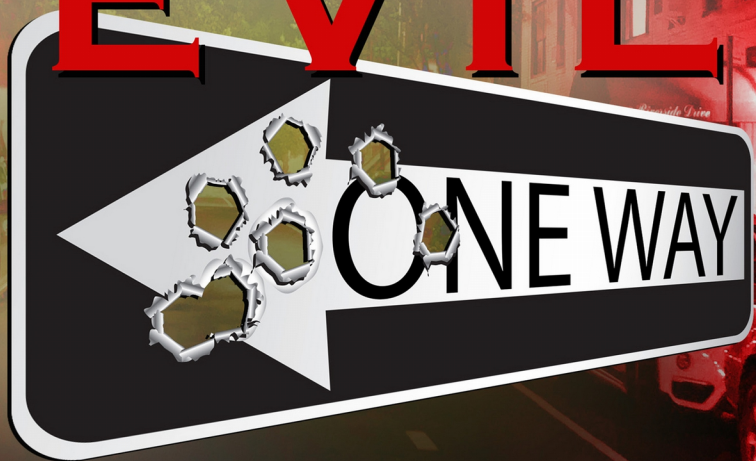


GEOFF  
LOFTUS

TURN FROM  
**EVIL**



A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL

Turn from evil and do good;  
seek peace and pursue it.

Psalms 34:15

**The New American Bible  
with Revised New Testament and Psalms**

# 1

Until the woman staggered in front of my SUV, it had been a magical night driving through gently falling snow.

The first hours of a late night snowfall were lovely in Manhattan. Everything was quiet, and the sidewalks and streets were covered by a clean, white coating about an inch thick. The Hudson River flowed by on my left, its black surface rippling with occasional reflected light from the Jersey side. I was driving north on West Street at 1:07 A.M. There was almost no traffic, but the snow slowed down what traffic there was. I couldn't speak for any other drivers, but I definitely didn't want to skid out and bang up my cousin's brand new Subaru Forester. I was headed to my fiancée's apartment after a late night of work, and in the morning Kim and I were driving in our borrowed vehicle to Bucks County for the weekend. All was right with my world.

At which point the woman ran, stumbling and sliding on the snowy road, about 20 feet directly in front of me.

I slammed on the brakes. The Forester skidded slightly, but the anti-lock braking system kicked in and

quickly brought the vehicle to a stop. As soon as the car halted, the woman ran the last few steps toward me and ducked down behind the hood on my side of the SUV.

Bullets thudded into the passenger side of the car. So much for returning my cousin's brand new Subaru in pristine condition. I had some uncharitable thoughts about the shooter, whoever he or she was.

More bullets shattered the front and back windows on the passenger side. I could have sworn I felt the breeze of a bullet passing by my chin. I pushed my door open and dropped to the snowy roadway. I shut the door and looked at the woman, who was only a few feet to my left, crouched behind the front tire. At this point in the proceedings, it would have been a really good thing if I could have pulled out a gun and returned fire. Unfortunately, I only carry a gun when I'm pretty damn sure I will need one. How could I have foreseen my current predicament?

The gunfire had ceased.

"Are you all right?" I asked the woman.

"They're trying to kill me," she replied, her voice husky with fear.

"I got that. Are you okay?"

"Yes . . . yes."

"Good. Stay here." I poked my head up and peered through the Subaru's broken windows.

Two men were coming toward us from Bank Street. I saw they were carrying pistols and other than the fact that they were linebacker size, I couldn't tell anything

else about them. One of them must have spotted me because I heard the burping sound of suppressed gunfire and the ping of a bullet bouncing off of the vehicle's roof rack. I dropped out of sight below the driver's side window sill.

A Mercedes sedan slowly rolled past us headed south, and a Chevy Suburban cruised at a slightly higher speed north. The Suburban slowed a tiny bit as he went by us but kept going. Guess the driver figured he should mind his own damn business.

“How do we get out of here?” the woman asked, her voice rising toward panic. Her question and her panicked reaction both seemed reasonable to me. But my fiancée thinks I'm a tough guy, which means I'm not supposed to panic in ugly situations like this one. That left me with no option but to launch a counter-attack.

I peeked through the blown-out windows one more time. The guys were on the sidewalk of West Street, maybe 20 feet away from us. They had spread out; they were going to go around the front and back of the Subaru. I crouched down on the street.

