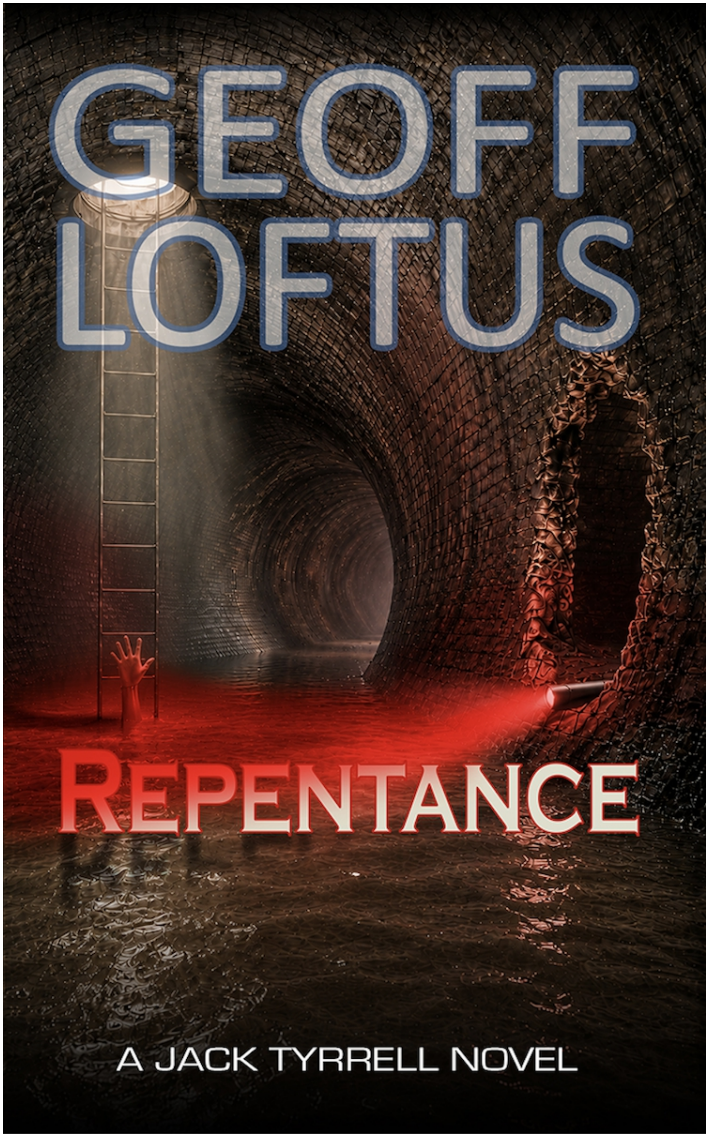

GEOFF
LOFTUS
REPENTANCE
A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL

Repentance

By

Geoff Loftus



Repentance

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Repentance is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual people is unintentional and coincidental. A serious attempt has been made to portray accurately the details and geography of New York City, but I may have exercised poetic license, including with some actual places. I hope the reader will excuse this.

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For Greg,
co-writer, editor, inspiration, and beloved son.

Being your father has been
the great adventure of my life.

repentance (noun)

1. deep sorrow, compunction, or contrition for a past sin, wrongdoing, or the like.

Synonyms: remorse, penitence, contriteness

2. regret for any past action.

Synonyms: sorrow

– Dictionary.com

Do not wait for the last judgment.
It takes place every day.

– Albert Camus

1

Who the hell met people at the end of a pier at some ungodly hour of the morning?

I did. Apparently.

I couldn't begin to tell you the reason I was standing at the end of Pier 16 jutting into the East River at the South Street Seaport. According to my phone, it was 3:03 a.m.

Patting the empty pockets of my cargo pants, I found myself questioning the wisdom of showing up in this location, at this hour, without a firearm. Rendezvousing with people in a dark, isolated place was usually not a good idea. Meeting them without a weapon was nuts. So … why was I here? I didn't remember. Something was wrong with my cognitive functioning. Then again, my fiancée would tell you that my cognitive functioning wasn't very good at the best of times. And this moment in the middle of the wee hours was clearly not the best of times. Was I so tired that I had forgotten a perfectly logical reason for this meeting? Had one too many punches clouded my brain? Had one too many bullets drained a little too much blood from my gray matter to do its job properly?

