

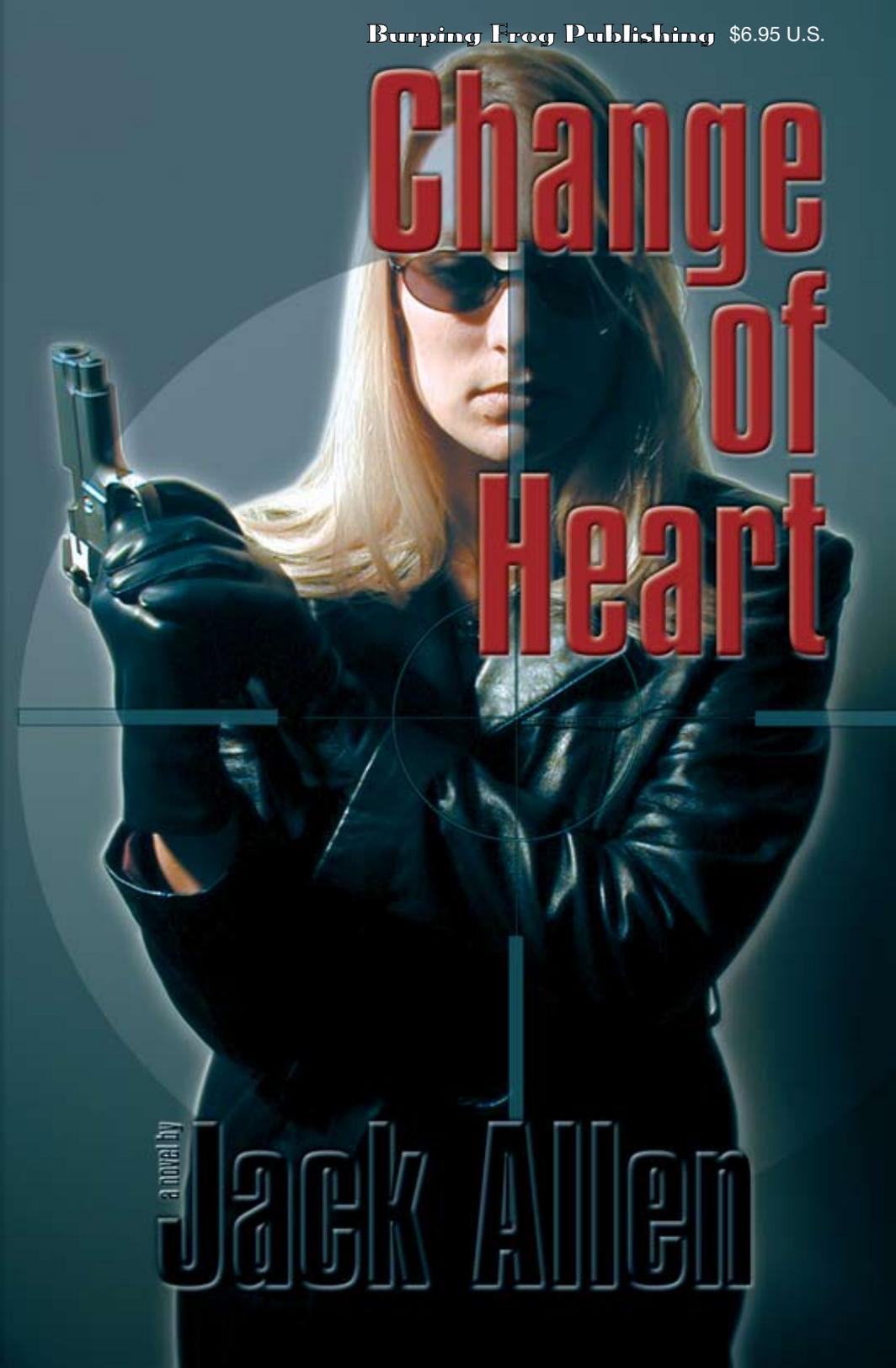
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Change of Heart

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Change of Heart

a novella
Jack Allen

Change of Heart

Jack Allen



Detroit • Michigan

CHANGE OF HEART

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Chapter 1

It started with a phone call. Walt Bergene held his wife's hand. They waited together by the sign with the words: Please Wait To Be Seated, inside the doorway of Rottelli's, just six blocks from the White House. Walt was six foot five with wispy, receding black hair and a mustache. Miriam, his wife, was a petite woman with hazel eyes and auburn hair.

Walt's cell phone rang the moment the waiter set a steaming platter of pasta in front of him. His big, hungry grin fell and he avoided his wife's eyes as he fished the small phone from his pocket.

"Yeah?" he said.

He had a deep, booming voice that could be intimidating when he was annoyed. He listened to the person on the other end. His eyes finally came up to meet Miriam's, and he found he was unable to decide whether she was irritated or concerned.

"Tell her I'll be at my office in fifteen minutes. I'll call her from there," Walt said.

He flipped the phone shut and looked at his wife again. She was clearly disappointed.

"Care for a picnic?" he said, but his voice did not sound as cheerful as he hoped.

He stopped a waiter and asked him to wrap their meals.

Half an hour later they unlocked the door of his office on the third floor of a small building tucked behind the Treasury building in downtown Washington. Painted on the glass of the old door

were the words “U.S. Navy Intelligence” and below it the words “Criminal Investigations Division”. Walt cleared a spot on his desk for the styrofoam trays and sat down in his tall, black leather chair and picked up the phone. From the reception area outside his office, where Walt’s secretary had her desk and miscellaneous supplies, Miriam found a couple of plastic forks, some napkins and a couple of bottles of tea from a small refrigerator.

Walt dialed a direct line. It was answered on the first ring.

“Special Ops,” said the woman’s voice on the other end, and Walt could picture the short, stout figure of Rear Admiral Katherine Filmore holding the receiver to her ear.