I leaned in close to the woman and whispered in her ear, “I'm going under the car. As soon as you can follow me, crawl under, just far enough to be out of sight.”

“But they'll look for me there.”

“No, they won't.” I didn't wait for her answer but slithered under the Subaru toward the rear bumper. Thanks to the vehicle's high ground clearance, it was a lot easier to

do this than under, say, a Ferrari 308 GTS. But it was still a tight fit and we didn't have a lot of time. I felt the woman brushing my right leg as she followed me.

As a pair of booted feet walked past my face, I shot my right arm out, grabbed the near ankle, and pulled hard. The man crashed heavily to the road. I grasped the bumper with my left hand in an underhanded grip and yanked my upper body out from under the car.

The other man shouted, but I ignored him. The man I had toppled was rolling away from the vehicle, which meant that he had to roll onto his left side, then his belly, and then onto his right side—with his gun hand— before coming to a position where he could shoot me. My legs were still under the Subaru; I planted both hands in the snow and thrust myself into a horizontal lunge. I grabbed the man's gun hand just as it came out from under his rolling body.

I jerked the gun up and away from me. In the same instant, the man pulled the trigger. Twice. Two harsh belching noises as the gun fired. And an almost simultaneous man's grunt. I heard the thud of a body against the Subaru followed immediately by the softer thud on the ground.

I had my hands full—literally—with the hands and gun of the very energetic man. Underneath his bulky winter parka, he was a big, strong man, and he was doing his absolute best to turn his gun on me. The nerve of this guy. He dropped his left hand from the gun and jabbed me in the

gut. It wasn't an ideal way to throw a punch, for which I was thankful, because it still hurt plenty. And even though I now had him out-handed two to one, I still couldn't gain control of his pistol.

I kneed him in the groin. It wasn't the best knee to the balls I've ever delivered, but he grimaced in pain, and his eyes began watering. Then I head-butted him, catching him in the nose and snapping his head back. I wrenched the gun from his hand and stuck it under his chin.

“Stop,” I said.

He stopped clutching for the gun and moving around.

“Now listen,” I said. “I know what you're thinking. This gun under your chin would be awfully easy to grab. But given that I'm tough enough to have taken it away from you, you might want to consider that I'm tough enough and fast enough to blow your head clean off. So you need to ask yourself, do I feel lucky?”

“Really?” he growled. “You're doing fucking Clint Eastwood?”

I shoved the gun harder under his chin.

“Okay, okay,” he said, his growl lessening in ferocity. “I won't move.”

“No, you can move. You can roll away from me. But don't stand up.”

As he rolled, I did, in fact, stand up. I glanced over quickly at the other man, who'd caught the two bullets fired by my wrestling buddy. He'd been shot in the chest and was

as dead as the proverbial doornail. I scooped up the dead man's gun and put it in one of my parka's large pockets.

I returned my attention to the first man. Not only was he big and strong, he was fast. He had a small pistol—maybe a Walther PPK?—in his right hand. Still lying on the ground, he had the gun aimed squarely at my chest. I had only looked away for the briefest instant, yet this guy had gotten the drop on me.

“Drop the guns,” he said.

“You first.” I resisted the almost overwhelming temptation to bring my gun up and fire.

“Drop your gu—” he repeated but stopped as a Ford Explorer drove by on the southbound side of the road. His eyes diverted for a second, and by the time they returned to focus on me, I had my gun aimed at him. Turns out that I'm not exactly slow either.

Police sirens cut through the night air. They sounded far away, but that might have been an acoustical trick of the snowfall.

We continued staring at each other; our guns never wavering.

The sirens were definitely getting louder.

Even in the darkness, I saw the man's eyes glitter and his jaw tighten.

We fired at the same time.

The bullet tore at my left side, a few inches above my hip. The force of the shot spun me around and smashed me against the side of the Subaru. Somehow my legs did



not buckle. I was able to push myself erect and turned to face the gunman.

He was flat on his back in the road, eyes wide open to the falling snow. I walked to him very slowly, knelt, and felt for a pulse. Nothing. There was a hole in his coat over his upper left chest. I'd shot him through the heart.

The police sirens were very loud now. I looked up to see the colors of the emergency lights bouncing off the faces of the buildings on Bank Street.

I managed to stand and walk back over to the Subaru.

