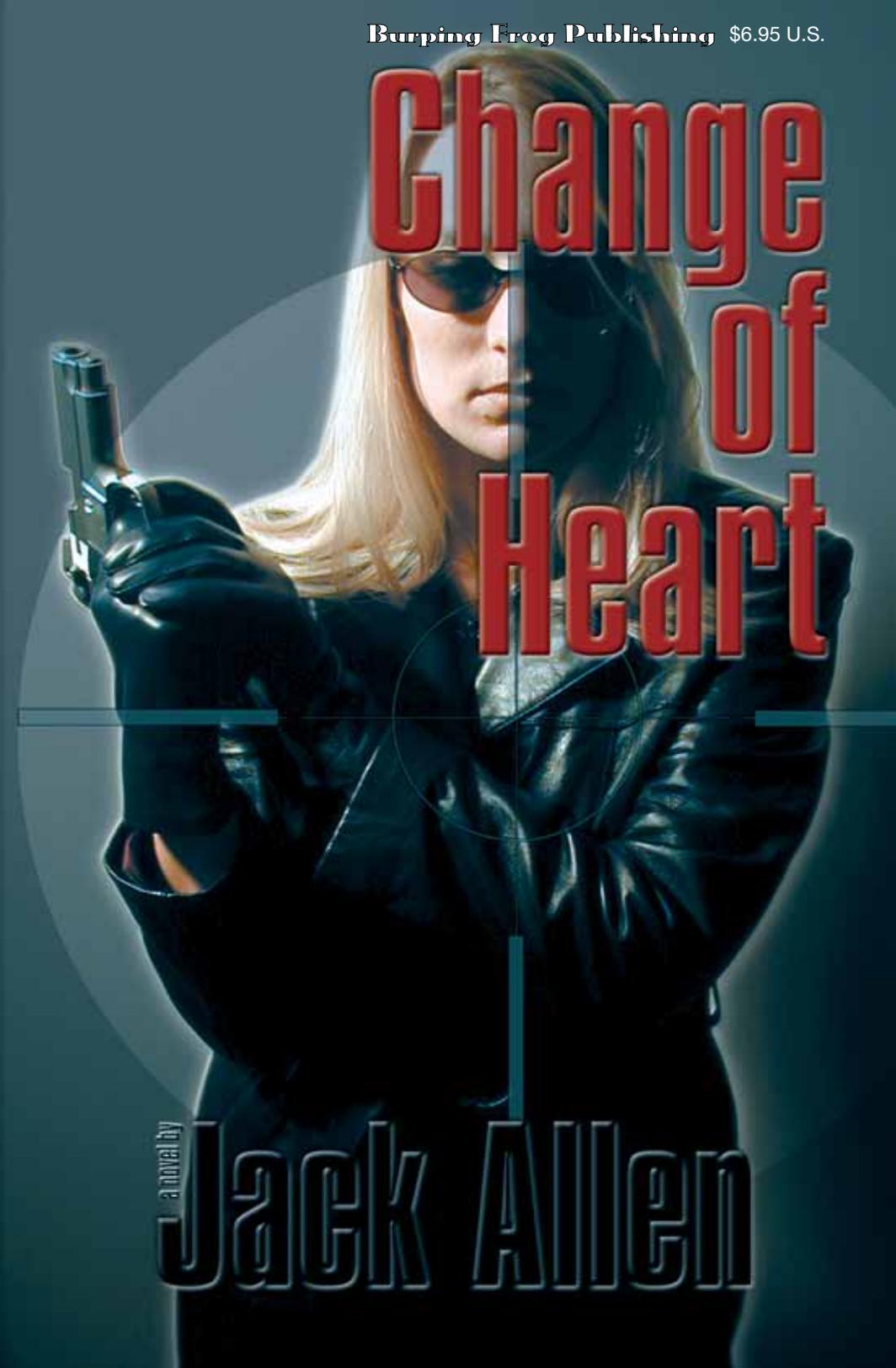


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# Change of Heart

a novella  
**Jack Allen**

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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