Since my rendezvous mates had not yet appeared, I took in the sights. To the north, the stately Brooklyn Bridge spanned the East River to—where else?—Brooklyn. Closer

at hand to the north was the large pavilion atop Pier 17 housing stores, restaurants, and a rooftop entertainment. All dark at that moment. So was the historic, red-hulled lightship *Ambrose*, which was moored at the mid-point on the northern side of Pier 16. I turned to see the towers of the financial district, including the Freedom Tower (officially designated One World Trade Center). There were a few lights on here and there in those buildings. Probably offices full of Masters-of-the-Universe wannabes slaving away around the clock on some monstrously huge deals. Finally, I turned south and saw the *Wavertree*, another historic ship: A huge three-masted, gray-hulled vessel that was more than 300-feet long.

Was I here to go on a voyage of some kind? Sail the seven seas? Or maybe go to the *Twilight Zone*?

Headlights flashed down the length of the pier and drew my attention to a large, dark car coming to a stop. Its headlights shut off. Three figures climbed out and began to make their way toward me. I reflexively patted my empty pockets again. Why, oh why, hadn't I brought a gun? A cute little Walther CCP with an eight-round capacity would have made me feel so much better. What had I been thinking? Kim would have said, "You *weren't* thinking."

As they walked closer to me, I saw that they were two men and a woman. All white. The men were a little shorter than I was, about six-feet tall. Both wearing bulky trench coats, which flapped open as they walked. The woman was quite a bit shorter; I guessed around five-feet-six. She also wore a trench coat, but it was fashionably

tapered, not the baggy, wrinkled garb the men were sporting. And I noticed that she wore flats. Sensible shoes if you were going to engage in violent activity.

"You Tyrrell?" One of the men asked as they stopped a few feet in front of me. His voice had the raspiness of a heavy cigarette smoker.

"Who else would I be?"

The woman said: "We're not in the mood for an existential discussion. Please show us your identification."

She stepped in front of the man who hadn't spoken yet, partially covering him. Was she trying to protect him? Or screen him from me if he pulled a weapon?

"No, I don't think I will." I shifted ever so slightly to my right. "I think we need a modicum of trust for our transaction." Whatever the hell our transaction was.

"Don't try to impress me with your toughness," she responded. "Show us your identification. Then we can get on with our business."

"And what is our business?" I asked. I shifted even more to the right. Now the woman was on my left, almost completely blocking the silent man.

Mr. Smoker turned to his companions, "Do you believe this guy?"

The silent guy smirked and spoke for the first time, "Stupid is as stupid does."

"You don't need my ID. You're supposed to meet a man named Tyrrell on Pier 16 in the South Street Seaport at three o'clock in the morning. Here I am; here you are. Let's get down to business."

“Nice bit of logic,” the woman smiled. “But I still need to see your ID.”

“No thanks,” I replied. Why on earth was I being so difficult? Tyrrell, do I have to remind you that you don’t have a gun? And they probably had at least one each.

“*NO* thanks?” Mr. Smoker rasped.

“Despite my great pleasure in meeting you all,” I said, “I’d really like to go home and get to bed.”

“Well then,” Mr. Smoker grunted. “We’ll skip the ID and you give us what we came for. Hand it over.”

“It? What is *IT*?”

The smirker shook his head. “Wow. Stupid is—”

He stepped around the woman's side and whipped out a pistol from under his trench coat.

I planted my left foot and lashed out with my right. I prefer to punch rather than kick because kicks are easily defended against if your opponent knows what he’s doing. On the other foot, kicks tend to have greater range, and I needed that extra bit of reach. The kick caught Smirker under the chin. He flew backward. His pistol clattered onto the pier.