“You can come out now,” I said, leaning over and extending my left hand.

The woman grabbed my hand, and I pulled her out from under the vehicle. She stood up. For the first time I took note of her appearance: She was a very tall, about five foot nine or ten, very pretty Black woman. That was about all that registered before I slumped against the SUV.

“You've been hurt,” she said, grabbing my arms, tried to hold me up, but it was no use. I slid to the ground and passed out.

\* \* \*

I woke up to the sound of a patient monitor. There were a couple of nicely undulating lines in bright green stretching across the screen. Still alive and well, as Johnny Winter used to sing.

“Hey there.”

I turned my head slowly toward Kim's soft voice and smiled. “Hey there, yourself. Everyone who wakes up in a hospital should get to see you first thing.”

“You say that to all your fiancées.”

“Every last one of them.”

Kim Gannon was, in fact, wondrous to behold even when I wasn't waking up in a hospital bed. Long red hair, sparkling blue eyes, a wide mouth—and a dazzling smile. And just to clear up any confusion, she was my one and only fiancée.

“Where am I? What time is it? What day? What kind of shape am I in?”

“Since I don't agree with the order of your questions, first I will tell you that you're not too bad. You were shot in the left love handle. The doctor said it looks as if you've been shot there before.”

“I have. It was no fun the first time either.”

“This time around you lost a lot of blood, but other than quite a few more stitches and a new, bigger, badder scar, you're fine.”

“Place, day, and time?”

“Beth Israel. First Avenue and 16<sup>th</sup> Street. Wednesday afternoon. You were out for a little more than 12 hours.”

“Have you been here long?”

“A little more than 12 hours. The police found an emergency contact card in your wallet.”

“With your name on it.”

“Amazing how that works.”

“When am I being released?”

“Probably today.”

“Would you mind taking me back to your place and overwhelming me with tender loving care?”

“Can you lay it on any thicker?”

“I can try if you really want me to.”

“No thanks. Yes, I'll take you home and make sure you are cared for.”

“Cappuccino on demand all day long?”

“There'd better not be any demanding.”

“I can see why you'd feel that way. Listen, on another topic, what happened to the young woman who was with me last night? And the two guys who attacked us? Are the police going to be stopping by before I'm released?”

“You sure have a lot of questions for a guy who just woke up from a 12-hour nap.”

“A 12-hour, blood-loss-induced nap. And, of course, I have a lot of questions. Wouldn't you want to know about the guys who shot you? And the woman they were chasing?”

“Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't know any of the details. I am, however, supposed to call Charlie Winfield at the 6<sup>th</sup> Precinct as soon as you're ready to talk. Which seems to be now.” She pulled her phone and a business card from her purse and dialed.

“Hello, Detective Winfield—yes, sorry, Charlie.”

She paused.

“He seems to be okay. But you know how hard that is to determine with Jack.”

“*I can hear you,*” I faux-whined.

“Yes,” Kim said, ignoring me, “I think he'd be happy to see you. . . . That's fine . . . we'll see you in a little while.”

She tucked her phone and Charlie's card back in her purse and treated me to that amazing smile as if that made everything okay. I have to admit: It made everything okay for me.

“Charlie will be over here in a few minutes. You can pester him with all your questions.”

“I'm not pestering—I was shot for crying out loud.”

“And now you're going to use that as the reason for getting every single thing you want.”

“It's worth a shot.”

“Pun intended.”

“Of course.”

“So . . . will getting shot get me my way on everything for the next few days?”

“It might not get you what you want for the next few minutes.”

“You're so mean.”

She deadpanned her reply: “Yes. I am.”

“I think I'm going back to sleep now.”

“You are such a baby.”

Two hospital staffers appeared at the door of my room at that point. A short, freckled-face nurse in scrubs asked me how I felt, nodded when I said “fine,” and then checked all my vitals quickly and efficiently. A thin white orderly set lunch on a plastic tray on the bed table that stretched over my legs.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Starving.”

“Too bad,” he said, pointing at the tray and grimacing.

“Boy, you really know how to sell the cuisine,” I replied.

The orderly shrugged and walked out the door. As the nurse finished jotting down numbers on my chart, she said, “Eat hearty.” She followed the orderly out of the room.

I said to Kim, “Did you hire those two especially for me?”

