment—oh my God, back in with my parents—and began the divorce process. And then the annulment process. Yes, you get the divorce first then the annulment. I only got the annulment to make my splitting with Craig as easy as possible for my parents. Living at home was humiliating. But it was better than living with a man who lied to me every second of every day.

I was completely shocked to find that the annulment process actually helped me get some clarity about why our marriage didn't work. Sure he cheated on me. But I had been oblivious—and happily so. I hadn't been willing to look hard at us. I didn't want to develop any self-awareness—maybe I should have begun this diary back then? Anyway, working through the annulment made

me see my part in our problems. I wished it had done the same for Craig, but he didn't seem to learn anything. He continually begged for forgiveness, pleaded with me for a second chance, and poured on all all the charm to try and get me to reconsider. I think the only reason he went along with the divorce and annulment was he thought being reasonable would be the best way to make me change my mind. It didn't change my mind. Not in the slightest.

Whenever Craig came begging, I asked, "How long were you sleeping with her?"

He was silent. Silent for a minute or so. And that silence meant there was absolutely no way I was giving him a second chance.

So, at the age of 31, I got a divorce, started my MBA at NYU, and worked with my partners to build our marketing consultancy.

I wish I could say that was the end of Craig. Mostly it has been. But Craig has never quite let go of me. He's never seemed to accept that our marriage failed. He sees himself as a loser at marriage. And Craig definitely does not see himself as a loser. And because he can't let go, he occasionally gets in touch. Voicemails, e-mails, texts. Not often, but every once in a while he reaches out again.

It had been two years since I last heard from him. Last week, I got a voicemail. Same old stuff. "I still love you." Pathetic. For crying out loud, Craig, just let it go. It's over between us and has been for a long time.

Now, dear diary, at 38, I'm engaged to a man who is literally beyond my wildest dreams or imaginings. A man who's an honest-to-God hero. And kind and amazing. Although his sense of humor could use some work.

We're hoping to get pregnant before we say "I do." That's a big Catholic no-no, but we're doing it anyway. Why? Because I love him and want to have a family with him.

Speaking of families, that's how Jack got involved with his latest client. I asked him to look after my friend Elizabeth who desperately needed help.

"Domestic violence isn't really the kind of thing I handle. Your friend should see a counselor, maybe go to a shelter. If she feels she's in danger, she should go to the police and get a restraining order," he said.

"She can't."

"Why not?"

"Because she's like thousands of other abused women who are frozen with terror."

He thought about that for a long moment.

After a while, I said, "Jack? She's terrified. He rapes her and beats her. Elizabeth knows she should leave, but he's threatened to take away their kids if she ever leaves him or reports him."

"I want to help her, but the police would be better—"

"Please, Jack. I need you to do this. Please."

He shook his head and groaned, "This is a big

mistake.”

*I gave him a hug, kissed his cheek, and whispered,
“Thank you, thank you,” between kisses.*

*It can be a very handy thing to have a boyfriend
who's a government-trained tough guy.*

1

What I really wanted to do after two weeks of surveilling Nicholas Barker was grab the guy and pound him senseless. Pound him until he was a little-blob-of-inanimate-matter senseless. Why the hostility? you may wonder. Because Barker was terrorizing his wife and threatening to kidnap their children, even as he was living in high style thanks to the fortune she inherited from her parents. I supposed there were lower forms of life than a guy like that. But I certainly didn't want to encounter them.

After telling Kim that I would help her friend Elizabeth, I spent the early part of February getting to know the friend's husband, Nicholas. My surveillance included a deep-in-the-night visit to plant some illegal recording devices in his home and clone his phone. After a couple of weeks of following him and listening into conversations in the Barker home and his personal phone calls, I could say without equivocation that he was as disgusting as maggots on rotting food.

Despite the fact that I thought the guy was personally repulsive, Barker was physically attractive. White, early thirties, six-feet tall, broad shoulders, jawline like the bow of a ship. He had played rugby in college and

kept himself in shape. Which probably accounted for the favorable impression he made with young women wherever he went. His looks and his free-spending ways allowed him to bed quite a few of those young women. Like I said, he was a repulsive human being.

