

JC^{INC}
NOVEL

JOHN CLARKSON

ONE
MAN'S
LAW

*A NOVEL OF VENGEANCE BY THE AUTHOR OF
AND JUSTICE FOR ONE*

ONE MAN'S LAW

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*No law can be sacred to me
but that of my nature.*

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I don't think most people know much about Hawaii beyond the usual images of beautiful beaches, destination hotels, and tourist attractions. There's more to this fascinating set of islands, including disenfranchisement, poverty, racism, and the fact that Hawaii has the largest concentration of U.S. Military bases and compounds in the country. To know about these things, you have to know the people who live there. Two people in particular helped me discover this "other" Hawaii.

When *One Man's Law* was first published, I wrote: This book could never have been written without the help of Richard McMahon who started out as my guide and ended up as my friend. He shared his knowledge of Hawaii with me, his experiences as a decorated Army officer, his companionship, and his home. That's just as true today as it was then. But now I can add that his friendship and support deepened over the years as we shared experiences, ideas, and thoughts regarding the process of writing. Thank you for all of that and more, Richard.

I'd also like to once again thank Roger Christie for giving generously of his time and sharing the power of his activist spirit. In the years since the book was first published, Roger's spirit has not only never wavered, it's grown stronger. Roger has paid the price for his beliefs and earned the accolades he deserves because of his commitment.

PROLOGUE

As dawn slowly pushed the darkness out of the cloudy sky over Pahoia-town, Billy Cranston smoked up his last bud, on the last day of his life.

He cradled a well-used wooden pipe in his right hand, sucked sharply, and inhaled deeply. He held his breath so that the sacramental smoke would seep deep into his lungs. He exhaled very slowly and sniffed back the exiting smoke, trying to capture all that the sacred herb had to give him.

He squatted coolie-style underneath a piece of weathered plywood hanging over the back of a rundown, empty wooden building sitting at the east end of a small rural village on the big island of Hawaii. Billy had slept under the flimsy shelter, wrapped in a tattered wool blanket that he carried rolled up, tied with a thick piece of twine, and slung across his broad back.

Billy settled into his plantation squat, pulled in more sacred herb, watching the small trails of smoke that rose from the little wooden pipe bowl. He watched the clouds in the dawn sky release a fine mist of tropical rain. He looked down at his worn-out boots estimating how long it would take him to hike the miles that lay ahead of him.

Billy took another toke. He had cultivated the marijuana himself, not too far from his destination, planting it according to the season and cycles of the moon. Billy Cranston considered the herb to be a sacrament, just as sacred as receiving a Catholic communion

host had once been to him. That was long ago. Before his life had dwindled down to very little except pain and anguish.

The trade winds whipped through the sky, and suddenly the tropical mist turned into a steady downpour. After a few minutes of concentrating on the rain, it seemed to Billy that he could see the individual drops falling through the balmy tropical air. Big, fat, heavy drops of warm water splattering into the rubble-strewn back lot, turning the red Hawaiian earth into blood-red mud.

A mynah bird fluttered into view, landing about five yards in front of him. The funny little black bird with a bright yellow beak and bowed legs began strutting back and forth pecking at tufts of pungent molasses grass, breaking Billy's reverie.

He smacked the pipe against the palm of his hand, emptying the residue. Billy looked at his hands. They were big hands. Still strong, even though two fingers on his left hand were permanently bent inward. His hands were dirty, and Billy hated being dirty. Even though he had long ago lost his capacity to maintain a home where he could wash in a real bathroom, Billy always tried to stay clean. He leaned forward out from under the protection of the plywood overhang and held his hands in the cool Hawaiian rainfall. He rubbed them clean as best he could, then wiped them dry on the sides of his worn-out jeans.

He rubbed his face and stroked a long black beard flecked with gray that reached to his chest. He ran his fingers through his thick black hair graying at the temples, pushing it behind his ears, getting ready.