“It’s me. Fill me in.”

Walt listened while she gave him details. Miriam handed him his tray of mostaccioli and a fork and he picked at it, occasionally putting the fork down to scribble notes on his desk blotter.

“Hawkins is in town. I’ll put him on it,” he said when Filmore finished.

“I don’t have time for that. I need to know this job’s gonna get done. I have orders from very far up the chain.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I need the mechanic for this one.”

Walt sighed. “Katherine, I’ve got him on a job right now. I can’t pull him out right in the middle-”

“Walt, I’m not asking you for a favor here. Get Josh and send him here, now.”

She hung up. Walt set the phone down. Miriam ate her Caesar salad and fettuccine alfredo in small bites. Walt’s brow creased with deep furrows.

“Sounds big,” Miriam said, raising the fork to her mouth.

Walt nodded. “I think it is.”

Josh McGowan set the spoon in his styrofoam cup of egg drop soup and shifted in the seat. His body was cramped from sitting in the confining seat of the car for three hours. He wore a gray double breasted suit, a white shirt with a dark red tie, and a long overcoat, which was great for the dinner party they attended, but

was terribly uncomfortable for sitting in a car for long periods. He brushed his hand through his short, dark hair and adjusted the earpiece in his left ear. He hated wearing those things. It was impossible to ever make them fit. Walt was always telling him his gadgets would make his job easier, but Josh never bought that. The only time he needed a radio was when he worked with a team, and on most jobs, he preferred to work alone.

For some reason, though, Walt believed Josh needed a partner on his assignments. Even worse, he wanted Josh to take part in the training of some of his newer recruits, no matter how much Josh objected.

Josh was six foot three with broad shoulders, deep, dark eyes, and a regular face, except for a small scar on his chin and one over his right eye. He looked straight ahead through the windshield into the blackness of the quiet alley and the street onto which it opened. He sat in a black Crown Victoria parked in the shadows of an alley looking out on West 47th in downtown Baltimore with Jerry, his partner on this mission and Walt's latest whiz kid.

"Ok," Josh said, and wiped a drop of soup from his chin. "Mel Gibson, Kurt Russell, Michelle Pfeiffer."

"Jesus, I don't know. What?" Jerry said, and lowered his night vision scope.

"*Tequila Sunrise.*"

"No way. Michelle Pfeiffer wasn't in that."

"Oh yeah, she was," Josh said, and sipped his soup.

Egg drop was one of his favorites. He loved all kinds of soup. It always gave him a warm, wholesome feeling.

"Ok, I got one for you. Antonio Banderas, Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt."

"Easy. *Interview with the Vampire,*" Josh said.

"Damn, you're good at this."

For the past three hours, he and Jerry sat in that car, staring at the same uneventful section of street. Josh studied Jerry out of the corner of his eye. He looked like a kid fresh out of high school, not a recent graduate of Annapolis. Jerry was tall and athletic with a square jaw and a neat, short haircut. He had that

star quarterback look with the charming smile that women found so irresistible. He also had a cocky attitude.

“I was the best shot in my squad,” Jerry was saying. “I knew I would be perfect for an assignment like this.”

Josh rolled his eyes and sipped his Seven-Up. He easily could have felt nothing but contempt for this kid, but there was a time when he had been cocky himself. Several years ago, that might have been him in that seat on his first mission, after two years of Naval service and three years of a Special Forces posting.

Josh watched every car that passed and every doorway along the street. Within his view was a white van that led them from the dinner party to this location. He was waiting for a man to make an appearance, a man suspected of smuggling technological secrets out of the country.

Josh reached for the open container of chicken fried rice, picking at it with a plastic fork.

“Want some?” he said.

Jerry held up his hand.

“No, thanks. Gotta watch what I eat. Gotta take care of myself while I’m young. I eat only soy and alfalfa, and only at six and three in the afternoon. Keeps me sharp.”

Josh lifted a forkful to his mouth. Of course it did. Jerry was a good, smart kid, but he talked too much. Did Walt know what he was doing when he assigned this kid to work with him on his first night out?

The earpiece in Josh’s ear buzzed. He winced and shook his head. A low voice came through the earpiece and he reached for the button on his belt to turn the volume down. Jerry put his finger over his own earpiece.

“It’s going down,” the voice said.

Jerry lowered his night vision scope and looked at Josh. The voice was Alwayne Bolen, a man Josh chose to work with at every opportunity.

“It’s time,” Josh said.

Jerry turned back to the van and raised his scope.

Josh took a deep breath. On the outside, he tried to look

cool and calm. His insides, however, were twisted in knots. His fingers tapped on the steering wheel. He didn't want Jerry to see how nervous he was.

Josh lifted his own night vision scope and looked at the white van with the words "Vernon Carpet Cleaners" painted on the side. Finally, he saw movement around it. The rear doors opened and someone put something in the back.

Josh pushed one of the buttons on the belt pack.

"Do you see him yet?" he said.

"Not yet," Alwayne said.

Josh let out a strained breath. They were running out of time. The man needed to show himself soon.

"I count two. No, three," Jerry said.

The cell phone in Josh's jacket chirped. Josh and Jerry looked at each other at the same time. Josh pulled it out and held it to his ear without speaking.

"Josh?" came Sally's familiar voice on the other end.

"Yeah," Josh said.

There was a click and then another voice.

"I need you to pull out, Josh. Now," Walt said.

"What?" Josh said.

"I need you out. Now."

Walt's voice was plain, devoid of emotion.

"Now? Right now? I'm in the middle of a job here."

Josh had the night vision scope to his eyes and was watching two men in dark clothing getting into the van. Through the scope they were nothing more than indistinct black blobs against a fuzzy green background.