On the night I chose to confront Barker, he was wearing a royal-blue Brioni suit with a black silk shirt. The shirt was open at the collar because anyone as hip as Barker never bothered with ties. When the occasion demanded it, I still wore a tie, but what can I tell you, I'm hopelessly square. Anyway, Barker's suit alone probably cost somewhere in the vicinity of \$7,500 and his shirt, shoes, and accessories could easily have added a few thousand more to the total cost of the outfit. Pretty pricey ensemble for a guy who was living off of his wife's money.

But exactly what you'd expect from someone who was convinced that the world revolved around him. Poor Nicky was about to have a life-changing experience.

On a cold Wednesday night, I followed Barker to a club called Please located in the Meatpacking District on West 13th Street. My first thought was: "Please *what?*" My second thought was: I didn't want to know. There was the obligatory velvet rope, and a doorman the size of Montana presided over the guests, deciding who to admit, stood in front of the white-brick building. I saw Barker shake the doorman's hand and subtly slipping him some money. Probably a \$100 bill, known as a "Benjamin" in the vernacular due to Ben Franklin's face on the bill and the

standard unit for paying off people in shady circles. At least that seemed to be the case in every movie or television show, and Nicholas Barker was the kind of guy who looked to TV for guidance on how to behave like a cool guy.

Whatever the denomination, it was enough. Barker and his best buddy, Alan Popovich, a very tall, skinny white guy, were allowed inside. I guesstimated Popovich's height at six feet seven or eight. But slender as angel hair pasta. He was dressed nicely in a light-gray suit with a dark-gray shirt. And no tie. Probably half the cost of Barker's outfit, but not cheap.

I walked up to the door but stayed outside of the rope, ignoring all the folks who were waiting impatiently on the line to get inside. Despite the cold weather outside, most of the men waiting outside the club didn't have coats. I guessed they were too tough to bother staying warm. Most of the women wore jackets or light coats that were left unbuttoned or unzipped to display the outfits underneath. It seemed that no matter how sexy they were, they also were too tough to worry about the cold.

“Excuse me,” I said to the doorman.

He raised the huge slab of his left hand to hold everyone in line, leaned toward me, and said, “What?”

“I'd like to go inside. Please. That's 'please' as in being courteous, not 'Please' as in the name of the club.”

He squinted in confusion and looked me over. I was wearing a navy-blue L.L. Bean parka over jeans and

Timberland boots, not exactly sartorial splendor. The doorman shook his head. “No, we got enough big white guys. Forget it.”

“The two guys you just let in were big and white.”

“Yeah. They musta used up the quota.” He smiled, very satisfied with himself.

I reached into my parka and pulled a U.S. Deputy Marshal's badge, a silver, five-pointed star inside a circle, and flashed it at him. “I'm in pursuit of a fugitive. I suggest you let me go inside.”

The doorman glared at me for a long moment, then shrugged, pulled aside the rope, and waved me on. As I passed him, he said, “Don't make any trouble.”

“Never.”

I tucked the badge back inside a pocket. I wasn't supposed to have a badge, never mind use it, but every once in a while, I was overcome with the nostalgia of being an *official* good guy and flashed it. On a less noble note, I have to admit that I liked the open-sesame convenience that the badge provided.

The first step inside the club proved to be underwhelming. Inside the front door was a dark foyer with a coat check to the left and two bathrooms to the right. The foyer opened into a huge, football-field sized space. It was a dark, square room lit by randomly aimed spotlights with color filters. A large dance floor filled the center of the room where people mingled or danced in and out of the lit areas of the club. Three walls were lined with booths, and a

few feet inside of the booths were three rows of small tables that ran parallel to the walls. The bar stretched along the fourth wall of the club. The bartenders, dressed in black shirts and pants, moved smoothly to serve the patrons. In the corner farthest from the entrance was an elevated stage where a DJ was plying her trade. The liquor bottles on the shelves behind the bar were the only splashes of color in Please. The entire place was full of shadow. Which, I supposed, was the point. Darkness to do . . . whatever people wanted to do. Very loud music, making it necessary to get very close to talk. Lots of booze to lift inhibitions. If I were in my thirties, still drinking and still single, I might have come to a place like this. But why be a slave to limitations? Barker was here tonight, and he wasn't single.