I had no time to pick up his gun before Mr. Smoker pulled his own weapon. He fired. I felt a scorching tear across my left shoulder.

The woman also had her gun out. Mr. Smoker fired again, missing me. I dove at the woman, tackling her waist-high. I spun her around and threw her into him. My spinning sent me toppling to the pier. Her gun went off, shooting skyward as she and Mr. Smoker fell.

I pushed myself onto my feet and dove for Smirker's pistol. I rolled as I hit the pier's rough surface, grabbed the gun, and came up into a shooting position.

Mr. Smoker was getting up, aiming at me. Next to him, the woman was also coming into a ready position.

I shouted, "Stop—"

He didn't stop. He fired again. He missed.

I pulled the trigger six times.

Mr. Smoker and the woman were each hit with tight, center-mass, three-shot groupings. Just as I had been trained to do.

Smirker was running toward the car.

"I hope you have the keys," I muttered as I crouched beside the woman. She was sprawled on her side, her long dark hair covering her face. I checked for a pulse. There was none.

Mr. Smoker lay on his back. Eyes wide open. Mouth wide open. As if he had been surprised in his last second alive.

Even though it seemed unnecessary, I knelt beside him and put my fingers on his neck to check his pulse. Nothing.

"Why did you make me do that?" I growled.

He jolted upright like the not-quite-dead demented killer in a horror movie. His arm clutched at my chest as if he were going to tear my heart out. A sharp pain burst through my body—

Then I was awake in bed, sitting up, gasping.

Next to me, Kim was still asleep.

The pain in my chest was gone. I reached over to the night table and tapped my phone to wake it from sleep mode. It was 3:05 a.m. I slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the bathroom. I threw cold water in my face and drank from the faucet. I debated whether or not to make myself a medicinal cappuccino. Decided against.

I walked to the living room and stared out the window at the Upper West Side. Just like in my dream, there were almost no lights anywhere except street lights.

"Oh my God," I sighed, "these damn dreams."

* * *

"Did you have another nightmare?" Kim asked when she joined me in the kitchen later that morning. Her glorious red hair fell loosely to her shoulders. I knew from experience that she had just run her fingers through it. Dressed in a men's large white T-shirt and blue-and-green-plaid pajama pants, she looked ready for her close up.

She kissed me on the cheek as she sat on the stool next to me and asked, "Would you please make me a cappuccino?"

"You are fully capable of making cappuccino."

"It tastes better when you make it."

I kissed her, slid off my stool, and stepped to the espresso machine.

"You left our bed in the wee hours last night. Did you have a nightmare?" she asked again.

I nodded, concentrating on making her caffeinated beverage. I could have operated the machine with my eyes closed. Just like breaking down and reassembling an M16 rifle in pitch black.

Kim waited for the hissing and dripping of the espresso machine to finish. I handed her a perfect cappuccino.

“Thank you.” She sipped her drink and smiled. “*Perfetto*.”

“*Grazie*.”

“Maybe you should see Dr. Hoffman?”

“Couldn't even wait to finish your cappuccino, could you?”

“I’m worried about you. You’ve been having these dreams ever since we came home from Block Island.”

“It’s only been two months. And it’s not as if it happens every night.”

“That’s one way to look at it.”

“And another way would be...?”

“You’ve been having nightmares almost every night for two months.”

“Gee, when you put it like that, it sounds as if I have a problem.”

“You do.”

I grinned, “I already left him a message, asking for an appointment. Knowing Dr. Hoffman as I do, I bet he will sneak me in sometime this morning.”

“Good.”

“Are you insinuating that my mental health needs,

uh, …," I couldn't think of the right word. "An adjustment? A boost? A tweak?"

"I'm sorry," Kim smiled sweetly. "I didn't mean to insinuate anything about your mental health. I meant to point out that you might benefit from some help."

"Hmm."

She reached over and traced the line of my lips with the tip of her index finger. Then leaned close and kissed me gently. "That's as much as I can do for you."

"That's a lot."

"Go see Dr. Hoffman."