“I wish I could take the credit. When the EMS team brought you here, Charlie Winfield was waiting. He told them you were law enforcement and should be given the best possible care.”

“I guess I—”

“Was a bloody mess—” Kim interrupted unnecessarily.

“Charlie probably felt that it was pointless to state that I was *former* law-enforcement.”

“Are you going to eat?”

“Yes,” I grumbled.

Lunch was a bowl of tepid tomato soup—a poor color choice for a hospital meal in my opinion—some crackers that were as tasteless as Holy Communion wafers, and a glass of orange juice. There was also a small cup of what appeared to be chocolate pudding. At least, I told myself it was chocolate pudding and not some other mushy brown substance.

I inhaled the soup, tried one cracker and gave up, and all but sucked the pudding out of its cup. As the orderly had said when he served the meal, “Too bad.” At least it gave me some calories to burn.

“I’ve seen dogs eat with greater delicacy than you do as you consume your lunch.”

“Yeah, well, were the dogs—”

“Shot before they ate?” Kim finished my sentence.

“Exactly.” I was triumphant. It was a short-lived victory.

“You’re using a bullet wound as an excuse to behave worse than a dog?”

“Well . . . it sounds bad when you put it that way.”

“Is there a way to put it that doesn’t sound bad?”

“No, there isn’t,” interjected Detective First Class Charles Winfield of the NYPD. Winfield was around five feet eight, stocky, and Black. He had a well-trimmed mustache, and was wearing a dark suit with no tie under his winter coat. He walked into the room at just the right moment to halt Kim’s mocking. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ll be fine once I get a cup of coffee and some real food in me.”

“Maybe later,” Charlie said lackadaisically. This wasn’t the first time he’d seen me in an emergency medical situation. He pulled a small digital recorder out of his pocket and turned it on.

“For the record, this is Detective Charles Winfield, and I’m speaking to John Tyrrell.”

“It’s Jack. No one calls me John.”

“Sorry, *Jack*. Can you give me the details of what happened last night?”

“First, can you tell me the woman’s name and if she is all right.”

He nodded. “Her name is Courtney Wilson. And she is fine. According to her, you saved her life.”

“Oh no,” Kim sighed. “Another woman who thinks Jack is a life saver.”

“Excuse me, but I *did* save her life. Who were the bozos chasing her?”

“No ID on their bodies. We’re running fingerprints and DNA now. Hopefully, we’ll get a hit. One of them had a cell phone, a burner, recently activated. Only had three calls to another burner. We’re getting the records to see what cell towers the calls pinged, but for the moment we have nothing on these guys. Now, would you mind telling me what happened.”

“I was driving north on West Street, driving very slowly thanks to the snow. This woman came running out

of one of the side streets—Bank Street, I think—”

“Yes,” Charlie affirmed.

“So, she came running out of Bank Street, right in front of my car, actually my cousin's car . . . is it a total wreck?”

“No. But it's going to be a hell of a repair bill, and who knows when the car will be released from evidence.”

“Ugh. My cousin is going to be very disappointed with me.”

“Just buy him a new car,” Kim said sweetly.

“You're no help.”

“If you don't mind . . .” Charlie said. “I need to hear your story. Ms. Wilson was in front of your car. . . .”

“Right. She froze in the middle of the road, and, yes, the 'froze' pun was intended, and I skidded to a stop just before hitting her. She ducked down behind the hood on the driver's side. The side nearest the Hudson River and farthest from the bad guys.

“I heard bullets hitting the Subaru and got the hell out as quickly as I could. The goons came up Bank Street toward us. I slithered under the SUV—thank God for high ground clearance—and told Ms. Wilson to follow me.”

“I gotta stop you,” Charlie said. “Are you telling me you attacked two armed men from under a car?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“How?”

“One went to the front, the other to the rear. I went to the rear, tripped the guy who was there, and scrambled



out on top of him. We struggled for control of his weapon, and he shot the other guy when he attempted to shoot me—”

“That was a lucky break,” Charlie commented.

“It *was* a lucky break. Anyway, Bad Guy No. 1 shot Bad Guy No. 2. I punched No. 1, took his gun away, he pulled a second gun—this guy was really fast—and then we had an old-fashioned shoot out. A quick-draw contest. He lost.”

“Wow,” Charlie sighed. “You are either incredibly lucky or incredibly good.”