Barker and Popovich had found two women sitting at a table with two empty seats opposite them. One of the women was white with light-brown hair and huge eyes. The other was Asian, with long, thick black hair and a wide mouth. Each was dressed in a clingy sheath dress that displayed their cleavage. Even from my distant vantage point, they looked pretty damn attractive. Barker leaned over and whispered to the Asian woman. She laughed and waved at the chairs. Barker didn't need to be asked twice; he and Popovich joined the women.

Barker signaled a waiter over and ordered. The waiter smiled, probably anticipating a huge tip, and hurried to fill the order. I moseyed through the crowd in Barker's direction. More than one person looked dismissively at me.

Hey, I thought, in the Maine woods L.L. Bean is fashion-forward. And unlike you people, I'm warm and toasty in my parka.

Actually, I was becoming uncomfortably hot. A whole bunch of people dancing generated a fair amount of heat. I unzipped my parka, but that wasn't enough to cool me down so I took it off and threw it over my left arm.

The waiter returned to Barker's table with a tray containing a bottle of Cristal and four champagne flutes. I had a feeling that this evening was going according to a tried-and-true formula Barker had developed. Too bad I was about to join his party.

The instant the waiter departed, the music shifted to a slightly lower volume and gentler tempo. I couldn't begin to tell you what the song was, but as long as the volume wasn't going to force me to rupture my vocal chords, I was happy.

I stood at the Asian woman's shoulder and said, "Hello, Nicky."

Barker looked up. "Do I know you, friend?"

"Nope."

"Well, in that case, would you mind," he motioned around the table, indicating his companions. "This is a private party."

"Oh, really? Do your new acquaintances know you're married?"

The women glanced at each other and shifted uncomfortably.

“Listen, Ladies,” I continued, “if you don't mind Nicky's marital status, I'm sure *he won't* let it get in the way of enjoying your company.”

Barker forced a smile. It wasn't a happy smile. More the kind of strained expression you see on a corpse who's been worked on by an unskilled mortician. “Like I said, private party,” he responded.

“Are you asking me to leave? That hurts my feelings.”

Popovich began to stand. I reached over the table, put my hand on his shoulder, and shoved him back into his seat. It took a hell of a shove to do it, but I kept myself from grunting. “You should remain seated.”

“Don't touch me,” Popovich said. “Or I'll break you in two.”

“Oh my,” I replied. “I'm almost scared.” To Barker, “I have a message from your wife.”

“Okay, that's it,” he snarled, standing up. To the women he said, “I hope you'll wait for us. Have a drink. We'll be right back.”

“Don't count on that,” I said.

“All right, outside.”

“What? Are you and the beanpole here going to deal with me? Step outside? Really?”

“Move.” Barker said, giving me a shove toward the door.

I was only too happy to comply.

As the three of us walked out the front door, the

doorman grinned, “Got your men, Marshal?”

“Got 'em.”

Barker looked surprised but shoved me again, down the sidewalk away from Please. A few people waiting at the guest rope turned to watch us pass. When we were fifty feet or so from the club's front door, Barker asked “You're not really a damn Marshal, are you?”

“No,” I replied, pulling my parka back on.

“Good,” Popovich said and swung at me. The punch was a roundhouse right, and given the man's height, I easily ducked it. I slammed him with a quick right/left combo to the gut. He doubled over, whooping for breath. I kicked him in the balls, which gave him something truly worth whooping about. He staggered a few steps and collapsed on the sidewalk.

I glanced back at the club. At least three people had their phones in their hands, apparently recording the fight. I hoped they had caught Popovich's first swing.

“I wasn't a U.S. Marshal. I was a Deputy. There's a difference.”

Barker couldn't take his eyes off his friend. Then he took a deep breath, did a reset on his manliness, and said, “A Deputy. Wow. Why don't you get lost, *Deputy?*”

“I need to deliver a message to you first. Then I will happily depart.”

“Listen to you. 'Happily depart.' Fine. Give me your damn message and get lost.”