Right on cue, Hoffman called. He would see me in half an hour.

"I gotta go," I said. I kissed her quickly on the cheek, grabbed a windbreaker, my keys, my phone, and headed out the door.

A quick subway ride on the 1 train took me to Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. From there it was a short walk to Dr. Hoffman's office. It was a beautiful, crisp day in late September 2017. On a day with weather this nice, it was hard to be bothered by the latest news regarding the yellow-topped, orange-skinned menace in the White House. I took a deep breath of the early autumn air. Ahhhh.

Washington Square Park is not actually a part of the NYU campus, but it sure did feel like it. Purple NYU pennants flew above the entrances of NYU buildings along the four sides of the park. Students bustled back and forth. Or sat on benches and enjoyed the weather and

conversation with their friends. Dr. Hoffman's office was in a handsome pre-war building at the southwest corner of Washington Square Park. One of the few buildings without a purple pennant.

I took the elevator to the fourth floor. Sr. Hoffman's office was two rooms with a bath. Probably subdivided from a larger apartment. The walls were cream-colored. The artwork featured paintings of beaches and shoreline. Not exactly great art, but pleasant and soothing. The couch and armchair were upholstered in medium-dark shades of blue and maroon.

Dr. Hoffman opened the door to his inner sanctum. "Please come in," he said in his Bavarian-flavored accent.

I sat on the couch.

Dr. Hoffman settled into the armchair and picked up his notebook. "What would you like to talk about?"

"Well … uh, I've been having these dreams. Recurring nightmares, actually."

"I see."

"Do you go in for dream interpretation? Do you believe dreams are messages from the subconscious? If we dig deep enough are we going to discover that I have an Oedipus complex?"

He smiled. "I think we should start simply. We can always leap to wild conclusions later. Why don't you tell me about your nightmares?"

I took a deep breath. "Okay. It's not the same dream night after night. But lots of common ingredients."

"And they are?"

"I'm always in some isolated place about to meet some people. I never know why I'm in that place. I never know the people. They always have guns. I'm unarmed."

"You're unarmed in every single dream?"

"Yes."

"Hmmm. Do you have any thoughts about your not knowing any of the reasons or the people in the dream? Any theory why you don't know what's going on?"

"Because it's not important. What happens in the immediate moment *inside* the dream is the only thing that's important."

"That is a good insight. Please continue."

"So, I'm in some isolated place. The other people arrive—three of them. They ask me for identification. I refuse. We go back and forth. I stubbornly refuse."

"Why do they ask for identification?"

"They want to know who I am."

"*They* want to know?"

"Oh," I said. But I said it with great length, as in *Ohhhhhhhhh*. "I'm the one who's really doing the asking—I want to know who I am."

"That could be. Again, please continue."

"Okay, we go back and forth, things get ugly, there's a bit of violence."

"Do you kill them?"

"I kill two of them. The third one runs away."

"And lives to fight another day."

"Wait … are you saying that the guy who runs away is kind of like the 'to be continued' in a two-part TV

show?"

"Possibly. But let's return to the two people you kill. How do you kill them? You said they always have guns and you never do."

"I manage to get a gun from one of them and shoot them both."

"This happens in every single dream?"

"Every single damn dream."

"Why do you think you have no gun?"

"Uh … because … holy shit." The realization clutched at me like my demented horror-movie villain trying to tear my heart out. I looked directly into Hoffman's eyes. "I'm trying to answer the question of who I am. I want to be the innocent guy, but I end up being a killer."

Hoffman said nothing, letting me sit with my increasingly uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

"But … I only kill because I have no choice. It's been a part of my life for a long time. First in the Army, then the Marshals, and now working for the Chairman."

"Yes." He affirmed what I had said without pushing me in any direction.

"I've always believed in what I was doing, so how come I feel so bad about it?"

"Belief and comfort are two very different things."

I mulled that over for about thirty seconds. "So I can believe in what I do but still feel bad about the results."

"You have often told me that you find it possible to feel contradictory things simultaneously."