"I realize that, Josh, but I've got another job. It's urgent."

Josh sighed. "Ok. When do I leave?"

"Half an hour ago," Walt said.

Josh looked at his watch. "What do I do?"

"Go to the airstrip. You'll be briefed when you get there. Tell Alwayne he's in charge."

The line clicked and went silent.

"Thanks," Josh said, and put the phone down.

“What was that all about?”

“I just got a promotion,” Josh said.

Jerry looked confused.

“Congratulations,” he said.

Alwayne’s voice buzzed in Josh’s ear.

“There he is. He’s heading for the car. Are you on him?”

Josh hesitated. He raised the scope and saw a figure entering the dark car parked behind the van. The van pulled away from the curb and headed in their direction.

“Josh?” Alwayne said anxiously.

“We’re on him,” Josh said. He pulled off the headset and looked at Jerry. “I didn’t chase this guy for six months just to let him get away with the goods.”

He started the car.

“What are you gonna do?” Jerry said, a tinge of nervousness in his voice.

“You ever crash a party?”

Josh jammed the shifter into drive and gunned the motor. The tires screeched on the pavement and the car lurched forward just as the white van flashed in front of them. Jerry’s mouth and eyes grew very wide. He braced himself against the dashboard with both arms.

The car shot out of the alley like a shell from a cannon and slammed into the van, caving in the side and lifting the front wheels of the car off the ground. The van spun like a top. Its back end whipped around to the right and crushed the side of a parked car while its momentum carried it down the street.

Well, now he’d done it. Josh glanced at Jerry. He looked all right, although a bit dazed.

The front end of the car was bent up and the hood was crumpled like the bellows of an accordion. Josh’s door wouldn’t open. He gave it a stiff shove with his shoulder and it opened with a loud wrenching sound. He hopped out and drew his pistol, a black and silver Smith & Wesson .45 automatic, from the shoulder holster under his jacket.

The van was still upright, propped against a pair of parked

cars, but it was far from roadworthy. It was curved like a beer can somebody tried to crumple and bend in half. Its engine had stopped. Fluids dripped from the motor under the front end and steam rose through the radiator grill. Josh moved toward it, jogging along the row of parked cars to his left, holding his gun straight out in both hands, aimed at the driver's side door. His long overcoat flowed behind him. The turned up collar flapped against his neck like a mane of hair.

Half a dozen car alarms had gone off. The cars' headlights flashed and their sirens screeched, some with a variety of annoying sounds. Mixed together, it was an irritating cacophony of noise that made Josh's ears ring.

The back doors of the van burst open. Josh pivoted.

"He's got a gun," Jerry shouted, and ducked behind the front end of their crumpled car.

The rear doors of the van blocked Josh's view. He couldn't see who stepped out, but he did see the yellow, strobe-like flash of flame from the muzzle of a machine gun light up the area behind the van. He also saw bullet holes appear in the side of their car, sprinkled like specks of pepper, although the sound of the machine gun was muffled, like the soft, rapid tapping of fingers on a wooden table top. The spray of bullets cut through the windshields of their car and two other parked cars. Jerry was pinned down behind them.

Just as he started toward the rear of the van, Josh noticed a movement out of the corner of his eye. Instinctively, he pivoted to his right, took one step and dove onto the hood of the nearest car. A burst of gunfire chased him over. Each bullet made a thunk sound when it hit the side of the car. The side glass and windshield exploded in a shower of crystalline shrapnel that rained on Josh as he rolled off the hood and hit the pavement on the opposite side. He covered his head with his arms. The bullets shattered the plate glass windows of the storefront behind him and the noise of the sheets of glass crashing down around him drowned out the noise of the car alarms.

He felt pinpricks on his hands and face from tiny shards of

glass. From a short distance, he heard the tapping sound of the first Uzi firing and the sounds of bullets hitting his car. Much closer, he heard footsteps coming toward him.

Under the car he saw a shadow moving toward the car. Looking up at the car's side mirror, he saw the man's reflection. He was a young guy with dark hair and a trickle of blood down the side of his face. In his eyes was the look of cold blooded fear.

Josh raised his pistol over the edge of the car door, pointing it through the shot out side window, adjusted his aim using the shadow moving beneath the car as his guide, and fired. He heard a grunt. The gunman's reflection disappeared from the mirror. His body hit the ground with a thump, followed by the clatter of the Uzi on the pavement.

Josh hopped to his feet and scurried in a crouch behind the row of parked cars back toward the gap where the alley opened. The shooting from behind the van came in rapid spurts. Between each spurt came the staccato crack of a pistol. Jerry must have been pinned down. Josh went to the front end of the last car and peeked around the bumper.

Jerry was behind a parked car on the other side of the street, using it as cover. The headlights and windshield were shot out and the front end was riddled with bullet holes. Josh realized Jerry could do nothing as long as he was outmatched by the Uzi. So it was up to him to make something happen. If it worked out right, this would be the perfect opportunity for Jerry. He would distract the shooter and Jerry could take him out.

Josh stepped out around the front of the car.

"Hey," he shouted.

The shooter swung the Uzi around and Josh dove back behind the car, dodging a burst of bullets. He landed hard on the concrete curb, scraping both palms and banging his left knee.

Just as he hoped, Jerry took advantage and fired two shots. Josh stayed low behind the car, waiting for a shout of pain to tell him Jerry hit his target. However, he heard nothing. The gunman fired another burst of bullets, riddling the side of the car and shattering more windows.

Josh shook his head. Rookies.

He stepped out from behind the front of the car once more. The shooter was firing in Jerry's direction, but was waiting for Josh to reappear. As he swung the Uzi around again, Josh did not dive for cover. Calmly, he raised his Smith & Wesson and fired.