Billy Cranston had fought and survived many battles, in war and in peace, but now even the victories felt like life-sapping losses. All the struggle had somehow created a terrible downward momentum in his life. Billy Cranston felt like he was fading into something less significant than the last puff of pungent smoke that had disappeared in the rain-filled morning air. All that loss would end today. He focused on one overwhelming impulse, wondering if the

last spark pushing him now came from love or hate, murder or sacrifice. He wasn't sure. The attempt to decide spiraled him to a confused moment, his life lingering in a hazy limbo of inaction. And then the feisty little mynah bird twitched, stopped, and looked at him. Stared right at him as if to ask, *why are you here? This is my world, not yours.*

So, Billy Cranston stood up, brushed off his clothes, squared his shoulders. He even lifted his chin as he stepped out into the morning rain to take back one last thing that was still his. The mynah jumped up and fluttered off, having no idea that his piercing little eye had sent Billy Cranston walking toward a terrible death.

CHAPTER 1

Devlin woke as the change in air pressure made his left ear hurt. It was his built-in airplane alarm clock. He waggled his jaw to equalize the pressure and shifted his six-foot-four-inch body stretched out in first-class seat 4A. Far enough from the kitchen and bathrooms so his sleep would be relatively undisturbed. Devlin needed sleep. In the last seven days, he'd averaged three hours' sleep for every thirty hours awake until he had finished what he had to do in New York.

The plane would be landing in San Francisco. He'd have a fifty-minute break between flights; then he'd be on to Honolulu. He looked forward to walking around the terminal until he had to board the next flight. Get his muscles moving. See how his hip was holding out after being nicked by a .38-caliber bullet.

But when he emerged from the jetway, Devlin saw a young man trying to pick someone out of the stream of passengers coming off the plan. He guessed that someone was him. Just for the hell of it, Devlin shifted behind two people in front of him, blending in, concealing himself. His movements were smooth and artful enough to hide his large body from the young man until he was almost close enough to touch him.

Devlin's sudden appearance made the young man take a full step backward.

"Are you looking for me?"

"Mr. Devlin?"

“Yes.”

“Uh, Mr. Chow has to meet you here in San Francisco instead of Honolulu. He sent me to get you.”

“Where is he?”

“The Mandarin Oriental Hotel. Downtown. He said you should stay the night and fly to Honolulu tomorrow.”

The young man pulled an airline ticket out of the side pocket of his suit coat. “We have a new ticket for you. Same flight out tomorrow.”

Devlin withdrew his ticket from his breast pocket and made the exchange. Chow’s man stood where he was and stared at Devlin.

Devlin asked, “Anything else?”

“Uh, no. Is that your only luggage?”

Devlin handed a finely made carry-on bag to the young man.

“Lay on, Macduff.”

The young man looked confused for a moment, then said, “Isn’t it lead on?”

Devlin smiled. “Not if you work for William Chow.”

#

William Chow had reserved a one-bedroom suite on the top floor of the Mandarin, a hotel that occupied the upper floors of an office building tower. The suite sat hidden in the clouds with most of San Francisco spread out beneath it. Only the Transamerica tower poked its pyramid tip high enough to share the airspace.

The suite offered sweeping views. In one direction, was a view of the bridge to Oakland. Out another window was a magnificent view of the Golden Gate. Thick clouds of fog were rolling in from the bay, covering the city beneath them. The setting sun colored the fog with tones of purple and red.

William Chow, the founder and head of Pacific Rim Security Company, stood with his hands clasped behind his back looking out the north window. He was dressed in black slacks made of very

fine lightweight wool and a crisp white dress shirt made by his tailor in Hong Kong. The clothes hung perfectly on his lean, well-proportioned body. Chow was a compact man, a mix of Oriental bloodlines and Occidental manners. He was part Chinese, part Caucasian, a lineage that had blended to produce a strikingly handsome man, aging gracefully. The more years Devlin knew him, the more Chow seemed to become a unique kind of Everyman. A citizen of the East, at ease in the West, working anywhere in the world that required his attention.

Green tea had been served. The teapot rested snugly in a thickly insulated wicker basket. Devlin sat on the couch, sipping the slightly bitter brew from a fine porcelain cup, watching Chow. Waiting. On the glass end table, a manila folder rested unopened. Devlin knew it contained the information that would soon disturb the tranquility of their elegant room in the clouds. But for the moment, the folder just lay there, like a silent, unwanted guest.