“Don’t most people feel contradictory things? Isn’t that part of what makes people so crazy? And I’m not using ‘crazy’ in any clinical sense.”

“Yes, many people feel opposing emotions about a single behavior.”

“Which means I can feel good about righting wrongs since that’s what the Chairman calls me to do, and —at the very same moment—feel terrible about killing some truly bad people.”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” I muttered resignedly. “Do you ever feel this way about your work for the Chairman?”

“Our sessions together are about you, not me.”

“I know that, but come on, you’re one of the very few people I can talk to about working for the Chairman. Does your work for Him ever leave you feeling bad?”

“No.”

“Why not?” A bit of exasperation crept into my tone.

“The Chairman uses each of us according to our own gifts, our talents, and experiences. Mine are in the area of helping people with their feelings and thoughts. And yours are...,” his voice drifted off.

“In the area of killing people.” I looked out the window at the tops of the trees in Washington Square Park. A few leaves had started to turn yellow and dotted the expanse of summer green. “To be honest with you, this doesn’t seem fair.”

“Fairness doesn’t come into it. I have a Ph.D. in

clinical psychology. You have a great deal of training thanks to the military and the Marshals Service. It's probably way too late in each of our lives to attempt to change places."

"I hope you don't mind if I tell you that I am not comforted by what you just said. Not even a tiny, little bit."

He responded with silence, maintaining our eye-to-eye contact. Okay, Tyrrell, give him your steely-eyed Marshal's gaze.

After about a minute, he broke off and asked, "Can you tell me how many people you have killed? In real life, not your dreams."

His question went through my heart like a sharp blade. I hesitated, and felt as if my past opened into a deep, bottomless abyss.

I finally said, "I honestly don't know. Too many. Way too many."

"And you feel guilty about all of them? Regardless of the circumstances?"

"Circumstances? You mean like self-defense? Or killing someone to protect someone else? Or because I was fighting for my country?"

"Exactly."

"Well, almost everyone I have ever killed was under those … circumstances. And, yes, I feel guilty about every single one of them." I paused. "Actually, guilt isn't the right word. I feel *regret* over every single one of them."

"Could you define the difference between guilt and regret?"

"Well … as an Irish Catholic kid, the nuns instilled a sense of guilt in me for almost everything I thought or did."

"Very amusing." Hoffman did not seem the least bit amused. "But what do guilt and regret mean to you today?"

"I guess I'd say guilt is the pain I feel because I did something that was wrong. With regret, I didn't do anything wrong, but I'm sad about my behavior. Or the results of my behavior."

Hoffman was quiet. He was working his psychologist magic, giving me time for my thoughts and emotions to percolate. Waiting for me to say more.

"Okay," I continued. "There were one or two people I killed that I felt deserved to die, and I have absolutely no regret or guilt or whatever about killing them. None. But even with that being true, I honestly wish that I could say I have never killed anyone. It's not a pleasant experience."

"I wouldn't think so."

There was another uncomfortable silence. Uncomfortable for me, anyway.

"Does the…," Hoffman paused to consider his question then continued, "does the manner, no, does the proximity in which you kill shape your feelings?"

"Do you mean … do I regret it more if I kill up close and personal?"

"Yes, that is what I'm asking."

I closed my eyes and deliberately emptied my

mind. The last thing I wanted to do was remember the different deaths that I had meted out. But the more I didn't want to remember, the more I did.

"No, the manner isn't important. I've killed people at extremely close quarters and felt completely justified. No regret at all."

"Please expand on that."

"I don't want to go into it."

"Your story might help me understand you better."

"Are you sure you want to understand me better?"

He smiled. "Your story might help you."

"Okay," I sighed. "A guy named Daryl Hawkins, a guy with a background that was very similar to mine, became a mercenary and troubleshooter for some very bad people. He killed Laurie Mandelbaum, the first woman I was ever in love with. Murdered her right in front of me. A few seconds after he killed her, I stood over him and deliberately shot him in the eye."

"And felt no regret?"

"Would you?"

