



His wife is missing, his credit cards are invalid,  
and strangers have taken over his house.  
This soldier's return isn't what he expected.

*A Hero's*  
HOMECOMING

CARLENE  
HAVEL

A Hero's  
Homecoming

Carlene Havel

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## **A Hero's Homecoming**

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# CHAPTER ONE

Colonel Rich Martino was more exhausted than he could ever remember being. After so many delays and time zone changes, he couldn't even figure out how long he had been traveling. It was three-twenty p.m., Manila time, when he left the Philippine Islands. His flight was supposed to have left at noon, but a mechanical problem held things up for three hours. He missed his connection in Hawaii and spent an extra day in the Honolulu Airport waiting to get on a flight to San Francisco. After a brief stop in Guam, he finally touched down in California. Back in the good old U.S.A. for the first time in two years. He would have enjoyed it more if he hadn't been so worn out.

By the time Rich reached San Francisco, his whole travel itinerary was a mess. He'd been through enough delays to take it in stride—up to a point. Eyes gritty, he went to the airline counter to see what he could do. Somehow, he managed to get in the slowest line. The trainee agent had to ask for help three times to get Rich ticketed. Since he sounded almost incoherent to himself, he sensed he wasn't making a lot of sense to the ticket agent. After what seemed like an eternity, the arrangements were made, his boarding pass in his hands, and he was on his way home. Home. San Antonio, Texas. That was going to be a welcome sight.

After clearing through security, Rich located a pay phone to call his wife. There was no line, since everyone else who wanted to make a call was using a

cell. Technology had no use in the jungles of Mindoro. There, a man needed a reliable weapon and his wits about him. Rich promised he would fix himself up with a cell phone as soon as he got a chance. Maybe even tomorrow. He smiled at the thought. Who was he kidding? Tomorrow he would sleep all day.

He knew he couldn't be functioning well when he heard a recording indicating the number he entered was not a working telephone. "Can't even remember my own phone number," he grouched to no one in particular.

Rich had emailed Rita from the American Embassy in Manila to inform her he was on his way home. He couldn't remember if that was on Sunday or Monday. Occasional email and even rarer phone calls had been Rich's only contact with his wife since their brief vacation in Hawaii last summer.

During the last year he'd reached the realization he was tired of living in the jungle, chasing terrorists. Though proud of his work as a special agent, he figured at forty-four it was someone else's turn to carry the load.

Realistically, Rich knew as long as he was in the Air Force he would have essentially the same kind of job. Not many American Air Force officers were fluent in Tagalog. Even fewer could survive for months at a time in the jungle. The more he let himself think about retirement, the more Rich wanted it. He could live in a comfortable home with his beautiful wife, spend time with his Dad, take a cruise every year, and fly off to Vegas any time he desired. After a while, retiring seemed not merely the right thing, but the only thing to do. He could always work for his dad if he got bored. But he wouldn't have to do anything he didn't

choose to.

Rich had planned his finances carefully. He and his wife could live comfortably on his savings and substantial stock portfolio, without ever touching his retirement pay or Rita's income. Some of his friends sank into depression just thinking about leaving the service. He told the embassy staff—when was that? Monday?—"I'm leaving with mixed emotions, happiness and joy."

That tired old cliché made the rounds in military circles for years, but it still got a laugh.

A broken seat delayed the flight from San Francisco to San Antonio for thirty minutes. After they pushed away from the gate, the pilot announced bad weather brewed over Texas and they would wait just a bit before taking off. While serving a third round of free drinks, one of the flight attendants doubled over with stomach cramps and started throwing up in the aisle. So they returned to a gate to wait for a cleanup crew and a replacement flight attendant.

As tired and frustrated as he was, Rich couldn't help thinking the whole situation was somewhat comical. What a way to end his Air Force career! Maybe it was the liquor. He chuckled, thinking how much fun he would have telling his wife and dad about the trip home. Rich wondered if his dad would be present when he arrived. Several of Rita's recent emails mentioned his father was doing a lot of traveling back and forth to New York. Must be some kind of business deal.