I grinned as I spoke: “As of tonight, your wife,

Elizabeth, had the locks changed. She also got an order of protection—you can't go within one hundred feet of her. While she was at it, she's filed for divorce. You'll be served with papers any day now.

“Last but not least, your money supply—actually your wife's money—is now out of your reach. A friend of mine is a crackerjack forensic accountant and helped Elizabeth transfer all of your joint accounts into a new, secure portfolio that only she can access. *Annnnnnd* . . . your credit cards have been canceled. At this exact moment in time, you've got bupkis.”

“You're full of shit.”

“You don't even have enough money to pay for the Cristal you left on the table. It's none of my business, but if I were you, I'd start scouting park benches to sleep on.”

He growled something unintelligible and charged me. I expected his making a move, but he was very fast and it suited my purposes to let him attack me. But I hadn't counted on him barreling into me like a rhinoceros crashing into a Land Rover on safari. Must have been all that college rugby.

Barker' lifted me off my feet and carried me backward, slamming me into the side of a parked car. I saw stars, and it became hard to breathe as Barker pummeled my mid-section with quick, fierce jabs. It was hard to breathe. I realized that I was seconds away from passing out. Hey, Tyrrell, why not go with that?

I slid down the side of the car and slumped

forward, my head coming to rest against his chest. Barker stopped hitting me, and his hands gripped my upper arms to steady me, probably to prepare for more pummeling.

I snapped my head straight up, the top of my skull connecting with great force against Barker's chin. He dropped his grip on my arms and staggered away from me. I stood up and stepped forward, preparing to lay him out with a right. I never got to throw that punch.

Popovich, long, tall Popovich, tackled me, toppling us both to the sidewalk. Thank God he was thin because he landed on top of me, and if he'd been any heavier, I would have passed out. As it was, I was gasping for breath, and my vision was blurry. I rolled to my right to try to free myself, but he shifted his weight to stop me. That was his mistake. The instant I felt him shift, I rolled to the left. He was overbalanced, couldn't adjust quickly enough, and I was out from under him, rolling away and pushing myself to my feet.

He jumped to his feet and came toward me in an exaggerated fighter's crouch. When you're as tall as he was, you didn't give away your height advantage if you knew what you were doing. He clearly didn't know.

Popovich came at me with his fists up, his right hand in close to his face, guarding his jaw. I feinted with my right. He overcommitted to warding off my blow with his left, and I threw a left jab into his right fist. His own hand bashed him in the chin. It wasn't enough to knock him out, but he was stunned. For a half-second he dropped both

fists a little bit, and I hit him with a tremendous right hook. He went down like an Acapulco cliff diver disappearing into the surf below La Quebrada cliffs.

There was no time to gloat. I spun around to find Barker, who had probably recovered since I had applied my head to his chin. Yup. He was recovered. He charged me just like before. I twisted sideways. He rushed past me, his shoulder bumping me in the chest. I staggered, and Barker wheeled around and swung quickly at me. For a rushed punch it was pretty damn solid. He connected with my jaw, and I went down.

He dropped on top of me, his knees digging into my belly, pushing all the air out of my lungs. I blocked a left jab, but he hit me with a solid right. The punch banged the back of my head off the sidewalk. This fight was not going according to plan. My plan, anyway.

When in doubt, I go for the eyes. I curled my fingers in claws and shot them toward his face. Barker swatted away my right hand, but my left reached his right eye. I gouged his upper cheek and eye socket. He screamed in pain and yanked himself away from me.

Police sirens wailed as they approached. Okay, Tyrrell, time to end this dance. Barker and I were both on our feet now. We circled each other for a moment, fists up, looking for an opening. He swung, and I dropped to the sidewalk, below his punch, and with a scythe-like kick swept his legs out from under him.

Barker crashed to the sidewalk, and now it was his

head bouncing off the ground. I sat on his chest and pinned his shoulders with my knees. The gentlemanly thing to do would have been to wait for the police. But I didn't feel gentlemanly. I pounded him with a ferocious jab that hammered his head back into the ground. He lay very still, with blood dripping from his nose.