"I don't … know." He paused. "But you must have felt something."

"I felt horrible grief and sadness for Laurie."

"What about Hawkins?"

"I felt … justified. In fact, I was angry. I should have killed him earlier."

"And maybe Laurie would still be alive."

"She probably would be."

We were both quiet for a minute. I guessed it was a

minute; it felt longer than that, but I doubted that the good doctor would waste time waiting for a psychologically unevolved person like me to speak up.

"The killings you regret … what makes them different? Why do you regret them?"

"They were mostly very quick. I had no time to think. I had to act fast and trust that I was doing what the Chairman wanted me to do."

"Do you think he uses you as an executioner?"

"No, no, not at all. I think … " yeah, Tyrrell, what do you think? "I think that the Chairman wants me to help people. If the bad guys get in the way, well, then … it's okay. But that doesn't mean I like it."

"No, of course not. But … do you find any comfort in the belief that you are following the path the Chairman called you to?"

"I guess. A little."

We sat in silence again.

Finally, Hoffman spoke up, "Please pardon me for sounding as if I'm giving you a diagnosis, but I think you're pretty normal."

"Could I get that in writing? I'd like to show it to my fiancée."

"Given your unique and dangerous calling, I think you balance your emotions reasonably well. You feel regret, which means you haven't grown callous and indifferent. You don't feel guilt, which would probably paralyze you eventually. And, on occasion, you feel justified, which means you are operating with a moral

code, something that is very important to you. All in all, a fairly healthy adaptation to the uniquely unusual circumstances of your life."

"So, I have nothing to worry about?"

"You are well aware that is *not* what I said. If you continue to pile regret upon regret it will become a burden too heavy to bear. Eventually you will suffer for it."

"Okay. Does that mean I should stop righting wrongs for people?"

"That is between you and the Chairman."

* * *

After my appointment with Dr. Hoffman, I strolled from his office on West Fourth Street to my apartment on Grove Street in the heart of Greenwich Village. As frequently happened after one of our sessions, I found myself deep in thought, wondering about the course of my life.

How had I ended up killing so many people? (Righteously. Always righteously.) Why were so many of my days filled with violence? And how did, since I worked for the Chairman and theoretically enjoyed His protection, I end up needing so much medical attention?

My current life began in June 2015, a mere twenty-seven months earlier. Before then, I had been a decorated combat veteran who had come home with PTSD. I joined the U.S. Marshals Service and did very well for a time,

earning a couple of commendations. I met and married my wonderful Maggie. But untreated PTSD has a way of catching up with people. At least it caught up with me. I became a drunken loser. I soured on my job. I took a bribe. I rationalized accepting the bribe. I took money to deliver names and locations for people in witness protection. I didn't work for WITSEC, which meant that there was no possible way on earth for me to get the names and locations of witnesses. But I had figured that since I was taking money from bad people to *not* give up information, I was okay. Morally speaking.

But the gentlemen who were bribing me, members of an Italian crime family, didn't share my views. They went from disappointed to angry when it became apparent that I was not going to deliver WITSEC names.

So they hired an assassin to shoot me. And Maggie.

She died.

I survived but was even more broken and more embittered than ever. I left the Marshals Service and subsisted on booze and takeout food. My income came from disability from the Marshals Service and occasional "muscle" jobs for unsavory types. I never killed or seriously injured anyone, but a nice guy I was not.

And … in June 2015, on the fifth anniversary of Maggie's death, she appeared to me one night in our apartment—like Marley's ghost appeared to Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*

She told me that she still loved me and was

heartbroken that the man she had loved had degenerated into a pathetic, selfish, self-destructive mess.

But, she also said that she had interceded on my behalf with the Chairman. Better known as God in some circles.

Yes, I am honestly telling you that my wife the ghost appeared to me after interceding with God on my behalf. Maggie had gotten me a second chance.