Rich's plane touched down in what his dad always called the Great State of Texas a few minutes after midnight. The weary travelers straggled into an almost deserted airport. Rich was glad he hadn't asked Rita to

meet him. He always said you never knew what could happen with an overseas flight and this trip clearly demonstrated Murphy's Law had not been repealed. He was mildly surprised when his suitcase came around the carousel. Losing it would have been the final touch. When Rich saw an available taxi sitting outside the baggage claim area, he decided his string of bad luck had run its course. He was only a thirty-minute ride from his cool, comfortable bed.

A twinge of guilt nipped at Rich when he slumped into the back seat of the taxi, leaving his oversized bag for the short little driver to load into the trunk. I'll take care of the guy with a good tip, he thought. He was way too tired to fool with luggage.

Normally, Rich would have chatted with the taxi driver, asking where he was from and catching up on San Antonio's endlessly entertaining local politics. Instead, he said curtly, "Fifty-seven hundred Glen Oak Meadow, near Randolph."

Only when he heard the high-pitched, "Yes, sir. I know right where that is," did Rich realize his driver was a woman. Regret cut deeper for making her lift his suitcase, but his remorse wasn't enough to keep him from falling asleep.

A noise startled Rich awake and he reached for his assault rifle. In a single quick motion, he was on the sidewalk. His suitcase too. The thumping noise proved to be the little driver closing the trunk of her taxi. Reality presented itself.

Nothing but twenty-dollar bills in his wallet. Rather than wait, he paid for his nineteen-dollar ride with two twenties and said, "I don't need any change."

The girl's eyes bulged. "Thanks!"

In an instant she was nothing but tail lights,

obviously making a quick getaway in case the big tip was a mistake. For a brief moment, Rich wondered why that little girl drove a taxi on the night shift, but his attention turned quickly to the front door of his tan brick home.

The neighborhood was quiet, the only movement a yellow cat stealthily prowling across a nearby lawn. The spacing of street lights and front porch lights gave the street a dim glow of suburban security. Yards were neatly maintained. Everything looked *so* clean. Back in the U.S.A. at last. San Antonio was equally as hot and humid as the jungle, but on the other side of that door would be a wonderful invention called air conditioning.

Rich's luggage made a muffled, rubbery noise as he rolled it to the front porch. Rattling keys out of his pocket, he wondered if Rita had thought to put his favorite flavor of ice cream in the fridge. A bowl of *dulce de leche* would be great.

Rich fought to unlock the door, which only rattled in his grasp. He pulled the key out of the lock and examined it. Fatigue overwhelmed him...maybe he had the wrong key. But, no, that was the one, the silver key that said TRU-SEC across it. He tried again, but the lock was frozen. A light came on upstairs. Well, as long as Rita was awake, he would ring the doorbell. The chimes sounded at the press of a button. The upstairs light suddenly flicked out, but no one came to the door. He rang again, trying to shake off the sense that he was being watched. If this was Rita's idea of a joke...

Fury mounted as he stood outside his own home and knocked sharply on the door. "Rita? Let me in. It's Rich."

There were scurrying sounds, but still no Rita. This time he pounded on the door with his open hand. "Rita! Open this door or I'm going to break it down."

Too bad if he woke up the neighbors. He was hot, hungry, and exhausted. He wanted inside that house. Now.

The safety chain kept the door from opening more than a few inches. In the soft porch light, Rich made out the concerned face of a man he had never seen before. Pakistani, perhaps? Indian?

In his clipped British accent the man asked, "Is it possible you have arrived at the incorrect street address?"

For a moment, Rich thought he might be at the wrong place. But, no. This was his house. He had planted that boxwood under the front window. He had painted the shutters and trim white.

With a voice of authority, he fired questions. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I am Chandra Pulashty. This is my home. Is it possible you are searching for the previous owner, Mrs. Martino?"

Previous owner? "I'm Mrs. Martino's husband."

"Quite so?" the man said gently, almost sadly. "My family bought this house last month. It is possible you will be able to locate Mrs. Martino elsewhere, but I do not know where."

With that, he slowly closed the door. Rich heard the deadbolt click. If he were twenty years younger, Rich would've kicked down the door. The wisdom that came from making too many mistakes of that kind reminded him breaking and entering would not solve his problem.

He was stunned. The scene was surreal. Rich

collected himself for a few minutes, then pulled his suitcase to the next block and sat on a bus stop bench. He needed some time to clear his head.

Things had been great between him and Rita when she was married to Jack. When the couple split over Rich and Rita's affair, Dad warned him, "Son, if she ran around on her last husband, she's going to run around on the next one."