The gunman grunted, bending at the middle. His hand squeezed the trigger of his Uzi and, as he fell backward, the small machine gun swept up, tracing a neat line of bullets all the way across the street, less than a foot from where Josh stood, and up the side of the building, taking out an entire row of windows.

Josh went around the car and found Jerry in a crouch.

"You all right?"

Jerry stared up at him with wide eyes. The kid had just finished his first year of training and this was his first mission in the field, Josh remembered. Clearly, he was shaken. Josh was angry at himself for not taking more time to get him ready.

"That was a great shot," Jerry said.

"Are you hit?" Josh said.

Jerry shook his head. "No. I'm fine."

He got to his feet, brushing down his jacket. His hands were shaking.

"Let me see your pistol."

Jerry handed it to him. It was a short barrel .38 caliber revolver. Josh examined it, turning it side to side.

"Where'd you get this gun?" Josh said.

"Walt gave it to me."

Josh handed it back. "Tell him to get you one that shoots straight."

He started toward the van.

"Where are you going?" Jerry said.

"To get the last guy. There were three, remember?" Josh said, holding up three fingers.

Josh approached the van with his gun raised, ready to fire at anything carrying an Uzi. Lights came on in the buildings along the street. People would be coming down to check on their cars. He could not let them get caught in the middle of a firefight.

He looked in the open back end of the van. Inside were a few boxes laying on their sides. From around the side of the van, though, he heard shoes scuffing on the pavement. He peeked around the rear door and saw a guy standing with his back against the van, adjusting something on his arm.

Was he injured? If so, this should be easy enough. He would at least take one of them alive.

He stepped around the door. The gunman looked up and raised his Uzi. Josh lunged back behind the van. A spray of bullets rattled against the door and the side of the van. Josh rolled into the street with the image of the open end of the barrel in his mind. He did not like getting that close to a machine gun. It was like staring at death.

He heard footsteps running away. Josh hopped to his feet and went after him. That was stupid. Only rookies made boneheaded moves like that. They got themselves killed for it, too.

A second burst of gunfire stopped him again. He heard glass shattering and peeked around the van. One of the glass doors that led into an office building was shot out. He heard someone shout, then another short burst of gunfire, followed by a cry of pain. Josh ran to the door and looked in.

On the floor in the middle of the lobby was a security guard, an overweight, middle-aged guy in a gray and black uniform.

“Wh-Who the hell are you?” the guard said.

Josh admired his valiant attempt to do his job even though he had three bullet holes in his right leg and two in his right arm.

“I’m one of the good guys,” Josh said.

The guard’s revolver was on the floor by a couple of potted plants.

“I called the cops when I heard the shooting outside,” the guard said.

“Great.”

Josh could hear a quiver in the man’s voice. He was scared and Josh didn’t blame him. He was pretty scared, too, the first time he took a couple of bullets.

“Which way did he go?”

The guard pointed with his good arm.

“The stairs. Up the stairs. Artie’s up there.”

Josh ran down the tall arched hallway toward the rear of the building, passing a row of elevators and several doors. At the end of the hall were doors on either side with signs to indicate they were stairwells.

Great. He could have gone anywhere. He could be upstairs or downstairs, or he might have found a way out of the building already. Josh picked one of the stairwells and went in.

It was dimly lit, with cement stairs, white walls and steel tube handrails. The gunman wasn’t there. Josh went across the hall to the other door. Nothing there, either. He started to go out when he heard another short burst from the Uzi, this time more distant. Definitely from upstairs. Did he find another guard? Josh went up the stairs. He was getting much too familiar with the sound of an Uzi for his own comfort.

He came out in the hallway on the second floor. There was the guard, Artie, he guessed, face down on the carpeted floor, a pool of blood spreading beneath him. On his back were the exit wounds of three bullets. Josh crouched and pressed two fingers to the man’s neck. He had no pulse.

In the opposite wall were three bullet holes. Artie obviously surprised the third gunman as he came out of the stairwell. There was no reason for this man to pay for this mistake with his life. It was his fault. If he hadn’t pulled that stunt with the van it would have gone on its way and none of these people would have been hurt. Walt was going to come down hard on him for this one.

Josh started down the hall. He wanted to find this guy before he killed someone else. He would tear this building apart if he had to.

Josh entered an office area crowded with desks when he heard a woman’s scream just a few feet away. He turned to his left and saw the Uzi pointed at him again. The gunman fired. Josh dove and rolled under the nearest desk. The bullets left a trail in the carpet behind him and slammed into the steel desk, shattering the phone and spraying a stack of papers in the air like confetti.

Josh rolled to a knee behind the desk and aimed at the shooter, ready to kill. The gunman was using the cleaning lady as a shield. He saw Josh on the far side of the desk, readjusted his aim and fired. The woman screamed again. Josh ducked to avoid the bullets, feeling frustrated. This guy had to run out of bullets sometime, didn't he?

"Don't make me kill this bitch," the gunman shouted.

"Oh, God," the woman cried.

Josh heard the fear in her voice.

"I'm not gonna make you do anything," Josh said.

He could see over the edge of one of the desk drawers that had slid open. The Uzi was pointed in the direction of the desk. The woman's eyes were wide with fear.

"You kill her, I kill you, simple as that."

"I'll do it," the gunman shouted.

The Uzi shook in his hand. He was just as frightened as the woman.

"So do it," Josh said in a calm, patient voice.

The expression on the gunman's face changed. The woman sobbed. Josh felt sorry for her. She did not deserve to be put through this.

The gunman's arm held the Uzi out for another second, wavering, then his elbow bent to turn the gun on the woman. With his concentration focused on the gunman's eyes, Josh popped up from behind the desk, raised his Smith & Wesson in both hands and fired a single shot.