Finally, Chow turned away from the window and spoke. "New York was difficult?"

"Yes."

"Your wounds?"

"More troublesome than serious."

"Good." Chow paused. "So, we have a problem."

"Yes?"

"A death. Very disturbing. Someone we know."

Devlin frowned. "Who?"

"William Edward Cranston."

"Billy Cranston?"

"Yes."

Hearing the name brought up a flood of memories. Even the smell of mortars exploding in a rotting jungle. Devlin's expression darkened. He asked, "How did he die?"

"Violently."

"Murdered?"

“Very likely.”

Devlin felt a mixture of pain and anger so intense he stopped breathing for a moment. Devlin bowed his head, feeling as if the private, luxurious room in the sky made hearing this news even more offensive.

Chow continued, “We don’t know the details. His father has retained the firm to find out exactly what happened.”

Devlin knew that Chow had a long relationship with Billy Cranston’s father, a retired Brigadier General, Jasper Cranston. Devlin had never met the father. His relationship had been with the son, had lasted less than three days, but had changed his life.

At the time Devlin met Billy Cranston, his father, Jasper, was a Lieutenant Colonel commanding an Army Intelligence battalion in Vietnam. Cranston, a Korean War veteran, was on his second tour of duty in Vietnam.

Billy Cranston, an Infantry grunt, was nearing the end of his first tour of duty in ‘Nam. Fate had placed him in a series of brutal jungle battles that earned him the kind of reputation an entire Army could feed on to prove to itself that it still produced brave men. In a little under two years fighting in Vietnam, Billy had risen to the rank of sergeant first class, had won a Bronze Star, two Purple Hearts, an Army Commendation Medal, and a recommendation for the Silver Star, along with two disciplinary actions for insubordination.

Billy Cranston’s style didn’t fit with his commanding officer’s approach, so he solved the problem by transferring Billy to Jasper Cranston’s Intelligence battalion. At that time, the battalion was monitoring Viet Cong arms and supply movements by stationing two-man observation teams on secluded mountaintop areas. The teams hunkered down and hid in the jungle, counting trucks and personnel moving on the paths and roads beneath them. It was considered safer duty than most combat assignments. There was, however, the risk of being discovered. Discovery meant almost certain death.

Each team stayed in its hidden observation post for one week. After that, the teams had to be replaced, because a week alone in the jungle was about all the soldiers could take before they began to break down mentally.

Devlin had only been in the country for two months, not yet assigned to his Military Police post, but in those days MP's provided combat support. When a young Lieutenant found himself short one man, he ordered Devlin to join another soldier and replace a team positioned on a hilltop ridge, eleven miles inside Cambodia. The team consisted of Cranston's son, Billy, and another soldier, named James McNally.

Devlin and his partner, a skinny Jewish kid from Queens, New York named Ralph Axelrod, were helicoptered in along with three other teams. They were the first team to be dropped into a clearing about two miles from the observation site. It took them over two hours to hike up to the site.

Six minutes after Devlin and Axelrod arrived at the observation post, Viet Cong mortars started falling. The first mortar landed ten meters to the right of the bivouac. The second, eight meters to the left. All four soldiers knew they were bracketed, but before they could even look for cover, four more mortars exploded around them. The ground shuddered, the explosions concussed them into oblivion.

When Devlin regained consciousness, Axelrod had been turned into a blackened mound of green uniform, blood, ripped flesh, and shattered bones. McNally had lost an arm and most of the left side of his face. Billy Cranston had survived with only a large gash above his right ear. He leaned over Devlin, the right side of his face and shoulder covered in blood, trying to get Devlin to sit up. He seemed oblivious to his wound. In fact, he seemed energized by the mortar attack.

Devlin tried to sit up, but he kept falling onto his back. Billy yelled at him, "C'mon, get up. Get up before these rat bastards swarm us!"

Cranston pulled Devlin into a sitting position, then ran off to pour disinfectant powder all over the bloody, blackened area of flesh where McNally's arm had been. He tied a compress to the man's face, turned him over on his side so the dirt wouldn't grind into his wounds, all the while yelling at Devlin to get up.