I stood, walked to the nearest car, and leaned against it. I dug into my parka pocket, found some tissue, and dabbed at my own cuts, and thought: Tyrrell, maybe this should be the last favor of this sort that you do for Kim.

Harry appeared at my side. He didn't fade into view, or suddenly pop in like a jump cut in a movie. He was just . . . there. Harry wasn't the lean against the car, exhausted and bleeding type. He was looking sharp as ever in a dark suit and tie under a woolen overcoat. His smooth black skin had no wrinkles whatsoever.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Do I look all right?”

“You've looked worse.”

“You are *such* a comfort.”

“Would you like me to take you out of here before the police arrive?”

“Definitely not. These heinous brutes attacked poor little old me, and I want to make a statement to the police.”

“Does that mean you also don't want me obscuring your face on any of the videos,” he turned and pointed in the direction of the club, “that onlookers took?”

“Right. I'm hoping that there are some pretty clear videos that show that these two goons attacked me. That way Barker gets locked up for assault.”

“Which would be even better than his wife's order of protection.”

“That's what I'm thinking. Even if it's assault in the third degree, he'll get a year in jail.”

“And the District Attorney might be more inclined to believe his wife's story of assault and rape,” Harry added.

“Yup.”

He glanced at the folks in front of Please, “I can safely say that there will be several crystal-clear videos.”

“Thank you.”

He shook his head and pointed up.

I followed his finger and gazed to the night sky. “Thank you.”

* * *

The 6th Precinct was on West 10th Street in between Bleecker and Hudson Streets. The squat, functional precinct house sat in the midst of lovely brownstones in Greenwich Village.

A uniformed cop escorted me inside to the desk of Detective Charlie Winfield, a short, stocky African American with a well-trimmed mustache, wearing a tan

suit.

“Here's your guy, Detective,” said my escort.

“I got him,” Winfield said. “Thanks.” He gestured to the metal chair with a vague hint of upholstery on the seat.

“Wow, the deluxe treatment,” I said.

“Take the chair or don't. This isn't my shift. I'm here as a favor to you.”

“Thanks for the favor.” I took the chair. “Sorry to ruin your evening.”

“The Knicks were ruining my evening.”

“Yeah, they tend to do that these days.”

“Yeah. So what's up with you and these two guys at the club—Please?”

“That's the place.”

“What were you doing there? Besides causing trouble.”

“I didn't start anything.”

“You sure as hell finished it.”

“Well, that's just a result of all that fine training I received from the U.S. government.”

“Yeah, right. So what were you doing there and why'd the fight start?”

“I followed Barker into Please. Asked him if we could talk, and he insisted on taking it outside where he and his buddy, Popovich, jumped me.”

“They jumped you?”

“Absolutely.”

“Two good-sized guys make the first move on you, and they both end up unconscious on the sidewalk, while you got a boo boo.”

“I don't think that's a fair assessment of the injuries I sustained.”

“My nose bleeds for you,” he smiled, handing me a box of sanitary wipes. I used a couple to clean my face and hands as he continued to speak, “Anyway, bystanders at the club confirm your story, and we even got some video from a couple of them. Which means you're the innocent victim. But you haven't told me why you were there.”

“That's confidential.”

“Cut the crap.”

“Hey, I was behaving in a totally law-abiding fashion and then two people attacked me. My reason for being there is not germane.”

“Oh, *excuse me*, it's *not* germane.”

“It's not.”

“Law abiding?”

“That's me.”

“What about the Marshal's badge you flashed at the door? Before you say you didn't, you were caught on the security camera.”

“I'd love to respond with a witheringly clever remark—”

“But you can't come up with one.”

“No. So, I'm going to take the Fifth.”

He laughed. “I had you going there, didn't I?”

“Yes.”

“Do me a favor and don't go flashing a badge around, will ya?”

“Okay.”

I heard a female voice behind me. “If everything's okay, may I take him home now?” Kim Gannon stepped over to Winfield's desk. “Hello, Detective.”

“Nice to see you, Ms. Gannon. Would you please remove your boyfriend from the premises?”

“It will be my pleasure.”

“Thanks, Charlie,” I said.

“Next time, please beat people up in some other precinct, okay?”

“I'll try, but no promises.”