“Or both,” Kim said.

“Or both,” Charlie agreed. He snapped the recorder off and tucked it back into his suit jacket. “Ballistics is no doubt going to find the bad guys' bullets in your car, excuse me, your cousin's car, and the bad guys' bullets in each other.”

“Did you find the bullet that went through my left side?”

“No. The crime-scene techs calculated the angles on all the shots. They determined that your bullet went through your side and carried out over the river.”

“May I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Do you have any idea why the bad guys were chasing Ms. Wilson? Why were they trying to kill her?”

“No idea,” Charlie said. “She’s the general manager for a big-time art dealer. Place called the Borgen-Meijer Gallery. Ms. Wilson oversees accounting, shipping, private sales, IT, security, and auctions—all the logistical stuff.”

“No customer-facing duties?” Kim asked. Leave it to my fiancée the consultant to inquire about the customers.

“None,” he turned to me, “and before you ask, no spouse, no boyfriends, no family issues. She works long hours, goes to the gym a couple of times a week, sees friends for meals and movies.”

“Does she have any digital footprint?” I asked. “Social media? Dating app? Maybe she has a digital stalker.”

“Doesn’t look like it,” Charlie shook his head. “She has a Facebook account that she doesn’t use much. She was on a dating app but canceled her account a few months ago.”

“Do her parents have money? Could the two guys have been trying to kidnap her?”

“Comfortably middle class, but nothing to suggest their daughter would be a profitable kidnap victim.”

“Maybe it was a robbery gone bad?” Kim asked.

“Two professional bad guys randomly go after a lone woman on a snowy night?” I responded to her question with a question—bad form, I know.

Charlie was shaking his head again, “It's possible but not very likely.” He directed the next question to me: “You sure they were pros?”

“Oh yeah. A very capable pair.”

“Too bad they ran into someone more capable.”

“That's my Jack,” Kim grinned.

“Thank you.” I let my mind wander for a second then asked, “Why Bank Street? Does she live there?”

“No, she was leaving the gallery, which is at the intersection of Greenwich and Bank Streets, noticed the guys following her, and ran. Bank Street was just her escape route.”

“To summarize: Two unknown men, both professionals, chase and attempt to kill a young woman for no apparent motive.”

“Yes, that's accurate.”

“Are you providing protection for her?”

“She's staying with a friend tonight. A squad car will be outside the building all night. And with that,” Charlie extended his hand to me, “I'm going to say goodbye.” We shook, and Kim kissed him on the cheek.

“Tomorrow?” Charlie asked me, “6<sup>th</sup> Precinct to sign your statement?”

“Yup.”

“Thanks. And you are one lucky son of a—”

“Stop right there,” Kim said, smiling.

“Okay.” He nodded again, walked to the door, looked at me and shook his head, and left.

Kim came and sat in a standard-issue visitors chair with a tiny bit of a seat cushion. At least it was right next to the bed. She held my hand. “Maybe you should call your cousin and tell him about his car.”

“You're really looking forward to that, aren't you?”

“I hate to admit it but . . . yes, I am.”

“Sadist.” I shifted in the bed, trying and failing to get more comfortable. “I guess you had to cancel the reservations for our stay at the cozy B&B in Bucks County.”

“Yes. But you heal up, and I'll take you later.”

“Promises, promises.”

She squeezed my hand, let go, and stood up. “What do you say to my seeing if I can get you sprung from this place?”

“Sprung? We're not breaking out of prison.”

She pointed at my lunch. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, please get me sprung before dinner time,” I said enthusiastically.

Three hours later, I was happily ensconced on the couch in Kim's living room with a cup of cappuccino in one hand and the TV remote in the other. I sipped my hot beverage and contemplated what to do—if anything—with the television. Despite the caffeine, I felt sleepy. If I read a book, I'd definitely conk out and wouldn't remember the

couple of pages I drowsily made my way through before nodding off. If I watched TV, I'd probably conk out, too, but it wouldn't matter what I was watching before I nodded off.

Kim walked into the room and saved me from the necessity of making a decision. “Why do you think those guys were going after Ms. Wilson?”

“I honestly don't have any idea. I guess she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“But wouldn't Charlie be able to figure that out from talking to her?”

“Maybe. The last few days or weeks might seem totally normal to her. She might not have a clue what she saw or heard that would make someone want to kill her.”

