

Part I

Changes

Life belongs to the living, and he who lives must be prepared for changes. -- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

"Turn right onto County Road fourteen in one quarter mile," droned the monotone disembodied GPS voice; not quite male, but female enough to have been named in honor of Jason's ex-girlfriend. He christened his smart-phone GPS persona upon first use due to the fact the voice instantly irritated him and ceaselessly told him where to go.

"Got it, Shonda, now get off my ass." Jason replied, his voice almost as mechanical as his left index finger tipped the turn signal indicator. Impressively, he steered only with his left thumb. He may have actually used his right hand to drive if it weren't in the backseat out of reach and view, rummaging for his camera bag on the rear floorboard. His passenger had to lean hard to the right to avoid his combat patterned elbow as it narrowly missed clocking her in the left cheekbone.

"Wow, you do get violent when you hear her firm, but authoritative voice, huh?" Johnnie snatched her helmet from the floorboard of the Air Force sedan, planting it firmly on her head.

"I really didn't expect to have to suit up till we got to the training area, but I can see it may be necessary." The public affairs troop wasn't going to participate in the combat training going off at the test range today, but she would cover the event at the isolated desert training sight for the base newspaper. Jason was not only her driver for today, but her best staff photographer.

"Firm, but authoritative?" Spoken like a true reporter." Jason retorted. "The world would be a better place if the media reported like we think. 'Calmly sadistic and controlling' would be more appropriate... although a few other words come to mind." His sarcastic tone belied the amused flicker in his bright blue eyes which were cranked at hard left in order to see the road ahead, although he fully faced Johnnie. He stretched even farther to access the unseen bag. Her outer uniform shirt, earlier discarded in the backseat now flew past her head, narrowly clearing her headgear and landing in her lap. The good news was, the shirt had apparently blocked Jason's access to the bag; the bad news was, he had to skew his body even more to obtain a better reach for whatever treasure was more important than driving. This time it was his head, protected only by a fine layer of cropped red hair, which fronted the assault on the wary passenger.

The country road was paved, but filled with pot holes, and possessed just enough hills and turns to make the driving airman's acrobatics disconcerting to the typically laid back noncommissioned officer sitting next to him.

"Jason, I'm not a fan of off-road driving and even though we're probably the only ones out here ..."

As if those words summoned a real-time-to-slow-motion scene change, the steering wheel jerked slightly to the right as Jason leaned for that vital extra inch into the back seat. Utterly obedient, the right front tire angled and dropped off the pavement. The previously unseen farm truck coming over the hill was initially oblivious to the blue car as it nearly swerved off the road. The truck driver never heard the woman's shouts or her driver's obscenities as he overcorrected, propelling the car out of control and launching Technical Sergeant Johnnie Carter's world into an unstoppable chain of events.

There are few things more regrettable than the first tendrils of consciousness when those threads are powered by the dull pain of a hangover. Her crackling brain cells begged for hydration. Carpet mouth. Really had to pee.

This was a familiar feeling, but one she hadn't experienced in a while and one she certainly hadn't missed. Why did she do this? Who had she been with? Or who was she still with...Who was breathing in her ear? Why did her feet hurt and why did it feel like she was sleeping with her combat boots on?

When the last question formed, it shoved Johnnie's mind from a vague, achy awareness to a painful state of alertness. Her head and feet weren't the only things that hurt and before she even opened her eyes, she had a strong new suspicion that alcohol had not been a factor. Her chest tightened as she turned her head toward the "breather." Her eyelids strained to lift, sticking slightly, then opened - feeling as though they should creak in the act.

Two of her questions were immediately answered with the first blurry image. Too close to see clearly, but all too discernible was a large set of nostrils which were planted in the hairy brown face nestled in Johnnie's left shoulder. She jerked her head away and reached behind her, finding fur, and realized with horror that the creature was pressed against her back. Had this beast been "spooning" her in her sleep? What...?

In a fogged panic, Johnnie had to push straight up with her right arm to dislodge herself from between the now waking dog and a cold wall where she was tightly wedged. She leapt up too quickly, nearly tumbling off a disheveled bed, noting the dog was now on its feet...all three of them. It yawned, then appeared to grin, squinting, tail in full wag. Certain she was having a nightmare, Johnnie leaned against the wall and buried the heels of her hands into her aching eye sockets, rubbing hard. She filled with dread when her effort to redirect the bad dream failed.

"Okay." She exhaled, dropping her hands. She reached back to the wall for balance as she squeezed her right eye closed, slowly opening the left in an unconscious attempt to simultaneously focus and control the brain pain. Now in a slightly tilted full stretch, the three-legged dog spanned the entire length of the bed and flashed another toothy grin as soon it noticed her incredulous stare.

"Nice dog..." she said as she eased her other eye open and slowly stepped off the edge of the mattress, her back still against the wall. She gained her footing quickly, realizing the mattress rested on the floor. Voracious hand-licking commenced, allowing Johnnie to dismiss the killer-mutant-dog threat. Still unsteady, she took in the features of the small, dark room surrounding her.