The gunman's head snapped back. He stood motionless. The bullet entered on his right cheekbone and exited through the back of his head, scattering most of his skull on the wall behind him. He sagged to the floor like a rag doll. The Uzi dropped from his right hand. Still in the grip of the man's left hand, the woman was spun around like a ballerina. On her right shoulder was a splattering of blood. She stared at Josh, near shock.

Josh shrugged. "Sorry," he said.

He didn't know what else to say. It was his fault she had been put through this. There was nothing he could do to make it up

to her. He should probably try to comfort her or something, but he didn't know how to do that, either.

Alwayne had arrived when Josh came out of the building. He stood beside his car, looking around at the carnage with his hands on his hips. He was a tall man with a tall forehead, although he was about Josh's age. He wore a polyester print shirt and striped pants held up with suspenders.

That was what Josh always liked about Alwayne. He was true to himself and he didn't care what others thought of him. Walt was convinced Alwayne was not suited for field work and Josh was constantly fighting for him. He needed men like Alwayne.

"What the hell happened? A bomb go off?" Alwayne said.

His tall forehead crinkled.

"Just about," Josh said as he went to Alwayne's car.

He heard sirens approaching from the distance. He was not anxious to be there to explain things to the police. Jerry was leaning against the car.

"Anything in the van?" Josh asked.

Jerry shook his head. "Nothing, just empty boxes."

Josh looked in the back seat of Alwayne's car.

"Did you get him?"

Alwayne looked surprised.

"I thought you got him. I saw him go this way."

"Nothing came this way but the van," Jerry said.

Josh looked from one to the other, suddenly realizing they had been duped.

"He's headed for the boat. Jerry, come with me," he said.

He got in Alwayne's car. Jerry got in the passenger side.

"What are you doing?" Alwayne said.

Josh rolled down the window.

"We gotta stop him before he gets out of the country. You don't mind if we take your car do you? Didn't think so."

Smiling, he rolled the window up and drove off.

"Wait!" Alwayne shouted. "If you wreck that car Walt's gonna kill me."

Jerry had been told Josh could be like this. No, they had warned him. They said Josh was a wild cannon, out of control, a cowboy who could be more of a danger to his partners than he was to himself. After sitting in the car with him for three hours, Jerry came to the conclusion that none of it was true. Josh seemed like one of those timid, sensitive new-age guys. Jerry wanted to show Josh how tough he was and make an impression his first time out.

Now, sitting in Alwaysne's car with Josh again, holding on for dear life while Josh threw the car around traffic at speeds that made the other cars just blurs, Jerry was the one who was impressed.

Two days ago, when Walt assigned him a gun, Jerry was filled with confidence. Then, after sitting in a car with a new partner who seemed as passive as an old head of lettuce, Jerry was sure if he needed to use that gun he would have to do it on his own without expecting Josh to back him up. It hadn't quite worked out that way.

He looked at Josh out of the corner of his eye, not wanting to stare openly. This man was completely different from the one who started this mission earlier that day. Josh had ice in his veins and that fiery look in his eyes. What was it? It was a look he'd seen before, but where? Then he remembered. It was the bloodthirsty look of a war hardened veteran on a battlefield. Jerry saw that look in the eyes of the veterans he fought alongside in the desert. They got that look after combat, especially when they killed someone. It was a bloodlust. Every one of them told him not to let himself get that deep into combat or he'd never get himself out. It changed a man, it made him something less than human, like a beast, and he could never be the same around other people again.

Jerry always took that for a load of crap, until he looked into the eyes of the man sitting next to him. Josh was not just some average field agent working a tedious surveillance job for an intelligence organization. He had been changed. He was a soldier, a hardened warrior.

Jerry looked away. He completely underestimated his partner. But then, how could he not? To look at Josh he'd never know what he was made of inside.

They reached the docks. Apparently, Josh knew exactly where he was going. They came to a guarded entrance in the fence with a guard house and a striped gate. Jerry saw the guard in the small booth sit up when their car did not slow down. Josh laid into the accelerator and the engine roared. Jerry's grip on the door handle tightened. The guard picked up a radio microphone and shouted something into it. Josh launched the car up the slight rise of the driveway and through the lowered single plank gate, shattering it to splinters. The car slammed back to the ground. Josh did not lift his foot off the gas.

They raced past the row of docks. In the side mirror, Jerry noticed flashing red lights coming after them. He looked at Josh. If he noticed, he showed no sign of concern. If Josh wasn't worried, then he wouldn't be, either. He was, however, terrified.

At the end of the row of docks, Josh slammed on the brakes and slid the car sideways to a stop, perpendicular to the access road, facing out to the water and the end of dock 39. Ahead, in the car's headlights, several armed men ran toward them. Beyond them, a long, tall yacht drifted slowly away from the dock. Jerry and Josh both looked out the left side window back up the access road. Several security vehicles, their red lights flashing, rushed toward them.

Josh looked at Jerry.

"Hang on," he said.

"What? What?" Jerry cried.

His hands had never released their tight grip. Josh nailed the gas, heading straight toward the armed men, who raised their guns.

"You might want to get down," Josh said, his voice calm over the roar of the engine.

Jerry heard the crack of the pistols as the men scattered out of the way of the car. Bullet holes punched through the windshield, but Josh did not flinch. One of the men failed to get out of the

way of the car. Josh swerved to avoid him and Jerry wondered why until he realized Josh had no way of knowing whether they were real hoods or just rented cops.

They made it past the wave of guards and the only thing ahead was the yacht, turning out into the harbor, already well away from the dock. Jerry looked back. The guards were still shooting and the security cars had made the turn, bearing down on them.

“What are we gonna do?” Jerry said.

He did not see how they could stop the yacht without the harbor patrol. He also did not see how they were going to get away from all that security behind them with their lives.

“I don’t know,” Josh said.

His foot lifted off the gas. The yacht seemed to hover in a black void of space. Jerry hated the idea of admitting defeat.