“Really?”

“You got any better ideas?”

“No. But I'm not—”

I joined her in saying, “—a government-trained private detective cum troubleshooter.”

I then added, “With all due respect to you as the creator of that wonderful tagline, I think it's time to retire it.”

“It still captures the essence of what you do.” She was standing in front of the couch, which I felt put me at a distinct disadvantage so I began to get up. Kim put out her hand as if to press me down back into the couch. “Don't stand up. You're too tall. It's better when I'm higher than you.”

“Easier to talk down to me?” I grinned.

“Yes, actually.”

That created an awkward pause.

Finally, I said, “You think your tagline is my essence? I think I am more than that tagline.”

“Okay, it's not the sum total of who you are and what you do, but it's not a bad descriptor. Until . . .”

“Until what?”

“Until it's not.”

“What does that mean?” A hard edge crept into my voice.

“Until you're not righting wrongs anymore. Until you retire from your work with Harry for the Chairman.”

“And you're hoping that will be very soon?”

“I'm saying that using the government-trained private detective cum troubleshooter tagline is a hell of a lot easier than using your mission statement: You're a righter of wrongs who works in partnership with an angel named Harry and reports—through Harry—to the Chairman, also known as God.”

“You didn't answer my question. Are you hoping that I will retire soon?”

“Come on, Jack,” Kim pleaded sadly, “you know I want you to retire. You've done enough. You've saved lives. You've righted wrongs. Isn't it time for you to have a normal life with me? A life where all we worry about is how soon our kid's broken arm is going to heal? Or whether or not she'll get into the college she wants to go to?”

No more fretting about getting killed by psychopathic bad guys.”

“I wouldn't say I *fret* about getting killed—”

She interrupted me, “You're not as funny as you think you are. And you *know* what I *mean*. Don't you think you've done your fair share of good deeds? Is it wrong to want to be able to have a family? Keep all the future good-deed doing inside our home?”

“But . . . but I feel *called* to do this work. It's not just some job.”

“I get that. I really do. But does the fact that it's a calling mean it's a lifelong thing? After all, you're not getting any younger. Assuming the next bullet or knife or bomb doesn't kill—”

“I get it, I get it,” I said holding up my hands to ward off anymore talk of fatal possibilities.

Kim sighed, “Assuming you aren't stopped by death or injury, you still aren't going to be able to do this forever. At some point don't you think the Chairman expects you to leave this calling behind and answer a different call?”

“I suppose. . . .” It was pretty hard to argue with her logic. My shelf life as a righter of wrongs, even with all my Special Forces and U.S. Marshals Service training, was not likely to endure forever.

“Can I ask a question about another but closely related topic?”

“Of course.”

“How do you feel about the two men that you killed?”

“Well, I only killed one of them, and I didn't really know him very well—”

“Don't!” she cut me off sharply. “Don't make a joke about it.”

“Sorry.”

Kim sat down next to me on the couch and took my hand. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you, but . . .”

“Look, it makes perfect sense that you're still feeling raw after what happened with Cecilia St. John only a couple of weeks ago. Killing someone—even when you're saving a life, even when it's *my* life—leaves you hurt for a long time. Eventually you'll find it easier to live with the pain.”

“Do you already feel 'easier' about the man you killed last night?”

“Actually, it was the wee hours of this morning.”

Kim frowned at me.

“Uh, I haven't really processed it,” I said. “I passed out from blood loss within minutes of shooting him. And I'm going to try to stay focused on the fact that I saved Courtney Wilson's life.”

“And I should focus on the fact that I saved your life?”

“It'll probably help. A little.”

“You've killed a lot of people, and I'm sure they all deserved it,” she said with a bittersweet grin, “but how do



you live with it?”

“Until recently, I didn't live with it all that well. Look, I came back from Afghanistan with PTSD. I didn't get any help and drank myself silly. Then my wife was killed, and I got even worse.”

“And then Maggie appeared to you as a ghost and saved you.”

“Yes. She showed me the way to a different life. Now I help people in trouble, see a shrink, go to AA meetings, and have a relationship with a wonderful woman.”

“Do you think I should see a shrink?”

“It might help. Do you want me to ask mine if he would see you?”

“Is that a good idea? The two of us seeing the same therapist?”