The only furniture was the mattress and an old straight-backed chair. In an independent assessment, her nose detected dust, must and dog. The single plastic-covered window revealed very faint light through what appeared to be old pillow-case curtains. This was not full daylight, but Johnnie didn't know if the sun was fading or just gaining strength. As she searched her mind for any source of orientation, a vision of the last moments before the accident rushed her senses and she almost lost control of her bladder. She grabbed the chair and quickly sat, providing an instant lap for the dog's huge head, which she automatically and mindlessly scratched, thoughts racing.

Where was she? How did she get here and where was Jason? Did someone pick her up? An early lifetime of chaos, followed by years of military training had made this woman strong and adaptable, but, sadly, hours of television crime dramas had also given her an overactive awareness of the world's evil.

In her disoriented state, the less controlled part of her mind sprung into the darkest corners of anticipation. Dry throat closing in fear, her chest tightened and she clenched the dog's ears.

Oh God. Deserted empty room with only a mattress... had some psychopath hauled her unconscious body from the accident scene after finishing off poor Jason? She scanned the room for signs of blood spatter from previous victims...tools of torture, bones...

Nothing. She exhaled with relief, but still had to get out of here before the psychotic monster came back and realized she was awake! She looked down at herself, answering another of her initial questions. She did have her combat boots on because she was wearing exactly what she'd worn in the car before... before whatever happened; tee-shirt uniform pants and combat boots. In the limited light, her clothes and boots were very soiled with dirt and what looked like blood, but she couldn't discern where it had come from and it wasn't wet. She was patting her legs, checking for injuries when she felt her cell phone in her side cargo pocket.

"There is a God..." she whispered, pushing the heaving head from her lap to retrieve the phone. After pressing the activation button, the screen lit with the speed of growing grass, only to reveal that while the phone still had power and hadn't been disabled by the accident, there was no reception. Shoving it back in her pocket with an expletive, she carefully stood and moved quickly to the window. Covered with thick dingy plastic, the single paned window was apparently not made to open. The window and the plastic, as well as the makeshift curtains, reminded her of some of the more humble homes she'd lived in as a child. Like in the windows in those homes, the glass in this window also bore a few cracks.

Johnnie was beginning to pick at the plastic to peel it off so she could break the glass when she heard the door on the far side of the room creak, as if someone were peeking in. Adrenaline rushing, she swung around, ready for the fight of her life. The timid opening became a full swing, crashing the door against wall.

"Hey, don't do that! It keeps the cold and bugs out! Hey, whoaaaaa! Back off!"

Having learned in self-defense classes to charge a would-be attacker, Johnnie had reflexively launched across the small room, chair thrust in front of her. She was certain to gain the upper hand when she suddenly realized she was about to mow over a small woman. Worse yet, the woman held a baby.

Stunned by the serial killer-turned-mother, Johnnie halted so suddenly she nearly lost her balance and fell forward, jarred as the chair slammed into the floor. The woman swung the baby away from the estimated point of impact, producing an instant wail from the bundle.

"Just hold on now, just stop!" The woman turned halfway back toward Johnnie, quickly flashing a precautionary hand, then, gently bouncing the screaming baby, she used the hand to cradle its head. When she looked at the screaming baby, the lady suddenly smiled and, well, glowed as she cooed and calmed it. This and her apparent quick dismissal of Johnnie's attempted attack seemed a bit odd under the circumstances.

The dog couldn't pass up the unbelievable good fortune of its new roommate being back at eye-level. Seizing the opportunity to bond again, it hobbled over and slathered Johnnie's ear with a large spongy tongue. Johnnie was certain she had officially entered the Twilight Zone.

“Now come in here so we can sit down.” Baby calmed, the slight woman turned her back and walked into a dark hallway, as if leading the way. Johnnie took a deep breath and, no longer perceiving a life-threatening situation, her hierarchy of natural needs immediately shifted.

“May I please use your restroom?” She asked awkwardly in a total state of urgency; she crab-walked in attempt to hold her water. She followed the small figure, quickly taking in the limp brown hair, oversized t-shirt and sweat pants.

“You’re right next to it...”

Seeing the closet sized latrine, Johnnie quickly side-stepped in, wedging the door closed and was in near rapture within seconds as she managed her needs. The tiny room was dark and when she stood, she felt around for a light switch with one hand, clutching her trousers with the other. A single bulb revealed at least one fact about her current whereabouts; Johnnie had lived in her share of trailer houses over the years, and this was an old one. Tell-tale dark paneling, cramped space and under-sized fixtures, complete with a low stained ceiling gave it away. Where the hell was she?

Pants fastened, she turned 180 degrees right to face the miniature sink adjacent to the commode. At first glance into the darkish, chipped wall mirror, air escaped her lungs and she leaned forward. Her dimly lit image was unsettling, not for the reasons she expected, but because she felt a lot worse than she looked. Her hair was still pinned back per uniform regulations, although a few fuzzy tentacles floated loosely in the eerie light. Nose close enough to the mirror to create a small patch of fog, Johnnie scanned her unremarkable features for cuts, bumps...seeping brains...and found only a small straight bruise over her left eyebrow.