“I think I have an idea,” Josh said.

The car swerved again and accelerated.

“Oh no. Josh, no,” Jerry pleaded.

Josh aimed for a makeshift ramp on the end of the dock that angled toward the stern of the yacht. The gap between the end of the dock and the back of the yacht grew rapidly.

“Are you crazy?” Jerry shouted.

“A little bit.”

Jerry was screaming when the car hit the ramp at full speed. The engine roared as the wheels left the ramp and the car became airborne. Jerry stared down at the water that stretched between them and the yacht. They weren’t going to make it, he could see that, the yacht was too far. He’d rather take his chances with all those armed guards on the dock than face certain death in the cold, black water below.

Then the tail of the yacht loomed large in the cracked windshield. The car nosed over toward it. A man stood on the aft deck, lit by the car’s headlights. He had a machine gun, but was too stunned to use it. The car came down right on top of him. Jerry couldn’t watch. He closed his eyes, finally realized he was screaming, and snapped his mouth shut. The impact seemed to take forever. He heard nothing. Time stopped for him, like in a

dream. Then the car slammed into the deck like hitting a brick wall and the dream was over. Their seat belts strained to hold them back.

For a few seconds the world was silent. Gradually, Jerry heard the faint throb of the yacht's diesel motors and a fast hissing sound. Jerry opened his eyes slowly. Twice in one night. He was beginning to understand what he had been told about Josh's reputation. If he did this kind of thing on every mission, Jerry wasn't sure he wanted to be teamed with him again.

A hand touched his shoulder and he opened his eyes.

"You all right?" Josh said.

"I think so."

Josh smiled. "Damn. That was fun. I wanna to do it again."

"Fun," Jerry repeated.

Josh unfastened his belt and opened the door. Jerry did the same. As he got out, he noticed the hissing noise came from the front of the car, which had smashed through the wooden deck. Blood was splattered all over the splintered wood and he stared at it for a few seconds before he realized it belonged to the man who had been standing on that part of the deck. The car stuck out of the deck at a steep angle. When he climbed down, Jerry found the lower half of the man's body, and was unable to tear his eyes away. He'd never seen so much blood.

"Grab that," Josh said, and Jerry looked up.

Josh pointed down at Jerry's feet. He looked down again, realizing an Uzi lay beside the body. He bent down and picked it up.

"If we meet resistance I need you to cover me. If I miss a guy you have to clean him off. Can you do that?" Josh said.

"Definitely," Jerry said.

He pulled back the locking mechanism to make sure the Uzi was loaded and checked that the safety was off. Josh nodded. Jerry took a deep breath. Josh might be crazy, but there was something about the look in his eyes that made him feel confident. He'd follow this man to hell and back, if he wasn't so afraid he'd

get them killed on the way.

Jerry tapped Josh's arm and pointed up the deck. Josh looked. A man with an Uzi came toward them on the narrow walk alongside the superstructure.

"Thanks," Josh said.

He started toward the guy, who had not raised the Uzi. Josh held his pistol down at his side, concealed by his leg.

"Who the hell are you?" the man shouted.

Josh didn't answer. He didn't get a chance. On the upper deck of the superstructure, a door opened and another man came out, his Uzi up and ready to fire. In a lightning quick, fluid move that startled Jerry, Josh raised his pistol and fired a shot. The man on the upper deck went down before he could fire.

The one approaching on their level raised his Uzi. Josh, holding his pistol in both hands, swung his arms down and fired another shot. The man was hit in the shoulder. He dropped the Uzi, which clattered on the rail and fell into the water. Josh fired another shot. The man dropped over the side.

Another one appeared in the doorway on the upper deck, but before Jerry could shout something to warn him, Josh swung his arms back and fired. Jerry saw a red splotch appear in the center of the man's chest. He tumbled forward over the rail and landed with a thud.

"Come on," Josh said.

Jerry followed, shaking his head. Did this guy ever miss?

Josh looked back toward the dock. "I gotta turn this thing around. I don't think anyone's driving it."

Jerry looked back at the dock. The security guards and their vehicles had collected under the lights. He followed Josh up the stairs, past the body of the man who fell over the railing and the one who lay at the top on the landing.

The bridge had two entrances, the rear door through which they came, and a side door, which was open. The bridge was empty. Without a crewman to steer, the wheel drifted lazily to the left, then to the right.

"I'm gonna steer us back to that dock," Josh said as he hol-

stered his pistol. “Don’t let anyone come up those stairs.”

Jerry nodded. Josh grabbed the wheel and turned the yacht around. With his back to Josh, Jerry never saw the man come through the side door and crack Josh over the back of his head with his Uzi. He heard it, and felt the yacht surge forward. When he turned around, Josh was on the floor. The man had his foot on Josh’s chest and the barrel of the Uzi pressed to Josh’s cheek. Josh’s eyes were closed. He barely looked alive. His lip was split open and there was blood down the front of his shirt.

The man glared at Jerry with his teeth clenched.

“Drop it or I’ll waste your friend,” the man shouted. Jerry hesitated. “Don’t fuck with me!”

Jerry glanced past him out the front window of the bridge. What he saw alarmed him, but he tried not to let it show on his face. Josh must have fallen forward on the throttle because they rushed toward the dock at top speed. The security people scattered. Jerry wasn’t sure what would happen when they hit, but he knew they were going to hit hard.

The man had his back to the window. Jerry had to make sure he held his attention.

“All right. I’m putting it down.”

In his left hand he held out the Uzi, slowly lowering it to the floor. With his right hand he grabbed the edge of the door frame, hoping the entire structure didn’t collapse on impact.

The guy never took his eyes off Jerry until the last second when the lights of the dock flashed through the window. His head swivelled around to see what the light was at the same instant the yacht rammed the dock. He never had time to scream. The sound of the crash was deafening. The man vaulted head first through the large plate glass window.