He didn't listen. Rita was gorgeous and Rich lonely. He tried to ignore the way other men looked at her when they went to a bar for a few drinks. Although he often resented the way she looked back at them, he tried not to think about that too much. He suspected she was glad when he got his orders for the Philippines, but didn't want to believe their marriage was falling apart.

Somehow, he convinced himself Rita would be waiting when he arrived home, ready to welcome him with open arms. Well, maybe she *was* waiting, somewhere. Maybe things were not what they seemed. Rich would sort that out as soon as he could. The immediate problem was finding a place to spend the night.

Rich considered his options. He could wake up a neighbor and ask to use the phone to call his dad. But he didn't know for sure who lived in any of these places now. If he could talk his way into someone's house, there was a good chance his father would still be out of town.

He could find an unpopulated area and sleep under the stars. He'd done that more nights than he cared to remember in the last twenty years. But that had been in the real jungle, not the urban one. How many houses had been built, and where, since he left

town? Sleeping in some guy's yard could get a man picked up by the local cops and slapped with a record for misdemeanor vagrancy.

So far, retirement had nothing to recommend it.

Rich opted for his long-time refuge, the U.S. Air Force. He had driven from this neighborhood to Randolph Air Force Base and back five days a week when he was assigned there. So he knew the distance—four-point-three miles, one way. On a good day, jogging the round trip wouldn't work up a good sweat. Dog tired, hungry, hefting a carry-on, walking and dragging a suitcase? Probably an hour and a half. That would put him at the main gate about three a.m. With a little luck, he could secure a place to spend the night at Randolph, maybe even catch a ride from the main gate to his room.

Rich opened his carry-on bag and removed the duty-free champagne he had planned to share with Rita. It was good liquor, but he didn't feel like carrying it four miles tonight. He grinned, thinking about some surprised schnook finding the intact bottle at the bus stop the next morning.

One would think any fool who would carry a magnum of champagne eight thousand miles would at least have a drink. The prospect was tempting, but his survival instincts told him to stay completely alert until the situation was under control. He fished around in his luggage for some fresh socks and athletic shoes. Thus prepared, Rich slung his small bag over his shoulder, grabbed the handle of his suitcase and started hiking.

"Welcome home, Colonel Martino," he muttered. "A grateful nation thanks you for your many years of faithful service." What else could go wrong today?

## A Hero's Homecoming

The first raindrops began to fall.

## CHAPTER TWO

Charlotte Phillips looked strangely out of place in the emergency waiting area. Most of the people who drifted in and out of the room were dressed casually. Charlotte wore a pastel pink suit, her ivory silk blouse covered with tiny pink flowers framed by pale green leaves, her high heels polished and gleaming. A few strands of her exceptionally long chestnut hair were starting to escape the braid wound around her head, but otherwise she looked crisp and professional.

Dr. Stephens, still wearing his green scrubs, strode over and sat by Charlotte.

"Mr. Martino is going to make it," he said. "It's fortunate you got him here when you did. A few more hours...well, he's lucky you checked on him. Now, I can't say he'll be all right. But he's going to live. In a week or two, if everything goes well, you can move him to a rehab facility. The hospital has a list of places we recommend if you don't already know of one. Make the arrangements now, so you will be prepared when, and if, he's ready to be moved. I will be by tomorrow evening around seven. Meanwhile, here's my office number. You can call me any time and I'll get the message." He handed Charlotte a business card. "You are his daughter, correct?"

"No, Dr. Stephens," Charlotte replied. "Mr. Martino and I are not related. I'm trying to find his daughter-in-law, but so far I haven't been able to reach her. As long as Dick is all right, I'm only a friend. If

he's not able to make his own decisions, my understanding is that I will become his legal guardian."

Dr. Stephens' air of medical competence fell away at the first mention of family relationships. "You'll need to talk to the business office, then. I really don't know how all of that works." He was halfway out of the room before he finished talking.

Charlotte tucked Dr. Stephens' business card into her purse. "Oh, Lord," she prayed silently, "thank you for sparing Dick. And please show me how best to help him. Amen."

Things had started to unravel earlier that morning when Charlotte's normally punctual client did not show for his nine o'clock appointment. Nor did he call. That wasn't like Dick Martino. If anything, he was too structured, too much a slave to deadlines and timetables.

