

Excerpt from **Change of Heart** by Jack Allen

"Bring us up close," Josh said. He stepped over the equipment in the bottom of the Zodiac and moved to the bow. Jurgen maneuvered alongside the sailboat. Josh grabbed the wooden rail on the gunwale and lifted himself aboard. He stumbled over the cushions on the seat and fell to the deck. The guy in the Zodiac held a flashlight over the gunwale, shining it down into the sailboat.

Josh was looking at a pair of deck shoes. He looked up. In the flickering light he saw Ron Finn's prone form laying back in the seat. His left hand still held the rudder wheel, but his blank eyes stared up at the dark sky. In the center of his chest was a big, red hole. Josh shivered. That Russian warship might be more trouble than they thought.

Josh tore his eyes away and took the flashlight from the guy in the Zodiac. "I'm gonna see what I can find. Don't go too far," he said.

"We'll be right here," Jurgen said.

Josh opened the hatch to the cabin and shined the light in. The floor was covered with several inches of water and various things like cushions and charts and plastic cups floated in it. Josh went down.

His heart was pounding. At any moment he expected a monster to jump out at him. He reached under his windbreaker for his Smith & Wesson. His heart sunk when he remembered it wasn't there. He felt naked without it. Ahead was a low doorway into the bow. He opened it. The bottom of the door swirled the water around his shoes. He shined the flashlight inside and there she was, laying in the bunks in the triangular bow, not moving.

"Hello?" Josh said, and stepped toward her. The light shined on her legs. She wore an old pair of jeans. As Josh got closer he saw they were much too big for her and he guessed they belonged to Ron. She also wore one of his t-shirts, a paint stained University of Virginia shirt Josh recognized. He had a similar Navy shirt, spotted with the paint they used to fix up Ron's beachfront house. The jeans were well down on her hips and the bottom of the shirt was up, exposing her belly button. He shined the light on her face and was startled.

This woman was a child. She had the angelic face of a girl no more than nineteen, Josh guessed. How could a girl this young be so important to a mission like this? How could she possibly be the evil KGB whore he came so far to interrogate? Ron must have made a mistake. Knowing him, he probably fell in love with this girl and tried to sneak away with her instead.

Valeria Konstantinova. Josh remembered the way Mironov spoke her name with such venom. He caught himself staring. She was beautiful. This vision before him shared nothing with the image of a tired, older woman he had created in his mind. He pressed his fingers to her neck just below her jaw. She had a pulse. Whoever she was, she was alive and he was going to rescue her.

Josh pulled her up the steps onto the open deck. She did not stir or make a sound.

"Did you find her?" Jurgen asked.

"Yeah. Hand me that life jacket." Josh reached over the gunwale and noticed lights back the way they had come. Jurgen looked back as well. A huge spotlight shined on the Monticello. Even from that distance, Josh could make out the steel hull of the Russian attack ship from the small amount of light that reflected off the water. There was about half a mile between the two ships.

"They just got there. We saw them getting close," Jurgen said.

"They'll come looking for us," Josh said.

"Then we have to get back soon."

Josh put the life vest on the girl. He held her up with one hand and slipped her arms through with the other. He thought about being back on that warm, dry ship and getting the hell out of this place. The thing he dreaded was the awful task of interrogating this girl when they got back. Something about it did not feel right.

A loud boom startled him. The guy in the Zodiac who had not spoken a word since they started the trip shouted a curse. Josh looked in the direction of the Russian attack ship. A second later, the rear of the Monticello exploded in a ball of flames. The concussion of the blast rolled out over the water.

"They're attacking! They're attacking!" Jurgen shouted. The other man was screaming a stream of obscenities.

"Settle down," Josh shouted. He was holding the vest open with one hand and the girl's wrist in the other. He didn't need a flashlight to see the look of horror on their faces. The light of the flames on the back of the Monticello was like a flare, even that far away.

Jurgen yanked on the outboard motor's pull cord. "I have to get back there," he said.

"Wait a minute," Josh yelled. He leaned over the gunwale and tried to grab the one guy by the collar of his jacket, but he was just out of reach. The sailboat keeled to the starboard side, the hull groaning as if in pain, and Josh scrambled to keep from falling into the water.