“I don't know what the professional ethics of the situation are, but he's the only therapist who knows about my work with Harry for the Chairman. Harry referred me to him because he works for the Chairman, too. That might make it easier for you to talk to him about *everything*.”

We sat in silence for a while, holding hands.

After a few moments Kim leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Please ask your doctor if he'll see me.”

“I will.”

She pulled my mug out of my hand, stood up, and asked if I wanted another cappuccino.

“Always.”

She smiled, leaned over and kissed me again, and walked off to the kitchen.

I gazed up at the ceiling as if that was where the Chairman resided. "God, please help her. Please."

\* \* \*

***From Kim Gannon's Diary:***

*I had to shoot Cecilia St. John. She had a gun on Jack and was going to kill him. It was the only thing I could do.*

*But . . . oh my God . . . I've never felt this kind of pain before. Killing her was the worst thing I've ever done.*

*Jack's been so kind. He listens to me. He holds my hand. He makes gentle suggestions about my getting help. He tells me about his own struggles after killing someone. He tells me repeatedly, patiently.*

*And he does all this despite our sex life having died the same night Cecilia did. I just can't bring myself to . . . make love with him. Too much death.*

*And then he goes and gets shot. Two men come out of nowhere, guns blazing, and Jack rescues a damsel in distress and gets shot! His rescue of the woman is so Jack, and it's why I love him. But he could have been killed. Again. How much violence is a fiancée supposed to put up with?*

*I still want to marry him. And have a family with him. I think. I mean, I think I still do. Maybe this is just emotional inertia? A body in motion remains in motion until something stops it. A feeling—like the desire to marry and create a family—continues until something stops the feeling.*

*I'm terrified that I don't actually love Jack anymore. That I don't want to get married. But I just can't admit it to myself. Maybe all my doubts are symptoms of PTSD after killing Cecilia?*

*How could I not love Jack? If I don't really love him, why am I still pushing him to retire from his work with Harry? Is that just another case of emotional inertia?*

*And throughout all this, Jack has been understanding and patient. He hasn't pressed me to have sex. Or impatience anytime I bring up the subject of his retiring.*

*If Jack promised to retire now, would that make everything better? Would it wipe away all my doubts and jump-start our sex life?*

*I have this anxious feeling that it wouldn't. Our problems go deeper than his calling. My problems go deeper than that.*

\* \* \*

Most people who felt pretty damn good less than

24 hours after getting out of the hospital would be happy. But not me. My near-miraculous recovery had left me with a sense of foreboding. Two cups of cappuccino were not sufficient to wipe away the clouds of gloom and doom. So, when Kim began her work day by walking down the hall to her office, I made another cappuccino and called for Harry.

He appeared, as he always did, instantaneously. There was no sense of popping into place. No fade in. No beaming in a la the transporter in *Star Trek*. One second he wasn't there, and the next second, he was. Harry had been whooshing in and out of my life for almost 2 years, but I was far from blasé about his instantaneous comings and goings. Harry was Black, about six feet, slender, always well-dressed. His smooth skin had no wrinkles, and his hair had no gray. Despite his fortyish appearance, I guessed he was thousands of years old.

“Do you require my assistance with your third cappuccino?” he asked.

“Of course not. And you *do realize* how creepy it is that you know how much caffeine I've had this morning, don't you?”

“I am well aware that you find it creepy.”

“Which you enjoy immensely.”

“I think immensely is a strong word . . .”

I finished frothing my milk and poured it over the espresso in my mug. I kept trying to create a leaf pattern in the milk the way many baristas do but failed again. Oh well, it would taste good.

“What the hell happened the other night?” I asked.

“You are referring to the contretemps on West Street?”

“I got shot not quite 24 hours ago, and I feel fantastic today. Has the Chairman cured me so that I'm ready for my next client? Is Courtney Wilson that next client?”

“If you choose to help her.”

“I think I'm way past *choosing*. I killed a man to save her life.”

Harry shrugged.

“Do you think you could introduce me to my clients without bullets flying?”

“I could . . .”

I took a large sip of my cappuccino. Warm. Delicious. Soothing. “What's the deal with Ms. Wilson?”

“The deal?”

“Don't be obtuse for the sake of messing with me.”

“I am not obtuse. I don't know what her *deal* is.”

“You don't know why two professionals tried to kill her.”

“No. I do know that the fact that two men attempted to murder her is a strong indicator that she needs the kind of aid only you can deliver.”