Anita, Charlotte's office manager, phoned the Martino house and received no answer. Charlotte could not work past the feeling something was wrong. And, in a way, she had agreed to take responsibility for Dick.

Finally, the feeling of dread became so strong she drove to Dick's house. His car was idling in the tree-lined circle driveway with Dick slumped over the steering wheel. Charlotte immediately dug inside her purse for her cell phone. She rapped on the window of the locked car, but there was no response. Praying she hadn't arrived on the scene too late, she called nine-one-one.

An ambulance arrived in less than ten minutes, although it seemed to Charlotte to take forever. The locked car door didn't hinder the emergency

technicians. In a whirl of controlled chaos, the two men had Dick out of the car, onto a stretcher, and into the ambulance.

Charlotte reached inside the car, switched off the ignition, and removed the keys. So close to tears, she stared at them for a moment, then slipped them into her purse. Poor Dick.

Charlotte had counseled him for several months. He came to her depressed and lonely. He had only the remnants of a family. There was a daughter-in-law who did not appear to be very reliable. Dick's only child, a son, had been killed overseas, and his body never found. As for his twin granddaughters, their whereabouts Dick had not known for fifteen years.

Charlotte seldom took new clients because her schedule was full. She felt immediately Dick's motivation for seeing her was a desperate need for someone to talk to. Something about this hurting old man touched her soft heart. When he said, "Please help me. There's hardly anyone left in this world who cares whether I live or die. To tell you the truth, most days I don't much care either," Charlotte knew she would extend her office hours to make room for Dick. She had never been sorry.

Dick Martino was a man determined to change his life and change it he had. Soon after beginning to work with Charlotte, he had started going to church and established a relationship with Jesus Christ. The difference was remarkable.

In May, Dick and Charlotte had agreed he no longer needed psychological counseling. Dick thanked her for helping him work through his depression, to which she smiled and said she really thought he should thank God.

Dick grinned broadly and said, "I do that every day, Charlotte. Every day."

Dick still grieved for his son, but he looked forward to finding his granddaughters. He told Charlotte he planned to hire a detective agency to search for them.

Then, a month ago, Dick called and asked for a series of weekly appointments with Charlotte. She found this very peculiar and wondered what could be the cause. Why didn't Anita let Dick talk directly with her or at least ask more questions? However, his first session was scheduled for nine a.m. the following morning, so she wouldn't have to wait long for the mystery to be revealed.

Charlotte chose her career because she wanted to help others. She was always pleased when her clients' lives improved and was disappointed to think this one was in need of help again so soon. Dick surprised her by bounding into her office that next morning, right on time as usual, nattily dressed in plus fours and full of energy. "You don't exactly seem depressed, Dick," Charlotte had observed.

"Me? Depressed? You must be thinking about the old Dick, not this kid."

"Uh-huh," Charlotte replied. "Am I mistaken, or did you schedule an hour with your psychologist this morning?"

Dick laughed. "That I did, my lady. That I did." He eased into a comfortable chair, took a deep breath, and said, "Charlotte, I want you to do me a very great favor. I hate to ask and I wouldn't if there was another living soul I could think of to do it. But there isn't. I want you to be fallback executor of my will and the administrator of a trust. Now, before you say anything,

I hope you won't ever have to do any of this. I hope I'm going to find my granddaughters, Karen and Kathy. When they're old enough and ready, I'll make them responsible. But I haven't found them yet and they're still just kids. For all I know, something could have happened to one or both of them. Their mother is, well, she can be easily influenced. I have to protect the girls' interest for a few years. And, as my lawyer keeps pointing out, I am seventy-four years old. I'm in excellent health, but you never know. I don't want any of my ex-daughters-in-law to get anything and there are at least two of them who would arm-wrestle a grizzly bear if they thought he had a dollar bill. I want a good percentage of my assets to go to worthy causes and I don't even know right now which ones. Let me explain what's on my mind." For the next thirty minutes, Dick outlined his plan. He expected his granddaughters to inherit his estate. In the unlikely event the twins were never found, he wanted his wealth distributed to worthy causes. Dick had decided against leaving money to a recognized charity. "I like to fund what might otherwise fall through the cracks of our organized society. If I see on the six o'clock news a family's home burned, I rent them an apartment and buy their groceries until they get back on their feet. That kind of thing."