The door frame held up, but Jerry didn’t. He lost his grip and slid across the floor, colliding with the control console on the forward bulkhead. Anything that wasn’t bolted down, and a few things that were, fell on top of Josh. The wooden dock groaned and Jerry heard the sound of steel wrenching open. The yacht slid backward a few feet, then stopped.

Jerry scrambled to his feet, searching for the Uzi. He found it wedged under the console. Josh was already digging himself out from under the pile of debris and Jerry went to help.

“You all right?”

Josh got up to one knee, rubbing the back of his head.

“I’ve been better.”

He got to his feet, looking around. The interior of the ship was trashed. The antenna mast collapsed and lay over the forward deck. The bow had carved a neat wedge in the wooden dock and the thick timbers ripped open the hull. Water rushed in. The forward half of the yacht was up on the dock and pointed up at the night sky. The car they used to get to the boat in the first place had ripped loose, tumbled over the finished mahogany deck, and dangled over the port side, half on the yacht and half off.

Josh shook his head.

“There’s gonna be a lot of paperwork for this.”

The sound of gunfire made them duck behind the console. Josh drew his pistol from the shoulder holster under his jacket. None of the bullets hit the yacht, however. Josh peeked over the edge of the shattered window.

“It’s those guys who were shooting at us. They’re firing on the dock security,” he said. In the distance they heard police sirens. “It’s gonna get interesting now. Come on, we still got work to do.”

Jerry went with Josh out the side door, away from the gunfire. Jerry’s heart was pumping. He hadn’t been this excited since he saw action in the desert, and compared to what he’d been through in the last hour or so, his experiences with war were pretty calm.

They went down the stairs and Josh stopped. Jerry bumped into him. One of the men on the dock caught a mooring line that was tied to a cleat on the bow and must have gone over the side in the crash. He tied the other end to a post on the dock and was scaling the rope, about halfway up, hanging upside down over the water like a raccoon. An Uzi dangled from a strap on his back.

Josh raised his pistol and aimed. The man saw him and

climbed faster. Jerry couldn't believe he would have the nerve to shoot a helpless guy like that, until Josh fired and the rope frayed and snapped about a foot above the man's hands. The expression on his face as he dropped into the water still holding the rope made Jerry want to laugh, but he didn't for fear of getting yelled at by Josh.

Josh, however, turned to Jerry and snickered.

"Man, that guy was dumb," he said, and went to the aft deck.

Jerry went after him, even more confused about his partner.

The sliding glass doors to the cabin at the rear were still intact. Inside, a man came out toward them with an Uzi. Josh saw him first and fired two shots through the glass before the man could raise the Uzi. Both shots hit him in the chest and he went down. The large panel of glass in the sliding door shattered on the deck like a sheet of crashing water. He and Jerry shielded their faces with their hands.

What Josh did next surprised Jerry. His pistol locked open on an empty chamber. He ejected the clip, which fell from the handle of the gun and landed in the pile of broken glass. He reached under his jacket for the holster, then patted each of his pockets.

"Damn," he said. He picked up the empty clip, jammed it back into the gun, and released the catch. "Watch my back," he said, and went through the broken door.

Josh was about to reach for the Uzi of the guy he just shot when a man Jerry recognized from the dinner party appeared from the stairs that led to the lower decks.

His name was Maury VanBriekenbock. He looked distinguished in his black Armani suit with his silver hair gelled back. His face had the sharp features of a hawk, and he had a nickel plated Italian 9mm automatic pointed at Josh. He looked desperate and much less sophisticated than he did at the party. When he saw him, Josh forgot about the Uzi and raised his pistol at Maury.

"McGowan, how could you do this to me?" VanBriekenbock

said. "I thought I could trust you."

Jerry wondered what he meant. Apparently these two had a history he was not aware of. Jerry knew Josh worked undercover for a long time, but he had no idea he was that deep.

"It's got nothing to do with trust, Maury. Drop the gun and let's talk about it," Josh said.

Both men faced each other with their pistols extended at arm's length.

Maury noticed Jerry, who stood behind Josh with the Uzi.

"Who are you, McGowan? You're a cop, aren't you?"

"Close enough. Just put it down, Maury. We can talk about this."

VanBriekenbock seemed to hesitate, then lowered his arm. Josh quickly stepped forward and took the pistol from his hands.

"We have nothing to talk about. You've betrayed me," VanBriekenbock said in a defeated voice.

"It's my job, Maury. Don't give me any grief. Now tell me how you're doing it."

Jerry listened while Josh put his own gun back in his shoulder holster and pointed the Italian 9mm at Maury. This was the culmination of months of investigation by Josh and his partners. They knew for a long time VanBriekenbock was smuggling technology out of the country, but they didn't know how he did it. Jerry was dying to find out himself.

However, VanBriekenbock said nothing. Josh stood with his hands on his hips. Jerry remembered the swarm of men on the dock. The shooting had stopped, but Jerry didn't know what that meant. He hoped the good guys won. Josh didn't appear too concerned.

"All right, Maury, let's see if we can solve your little puzzle."

Josh grabbed VanBriekenbock by the arm and dragged him down the stairs to the lower deck. Jerry went down behind them. He wasn't about to miss this. They would deal with the security guards later.

Josh threw VanBriekenbock on the couch. VanBriekenbock's lips were sealed tight. Jerry stood at the bottom of the stairs where he could see Josh and VanBriekenbock and anyone coming down.

"What should I try first?" Josh said, but still VanBriekenbock did not speak.

Josh looked around the cabin. Jerry wasn't sure what he was looking for. It looked like an ordinary room, decorated like a comfortable living room with chairs and a sofa and paintings on the walls, although most of it was dumped over.