In a microsecond, in less time than the proverbial blink of an eye, I was standing on a beach at dusk. The surf gently broke on the beach and rushed up the sand to where I was standing. Opposite me stood a good-looking, well-dressed, fortyish Black man. Actually, not a man at all. He was—as Maggie had told me— Harry Mitchum, my guardian angel. (I know, this gets pretty freakin' bizarre, right?)

We talked about *A Christmas Carol* of all things. Harry urged me to be guided by what the ghost of Jacob Marley said to Ebenezer Scrooge: "Mankind was my business!"

Who wouldn't jump at the chance to work under the guideline of "Mankind is my business?" My life was a mess—if it hadn't been Maggie wouldn't have needed to intercede on my behalf. But did I really want to go to work for the Chairman? And work side by side with this Harry guy? I mean, angel? Was there a way out of this?

"Do I have a choice now?" I asked bitterly. "Can I choose not to work for the Chairman?"

"Yes, you can choose. You can always choose.

Your options are: Work for the Chairman or continue to live a miserable life."

I scanned the darkening sky and the phosphorescent surf rushing over the sand. "If this is my miserable life, I choose this."

"This isn't your life. Your life is empty, lonely, corrupt. You take no action to help anyone. You do nothing but wait and brood. You haven't got the slightest sense of the Chairman's presence."

"So, if my choice is to live this way, I die and go to hell?" I asked bitterly.

"Yes, if you choose to continue your life as you have."

I pounced on this: "In that case, is it really fair that hell is the end result of my choices?"

"The Chairman is always fair. And your choice is fair, because it is *your* choice. Have you ever read *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis?"

First Charles Dickens now C.S. Lewis.

"What the hell is this, an English-lit class?"

For the first time in our conversation, Harry smiled. It was a tiny, Mona Lisa smile, almost imagined but definitely there. "Lewis wrote that 'All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be *no* Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find.'"

After a long pause, I said, "I'm exhausted."

Harry smiled a bit more, "Talking about making life choices tends to have that effect."

I sighed. Finally, I said, “Okay, what does this righting-wrongs job involve?”

Harry stepped next to me. “You have an excellent skill set for what the Chairman has in mind,” he said. “You are a combat veteran and a former U.S. Marshal. Your experience can be put to use to help people—victims—that the law enforcement community isn’t able to.”

“How the hell am I going to accomplish what the NYPD or the FBI or any other agency can’t? I’m not Superman.”

“You will receive direction from me, something the police and federal agents don’t get. The Chairman will make sure you have the resources you need.”

“Why doesn’t the Chairman help these folks directly? Couldn’t He do it quick and easy?”

“He could, but then *you* wouldn’t have the opportunity to help them.”

I said, “The opportunity to help them—that’s just the ‘Mankind is our business’ crap. Are you telling me we’re all supposed to take care of each other?”

His large, dark eyes met mine. “Yes.”

I didn’t like thinking about what he saw when he looked at me. I turned away to watch the waves roll in. “How ’bout if I right the wrong of Maggie’s death?”

“No. You have been selfish and self-centered for the last five years. You chose to waste your life. If you choose to work for the Chairman, you’ll do it for the benefit of others not for yourself.”

“‘Mankind is our business,’” I muttered.

"Yes."

"There's one more thing you should know."

"Oh?"

"The people you help won't remember you. They may be aware that they were helped, but none of them will ever thank you. None of them will ever say goodbye."

"Whoa," I said. "You really expect me to be completely selfless, huh?"

After a long pause, Harry said, "Are you ready?"

"I guess so." I took a very long breath. "I should probably come clean with you," I said. "I've actually read *A Christmas Carol*."

"You've read it thirteen times to be precise. Each year at Christmas. That's one of the things that made the Chairman think you were seeking."

I faced him. "Maybe I'll find."

"Maybe." He smiled. "Good luck."

And that was how I had gone to work righting wrongs. You might wonder just what the heck "righting wrongs" means. Harry and I helped people who had nowhere else to turn. My deal with the Chairman was simple: I would get what I needed, but there were no guarantees for my safety. I had to act completely unselfishly. When we finished, there would be no lifelong memories of the wonderful guy who saved them at the risk of his own life. Absolutely nothing. Oh well.