Dick wanted someone he could trust to make independent decisions in his place. "I know this is a lot to ask, Charlotte. Although you would be compensated for your time, taking care of my affairs would be nothing but a headache. You don't have to answer right away. Think about it a while if you need to and let me know when I come back next week."

Charlotte had many reservations. She had

managed financial matters for clients in the past, but never anything as open-ended, nor as substantial, as Dick's. She was more accustomed to taking care of monthly Social Security checks to make sure an elderly person lived as well as possible.

"What about your attorney, Dick? Why don't you put him in charge?" she asked.

"Jerry McClain? I would trust him with my life. Not only have I been doing business with Jerry for forty years, he's my best friend. In fact, I'm on my way to play golf with him this morning. Problem is, that buzzard is almost as old as I am. He only comes to the office once a week, to take care of me and another couple of life-long customers. He's had prostate cancer, two heart attacks, and on top of that he's a raging diabetic. If Jerry outlives me, which I seriously doubt, he wouldn't have the energy to do everything that needs to be done. I don't think he's the man for the job and neither does he."

"I can understand that," Charlotte sighed. "But why me?"

Dick hesitated. "Several reasons. You're much younger than me, but not so inexperienced you'll be taken in by some fast talker. Your Christian values show in everything you do. This part may make you mad, but Jerry had you checked out and said you're as clean as they come. And there's one more reason, the main one in my book. I've always been a good judge of people. I can talk to a man for a while and predict whether or not he's going to try to cheat me. I trusted you as soon as we met. Those dog-like instincts have served me well all my life." Dick paused and then continued. "I wish my son had inherited my ability to judge character. It could have saved him four bad

marriages.”

The slam of the closing ambulance door brought Charlotte out of her reverie. After what seemed like an extensive time connecting monitors, starting an IV, and taking readings, the emergency technicians were ready to transport Dick to a hospital. “You can follow us. If we get separated, we’ll be at the Methodist ER.”

Later, Charlotte would not be able to remember driving to the hospital. There was a flurry of activity getting Dick into the emergency room. Charlotte filled out some forms. She waited. And prayed. And remembered.

After Dick had asked Charlotte to be his executor, she’d prayed for guidance. Was this the right thing to do? She believed, as Dick did, that she was merely providing a safety net. She was certain he would live long enough to care for himself until his granddaughters were old enough to take responsibility. She never doubted the girls would be found. They weren’t hiding, after all, just out of touch.

When Dick showed up for his next appointment, Charlotte said, “Yes.” She warned him, however, that he would have to give her explicit instructions on how he wanted things handled.

“Of course.” Dick grinned. “That’s the purpose of today’s session. And next week we’ll use my time to go over to Jerry’s office and get the paperwork in order.”

As she sat in the hospital waiting area, Charlotte thought back over that second “business” session with Dick. He set the stage by filling her in on his family. Dick graduated from college and joined the Air Force shortly thereafter. He met and married his wife Nancy in Washington, D.C., where their son was born. A couple of years later, Dick was reassigned to Clark Air

Base in the Philippines. He and his family spent five years there in the early sixties. Then they returned to the Pentagon, followed by a short assignment in San Antonio, Texas, and once again to the Philippines for five additional years.

Dick finished his Air Force career in San Antonio. He and Nancy fell in love with the place and decided to make it their permanent home. After completing college, their son followed his father's example by becoming an Air Force officer. Dick started a small business to supplement his retirement income and keep busy.

When Nancy died of cancer six months before her granddaughters were born, Dick threw himself into his work. He became, as he described it, "A continuously more successful business man and a progressively worse human being."

Dick made it clear he loved his son wholeheartedly. Despite a string of divorces, Dick also admired him.

"From the time he was twelve years old," Dick reminisced, "I didn't have to worry about being gone, not with Junior in charge. He was never an adolescent. He was a little boy and then all of the sudden he was a man. Needless to say, if my son could be here, I wouldn't have to ask anybody to do anything for me. Junior would take care of everything."

Dick went on to describe his hopes and dreams for his granddaughters, his thoughts on the kinds of charities he wanted to support, and how he wanted a few personal belongings distributed among his old friends if anything happened to him. He showed Charlotte some family pictures he had brought with him. After they both dabbed a few tears, Dick went on