Jurgen wasn't listening anyway. The motor fired and he steered the Zodiac in the direction of the Monticello, shouting something Josh couldn't hear over the noise of the motor. Josh watched them go, his mouth hanging open. They were just a black blob with a bright yellow outline on the shimmering water moving toward the burning ship.

Another loud boom startled Josh again. He saw a flash of flame from the gun on the deck of the attack ship to the left of the Monticello. It lit the attack ship's hull, allowing Josh to see some details. Travis said it was small and fast, but it looked immense compared to the Monticello.

The Monticello exploded again. The blast rocked the smaller ship and snapped it in half. It sagged in the middle and began to sink. The attack ship moved in the direction of the sailboat, turning toward the tiny black shape of the Zodiac that bounced on the waves. A searchlight on the deck of the attack ship scanned in lazy arcs over the water. The beam was so bright Josh could see it penetrate a few feet into the greenish water.

He kept his eyes on the Zodiac and the attack ship as he struggled to get the girl into the lifevest. He was breathing hard and his hands were shaking. The

distance between the Zodiac and the attack ship closed rapidly. He knew Jurgen felt he had to get back to rescue anyone who might be in the water, but he looked crazy enough to take on the attack ship himself.

The motor of the Zodiac was just a buzz. Behind it, the light from the fire on the Monticello faded as the ship went under. The spotlight passed over the Zodiac then backed up to find it again and stayed with it. Josh could see Jurgen and the other guy shielding their eyes and waving and shouting. They were cut off by the roar of a heavy caliber machine gun.

Josh watched in horror. The entire Zodiac was obscured by a thousand jets of water that sprayed up when the large bullets struck the surface around the boat. A second later it stopped and there was nothing in the bright, white light but the shredded remains of the rubber Zodiac hull, which quickly disappeared beneath the surface.

Then the only sound was the deep, low rumble of the attack ship's diesel motors and the only light was that of the powerful searchlight dancing over the tops of the waves, coming closer.

Josh knew he had to move fast to get himself and the girl off the sailboat and he only had a couple of minutes to do it. In the pitch blackness he managed to get the life vest on the girl. Glancing back at the attack ship, he decided he had enough time to go back into the sailboat. He remembered seeing something down there that would be useful.

Holding his hand over the end of the flashlight to prevent the attack ship from seeing the light, he searched through the debris. Floating in the water, which was deeper than the last time he walked in it, was a self inflating life raft. He grabbed it and stuffed it into his jacket, then went back up. The searchlight was closer. He grabbed the girl, pulled her to the edge of the boat on the port side, away from the attack ship, and lowered her into the water. She went under briefly and the life vest brought her back to the surface, where she floated on her back. Josh jumped in just as the searchlight passed over the sailboat and froze on it.

Josh grabbed the girl and pulled her back into the darkness behind the sailboat before she drifted away. The attack ship's engines died to a quiet rumble. Josh paddled to the front of the boat, towing the girl, and peeked around the point of the bow where it met the water to see the attack ship. It stopped on the opposite side of the sailboat, shining its searchlight on it like a laser beam. Josh could see men on the deck and could hear their voices, although they were still too far away to make out words.

The wake from the attack ship's bow rolled toward the sailboat. Josh's chin was in the water, and when the wake reached him, he took a mouthful of water. The girl moaned. He paddled back into the darkness with her in tow.

They were face to face and Josh held his hand over her mouth in case she awoke and started screaming. Something bumped his leg under water. He looked around but saw nothing. He reached down and felt in the water. Maybe the girl was kicking him. Then he saw what it was and his eyes grew wide. A grey, triangular shape stuck out of the water a few feet away, slicing silently through the water, outlined against the black sky. It moved out beyond the bow of the sailboat, where

the glaring light of the searchlight passed over it, and Josh saw the outline of the shark's body under the water. His heart thumped and he was panicking. The shark was huge, as big as a house, and it wasn't alone. Another dorsal fin swam near the boat, attracted by the light.

He could hear voices speaking in Russian on the attack ship. An officer ordered two men to board the sailboat to search for survivors. They were a lot closer than Josh wanted them to be, but he'd rather take his chances with them than with the sharks.