“Only *me*? Oh, don't worry. *No pressure*, Tyrrell. *Free will*.”

“As you say.”

“Okay. Of course I'll take her case. But are you

telling me that you don't know any more about her than I do?"

"Exactly."

I sighed. Harry didn't react to my theatrical exhale.

"Would you mind taking me to my apartment after I finish my cuppa, then to the 6<sup>th</sup> Precinct? I know I don't *need* your help to get there, but . . .," I gently rubbed my wounded side and frowned.

"You are pathetic."

"And you are an angel."

I finished my cappuccino, rinsed the mug, left it in the sink, and headed to Kim's office. I knocked softly on the door and entered when I heard, "Come in."

I leaned into the office. "I'm off to work—"

Kim looked up from her computer. "Are you going to help Courtney Wilson?"

"Well, first I'm going to the 6<sup>th</sup> Precinct."

"Don't be evasive. You're going to help her, right?"

"After the other night it seems like the thing to do."

"And all our talk about retirement?"

"I haven't forgotten. I promise, I'm thinking about it. Very seriously."

"Of course you are." She started to turn to her computer, stopped, returned her focus to me, and smiled. "Don't forget you need to tell your cousin Tom what you did to his car."

"Wait. I didn't do anything to his car. More accurately, I didn't do anything to his SUV."

“Oh? Does that mean you'll be returning it in pristine condition with a full tank of gas?”

“You're no fun.”

“Tell Tom I said, 'Hi!'”

I knew when it was time to retreat from the field of battle. I stepped over to the desk, gave Kim a kiss on the cheek, murmured my goodbye, and closed the door behind me.

As I grabbed my parka from the closet near the front door, I said to Harry, “Change of plans—”

“We're going to your cousin's place first.”

“Yes.”

\* \* \*

My cousins, Tom and Judy Corcoran, lived in a loft in the Meatpacking District, where they had moved long before the area gentrified and the prices had skyrocketed.

Judy was short and cute with bobbed, reddish-brown hair. She greeted me with a big hug and sang out, “Sweetheart! Back so soon! What happened to your trip?”

Tom was stocky, prematurely bald, and had a puckish grin that made him look younger than his bald pate suggested. Unlike Judy, he was not overjoyed to see me.

“Always good to see you, but since our last visit was 2 days ago . . . did something go wrong?” he said.

“Well . . .”

“How bad is it?”

“It's 'don't worry I'm going to get you a new Subaru' bad.”

“Oh, honey, what went wrong?” Judy asked.

“This had better be good,” said Tom.

“It kind of got . . . shot up.”

“Shot up!”

“Tom, honey,” Judy interjected, rubbing Tom's arm in an attempt to sooth him, “let's hear what happened.”

Tom was in no mood to be soothed. Not that it was unreasonable for him to be upset. I would have been in his shoes. He exhaled loudly, “You got my brand new vehicle shot up?”

“Yeah. Bullets. A lot of bullets. Very bad for the windows and body and engine.”

“Are you all right?” Judy asked, worried.

“Here I stand, right as rain.”

“You look a little pale.”

“Well, I did get shot, but only once. Not a serious wound, but a lot of bleeding, which probably accounts for my pallor.”

“I'm glad you're okay,” Tom said. “At least I will be when I have absorbed this little catastrophe. Do you know how many bullets hit the car?”

“Thirteen. The police have impounded it as evidence. God only knows for how long. That's why I'm going to get you a new one.”

“Oh, sweetheart, can you afford that?” Judy had



taken my hand and given it a squeeze.

“I just signed a big, new client, so yes! I can afford to buy you a new car.” I didn't mention that my spending plans for my new client's retainer included long luxurious trips to Hawaii and Europe. Oh well.

“Well, you certainly lead an interesting life,” Tom said. “How did you get our car shot to pieces?”

“The long and the short of it is that I was driving up West Street, two guys came out of nowhere with guns blazing, and I . . . dealt with them.”

“Dealt with them?” Judy was a little pale now.

“You killed them?” Tom asked.

“I only killed one of them. Look, it doesn't matter. I had no choice, I'm not in trouble with the police, and you should order yourselves a new Subaru.”

“I'm glad I'm retired,” Tom said. “Maybe that's something you should consider.”

“Kim tells me that all the time.”