Harry and I had been very busy for the last two years. We'd confronted the Russian Mafia, Chinese spies teamed with corrupt corporate Americans, the old-

fashioned Italian Mafia, neo-Nazis attacking the EU's banking system in Paris, international money-launderers in London, neo-Nazi terrorists in New York, a family business based on seduction and murder, and a pair of art dealers/collectors whose main trade was sex-trafficking and weapons dealing. Just two months earlier in July, Kim and I had been on vacation on Block Island and ended up confronting a psychopathic serial killer and his guardian devil.

We'd been *very* busy.

I wished that I could say that we were always successful, but … no. We had an almost unblemished track record of stopping the various criminal enterprises we had faced. But two of our clients had been killed by the bad guys. And a couple of others were not likely to live happily ever after. And, as you might expect, I had been shot, stabbed, and beaten up on numerous occasions, which had necessitated stitches, butterfly closures, surgical staples, blood transfusions, and a couple of hospital stays. Righting wrongs was not for the faint of heart. Or the frail of body.

All of which brought me back to the dilemma that was driving my nightmares: When was it okay to kill? And what did I have to do to live with the weight of those deaths on my soul?

If I had been a hotshot lawyer or a financial wizard or a life-saving doctor, I probably would have righted wrongs in a very different fashion. But I didn't have the talent and experience necessary to do my job differently. I did, unfortunately, have years and years of experience in

the world of violence. Which meant I was suited to be the protagonist in an adolescent boy's favorite video game. Or a blunt-instrument righter of wrongs.

Enough of this "woe is me" crap, I thought. You just had a session with your psychologist. You should be cleansed of your issues—at least for the moment. (Yes, I *know* that's not actually how therapy works.) I had reached Sheridan Square and turned left onto Grove Street.

I managed to make the block and a half to my apartment without any more soul-searching and headed straight for my espresso machine. Within a couple of minutes I had a double-shot cappuccino in one of my Block Island Blue Pottery mugs. I took a sip. "*Perfetto*!"

All was right with the world.

Until Harry appeared. He didn't blink into view like a sharp cut in the movies. He didn't slowly materialize. There was no puff of smoke. He just … was there. I called this technique "whooshing," which Harry absolutely hated. Which made me use the word all the more.

"Do you want a cappuccino?" I asked.

"Yes, thank you."

Even though Harry was an angel, he appreciated many of the finer things in human life, cappuccino among them.

I set to work brewing his drink and asked, "Are you dropping by to say hello? Or to tell me about our next client?"

"For cappuccino. And to tell you about our next client."

"Oh."

"Actually, this is an existing client of Tyrrell Security Consultants."

"Oh," I repeated.

After I had started righting wrongs, Harry and the Chairman had guided me into establishing a security consulting business so that I had a comfortable, regular income. (Very comfortable, actually.)

"Which client?" I asked, handing him his drink.

"Fēngbào Cyber Security."

"If I remember correctly, the company was founded and is currently majority-owned by Eric Parker and George and Jessica Zhào. Fēngbào means storm in Chinese. I think it's a pretty cool name for a firm that protects technology—the storm overwhelms any threats to your IT."

"Thank you for the unnecessary history and branding analysis."

I continued, "We just finished a security audit for them because Fēngbào Cyber's on the brink of signing a huge contract with the Department of Defense. Our clients are in great shape."

"That is the reason Stevens-Withington has offered to buy them."

Making the Fēngbào Cyber team very, *very* rich. What's the problem? Unless they don't want to sell."

"They don't want to sell."

"Can't they just say 'no thanks' to the lovely people at Stevens-Withington?"

“They used those exact words.”

“Oh?” I paused to swallow some cappuccino. “And the rejected suitors threatened them?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m guessing they weren’t so crude as to say sell to us or we will kill you.”

“No. But they made it very clear: Sell or die.”

“And our job is to make sure the Fēngbào Cyber folks aren’t eliminated by some nefarious means.”

“Exactly.”