The girl stirred. Josh was glad, because she was getting hard to hold. Her eyes opened a sliver and the first thing she saw was the fin of a shark passing a few feet away. Her eyes opened wide. Josh clamped his hand over her mouth just as she screamed. He hoped the noise of the attack ship's motor covered her muffled voice.

Josh leaned very close to her ear and spoke in Russian in a whisper. "I don't know if you speak English but if you don't stay still that fish will eat us and if you don't stay quiet your comrades will cut us to bite size pieces. Understand?"

She stared at him with her wide eyes and nodded. Her arms wrapped around him and she clung to him like a child, never taking her eyes off the shark. A third one appeared and passed very close. Josh could see its black eye staring back. He hoped they couldn't smell fear in the water, because he was shaking as much as the girl.

The Russian attack ship bumped against the side of the sailboat, which rocked in the water, startling the sharks. The side of the hull banged against the back of Josh's head. He heard shouting and a couple of sailors jumped aboard. Through the hull, Josh could hear their boots as they went below and opened cabinets and doors. The sailors shouted to each other.

One came to the gunwale and shined a flashlight over the water. Josh pulled the girl closer and pressed his back against the hull of the boat as hard as he could, staying below the bow where it curved out over his head. The beam from the flashlight passed over the sharks and paused on them for a moment. The sailor came forward until he was directly over Josh and the girl.

The other sailor said to shoot one of the sharks. Josh and the girl tensed up together. The ripping sound of a machine gun just above their heads startled them. Sprouts of water shot up around the fin of the shark Josh was watching. Its body rolled over in the water, showing the shredded red holes in its flesh. The other sharks attacked the body. The calm, undulating water turned to a violent, pinkish froth. Josh paddled away, towing the girl with him to get as far from the sharks as he could before they were attacked as well.

The sound of the attack ship's engine rose. It was moving off. Josh heard the sailors' voices, but couldn't make out their words over the noise of the engine and the splashing water. He did hear two distinct thuds on the deck of the sailboat just behind them, and he had a pretty good idea what they were.

Towing the girl again, Josh paddled as hard as he could away from the boat. He wasn't getting far and knew he didn't have much time.

"Hold your breath," he said in Russian. The girl looked confused and he

yelled at her to do it. She sucked in a deep breath and he dragged her under against the buoyancy of the lifevest. It tried to pull her back up and he pushed her down harder.

They heard a pair of muffled explosions. The concussion of the blasts shook them as it came through the water. The bright light of flames illuminated the water around the sailboat like a midday sun. Josh found himself staring into the black eye of a shark as big as a house only a few feet to his left. It appeared disoriented by the concussion waves. Something splashed in the water near Josh, startling him and the shark, which darted away. It was the mast of the sailboat, cutting through the water like a knife through a cake. It dropped past Josh and sunk into the dark water. The light of the flames faded and he and the girl were enveloped in darkness once again.

She bobbed to the surface. Josh emerged beside her. She was paddling hard in a panic to get away from the boat, which was engulfed in flames. She pulled off the lifevest and started swimming. Josh swam after her.

The attack ship turned away and moved off at a slow pace. Josh could see it clearly in the light of the fire. He decided he couldn't wait any longer. If they saw them and turned back, he would have to find a way to deal with their machine guns. He pulled the folded raft from his jacket, found the cord, and yanked. With a woosh of compressed air, the small yellow raft inflated on top of the water.

The girl stopped paddling and looked back. Josh pulled himself over the fat, tubular side. She turned and swam toward the raft. Josh pulled her in. There was not much room for both of them in it, and she huddled against the side as far from him as she could, watching him with wary eyes. Josh looked away and watched the sailboat sink, feeling the warmth of the flames on his face until they were extinguished with a loud hiss as the boat slipped beneath the water.

A hole broke in the cloud layer overhead and revealed a sky of stars. Josh stared up at it. In the pitch darkness it was the only thing he could see. The only sound was the gentle lap of water against the rubber raft, which swayed softly on the shallow waves. He settled back and sighed, counting each tiny point overhead. It had been a long day and he was exhausted. He couldn't even remember how he managed to wind up in this situation. He certainly had no idea how he would find a way out.