"Let's try the safe," Josh said.

He went to a picture on the far wall and pulled the frame, which swung aside on a hinge like a cabinet door. Josh looked at the wall safe behind it, then at VanBriekenbock.

"Am I getting close, Maury?"

"You'll never get it open," VanBriekenbock said.

Jerry immediately felt defeated. He was right, of course, there was no way they could open that safe.

Josh sighed.

"You never did think much of me, did you, Maury?"

He spun the tumblers. Jerry wondered if he was trying to pull off a bluff a second time.

"There's nothing in it," VanBriekenbock said, a hint of desperation in his voice.

Josh stopped and looked at him.

"There's only one way to find that out," he said.

He turned the lever and the safe opened with a thunk. Jerry could read VanBriekenbock's last hopes falling by the look of horror on his face.

Josh reached into the safe and pulled out a black velvet pouch, carried it to VanBriekenbock and set it on the table. VanBriekenbock stared at it like it was a bloody knife.

"Am I warm now, Maury?" Josh said.

He tucked VanBriekenbock's Italian 9mm into his belt and squatted beside the table to open the pouch, and dumped the contents on the table. A handful of small, glittering diamonds

scattered on the polished wooden surface. VanBriekenbock stared straight ahead, his face set in stone, but Jerry was dazzled. Josh picked one up to examine it closely.

Jerry heard footsteps on the deck above.

"Someone's coming," he said, his voice a loud hiss.

Josh was unperturbed. He set the first diamond down and picked up a few others, holding them close to his eye in his open palm.

"Relax. That'll be Alwayne and some friends," Josh said.

His voice was calm and even and Jerry was instantly reassured. He lowered the Uzi. The footsteps got closer and Alwayne appeared at the top of the stairs.

"You guys have had a busy day," he said as he came down.

Behind him were two men in plain suits with badges hanging from the breast pockets of their jackets. Jerry stood aside when he saw they were FBI agents. Behind them came a pair of men in blue uniforms and black boots with bullet proof vests carrying Heckler & Koch sub-machine guns. One of the FBI agents took the Uzi from him.

Josh seemed indifferent.

"Hi, Alwayne," he said without looking up. "Glad you could make it, Selewski."

He set the few diamonds in his hand aside and picked up a few others.

"What'd you find, McGowan?" Selewski said.

He was a short man with straight blonde hair and a face that looked like it was red all the time.

"Nothing yet," Josh replied. He stood up and went through VanBriekenbock's coat pockets. "I know I'll find it, though."

He looked directly at VanBriekenbock, who stared past him at the wall. Jerry wondered what he was looking for. If he knew what it was, why didn't he know where to find it?

Alwayne kicked one of the overturned chairs.

"You never do anything subtly, do you, Josh?"

"On my pay? Are you kidding?" Josh said.

He found something in VanBriekenbock's coat pocket. Jerry

didn't see what it was until he put it in his eye. It was a jeweler's eyepiece. Josh picked up a handful of diamonds and sifted through them in his palm, gazing through the eyepiece.

"You better find something, McGowan, or there'll be hell to pay for all this," Selewski said.

He seemed to be the one in charge now. He and Josh did all the grunt work, then this Fed came in and took over the show, getting all the credit. And Jerry was pushed aside, the kid who didn't know better. Typical.

"Try this," Josh said.

He held up his palm and handed Selewski the eyepiece. Selewski put the eyepiece in his eye and looked down at the diamonds. He was quiet for a minute while he examined them. What was it? Jerry was anxious to know. Above, he heard the sounds of shuffling feet and murmured voices and from below the soft groan of the hull as the gentle movement of the water rubbed it against the dock.

"I'll be damned," Selewski said. He handed the eyepiece to Alwayne. "I'd never have believed it." He turned to the other agents. "Take Van-, Van Brick-and-brack, or whatever his name is, take him in for questioning."

Alwayne whistled. He took the eyepiece out of his eye.

"You knew this all the time, didn't you, you bastard," Alwayne said with a laugh and slapped Josh's shoulder. "You owe me for that damn car."

He laughed again and went up the stairs. A pair of agents hauled VanBriekenbock out.

"Jer, come here. I know you're dying to see this," Josh said.

He handed the eyepiece to Jerry. Jerry put it to his eye and looked down at the diamonds in Josh's palm.

"What am I looking for? Oh," he said when he saw it.

One of the diamonds had a flaw. To the naked eye it was a tiny black dot among all the shining facets. Magnified, the tiny black dot became a microchip.

"Computer chips? He's stealing chips?"

Josh collected all the diamonds and put them back in the pouch.

“Not just the chip, but what’s on the chip. Whatever information he wants to steal he digitizes, writes to a chip, or several chips, then transports the diamonds legally to whoever paid for the info.”

“Oh,” Jerry said. It seemed so simple. “So what’s on that chip?”

Josh handed the pouch to one of the agents.

“Just a set of algorithms, I think. Nothing too complicated.”

“Who’d have a use for that?”

Josh shrugged.

“Anyone who might want to, say, plot the trajectory of an object in motion back to its source, like a sub-launched missile, for example.”

“Oh.”

Jerry went up the stairs with Josh. They looked at Alwayne’s car, laying upside down on the port gunwale. A crane on the dock moved in to lift it off. A dozen or so FBI agents scoured the yacht, cataloging every single item, including every shell casing and dead body.

“You did a good job tonight,” Josh said.

He had his hands in his pockets and kicked a piece of broken wood.

“Thanks,” Jerry smiled.

He looked at his partner. That warrior was gone, and the simple, timid man had returned. It was like a transformation from Mr. Hyde back to Dr. Jekyll. Josh nodded toward the car.

“I don’t do this kind of thing every day.”

“Thank God.”

A race to stop the next Cold War.

Change of Heart

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