Upon further inspection, she saw her hands bore the same dirt, and what looked like dried blood, as her clothing and boots...whose blood was this? Jason’s? Was he dead on the road? Did anyone at the base know what happened?

“Are you alright in there?” The voice yanked her back to reality with a start.

“Uh, yes, thank you, I’ll be right out.” Johnnie called. Shaken by the way the runoff from her arms and hands discolored the water, she finished a quick sink wash up. She made her way into the adjacent living/family-room/kitchen. She asked, “Please, where are we? How did I get here after the accident? Do you know if my friend is okay? Have you talked to anyone from the base?”

The woman was now perched on the edge of an old plaid sofa, rocking the sleeping baby. She stared with what was probably a degree of confusion equal to that of her guest. After a moment of awkward silence, she said, “I don’t know about no accident, but I gotta say them clothes of yours gave me a scare. You better sit.” The gaunt young woman gestured to a folding chair, next to an all-purpose card table covered with the only literature in sight – tabloid newspapers. Johnnie sat, pushing some of the world’s most intriguing headlines away to settle her arms in a resting position.

“Do you want some water?” Asked the woman, looking from Johnnie to the baby, and back.

“I’m sorry, but I really need to know what’s going on...The last thing I remember was we were about to hit a truck, and...” Her voice left her before the words were finished and she suddenly felt drier than she’d ever been in her life. “Yes, I would like some water, please, if you don’t mind.”

“Mind? You are one unlikely savior, ma’am, but water is the least I can give you after you healed my Em, here.”

Johnnie’s mind flickered with that feeling, once more, that she was somewhere other than reality.

“I’m sorry? What?” was all Johnnie could manage, cocking her head as she spoke. Exhausted and anxious again, she watched in the near darkness as the other woman padded the few steps across flattened orange shag carpet to a small battered sink. Johnnie, rarely at a loss for words, just sat as she heard the squeal of a cranky faucet. Water ran, then stopped with a sharp squeak. The woman turned, juggling the baby and an over-full plastic cup. She slowly closed the short distance between them, handed Johnnie the drink and sat at the only other folding chair. Johnnie never took her eyes off the bloodshot, but kind – almost adoring – eyes of the young, worn, mother, who stared with equal intensity; only she was smiling.

After drinking the entire cup of water, Johnnie said, “I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I really need to call someone if you haven’t already.”

“Well, I don’t know why I would’ve, but you can use the phone over there...”

Seeing an old pink wall phone, Johnnie stood too quickly and leaned against the table, palms flat against the scarred vinyl surface, eyes clamped shut.

“Can you at least tell me who you are and where I am?” she implored, still in darkness, trying to will away the galaxy of stars dancing inside her eyelids. She heard the answer through slightly ringing ears.

“My name is Lisa and you’re in Green Acres. Mobile Home Park, that is.” A sudden flash of the old television series and its main character shot through Johnnie’s mind.

“What town?” she asked, eyes clenched more tightly, praying for Lisa to say something that would ground her.

“We are right outside of Chut...but how could you not know that, I mean, I don’t want to be mean, but...?” Johnnie accepted the answer and ignored the question. Simultaneously exhaling and opening her eyes, she wondered how in the heck she had ended up in the tiny isolated town of Chut, at least three miles from the training ground and probably five miles from the accident site.

First things first. She gave the Lisa a faint smile, still confused by the nearly loving return-gaze, and made her way to the phone. She called her supervisor, the base public affairs officer, opting for his cell phone since she had no idea what time it was.

“Captain Stass.” His answer was uncharacteristically void of personality, sounding anxious and almost demanding.

“Sir, it’s Sergeant Carter...”

“Johnnie! Where the hell are you? Are you alright? We’ve left a thousand messages on your phone. You have no idea...” He stopped short... “Where are you?”

She was flooded with relief flooded at the sound of a familiar voice. Before answering his questions, she had to ask, “Sir...What about Jason? Is Jason OK?”

“He’s fine, Johnnie...but when he got the police back to the accident site, you were gone and...,” he was suddenly and awkwardly silent. “He’s fine, just a few bruises and worried sick about you. Are you hurt? Why haven’t you answered your phone? Are you with anyone?”

“I’m fine, but I think my clothes are covered with blood and I was afraid...” Her damned throat defied her again, constricting so tightly it hurt as she fought back sudden tears. “I thought the blood might be Jason’s. And there’s no cell coverage out here.” She was all at once uneasy and very, very tired. She simply wanted to get back.

After a short silence, she told him she was at trailer park near Chut. Placing her hand over the phone, she asked Lisa for more specifics. Her apparent newest fan gave her information about their exact location, which she passed on to the captain. At least there was hope of rescue.

“Johnnie, don’t go anywhere and don’t call anyone else. It will take me at least an hour to get there and it’ll be hard to find in the dark.” That meant the sun was setting, she thought, then foolishly realized it had, indeed, gotten darker since she awoke. So the accident must have been earlier today...It would be Friday night now.

“Yes, Sir, I won’t go, but I really want to call Jason...” His response cut her off.

“Don’t call. Johnnie, I mean it...just wait. I’ll be there as soon as possible. Don’t call and don’t leave.” And his voice disappeared, leaving the line dead.