By the time Devlin made it onto his hands and knees, Billy was pushing a syringe filled with a morphine solution into McNally's thigh muscle.

Devlin remained bent over on all fours and threw up. It wasn't the sight of the carnage that had made him vomit. It was the concussion he had sustained in the mortar attack.

Devlin spat out the bile and felt a big hand pat him on the back. He looked up and saw Billy Cranston's dazzling smile. He would always remember how white and perfect Cranston's teeth looked, how alive and confident his expression was, even with his face covered in blood and dirt.

Billy shouted, "Can you hear me?"

Devlin realized his hearing was just coming back and nodded.

"Good." Cranston stopped patting Devlin on the back to wrap a field dressing around his head wound.

"Let's get the fuck out of here before they make it up the hill. There's gonna be way too many of them for us to stay here and shoot it out."

Devlin nodded in response. It was about all he could do.

Billy yelled at him, "You're not hit. You're a lucky motherfucker, but you got to get moving and help me drag this guy out of here, or we're all dead."

Devlin stood up and staggered over to McNally. He wanted to hook him under the armpits and drag him away from the hilltop, but there was only one armpit left on the man. Cranston was gathering up rifles, a radio, supplies. Devlin was about to grab McNally by the collar of his shirt when Billy appeared holding a tarpaulin and a rope. He dropped them on the ground near at Devlin. "Tie him onto this."

Devlin did as he was told. Cranston finished loading up with as much ammunition and supplies as he could carry, then motioned for Devlin to follow. He staggered after Billy, dragging the tarp bearing the wounded soldier.

They made it halfway down the mountain when Cranston suddenly stopped and crouched in the jungle foliage, motioning for Devlin to do the same. He flashed Devlin his mesmerizing smile and whispered, "Now we see just how lucky you are, soldier."

Cranston smeared soil on the white bandage around his head. Devlin could barely hold still. He wanted to keep moving, but Cranston remained motionless. McNally had passed out from shock and morphine. And then Devlin saw them. North Vietnamese Army regulars. Rifles held in front of them, climbing slowly up the hill in a firing line, each soldier about twenty yards apart from the men on either side. The line extended as far to the right and left as Devlin could see.

The fear hit Devlin right behind his balls. He felt his heart pound and the strange, demeaning urge to evacuate his bowels. The intensity of it nearly overwhelmed him, but Cranston's unmoving presence steadied Devlin. Suddenly, Devlin had an intense need to have his rifle in his hands. As if Cranston could read his mind, he slowly slid the two M16 rifles off his shoulder and handed one to Devlin, whispering, "Don't fucking shoot unless I do."

Devlin gripped the rifle and nodded. He started visualizing how many of the NVA he would be able to shoot before they cut him down. A strange hot energy filled him. The insanity of combat. Billy turned and smiled at him as if he felt Devlin's heat. For a second, Devlin wondered if Billy was a brave man or a lunatic.

For a moment, it looked as if the enemy soldiers would walk past them as if these two trapped men crouching in the jungle were so dangerous they sensed they should avoid them. But then one soldier began to veer in their direction, taking a path straight

toward them, and both Devlin and Billy knew they were going to be discovered. In the next instant, without a word, Cranston lay down on the jungle floor and slid forward, down the hill.

Devlin watched the jungle foliage move as Cranston made his invisible way toward the oncoming soldier. The slight noise didn't attract any attention. There were plenty of sounds coming from the other soldiers struggling up the hill.

Slowly, step by step, his back covered in jungle foliage for camouflage, the NVA soldier kept coming right at Devlin. Inside his head, Devlin screamed curses at the enemy, but the soldier kept coming, step by step. Devlin slowly shouldered his M16, blinked his eyes, and tried to track the moving soldier in his sights. Two or three more steps and Devlin was certain the NVA would see him. Suddenly the enemy soldier fell backward. For a second, Devlin thought the man had slipped and fallen. And he had. But it was because Billy Cranston had pulled his legs out from under him. Almost before the enemy hit the ground, Billy clamped his hand over the man's mouth and shoved his knife into the NVA regular's throat. Billy rolled on top of the soldier, twisting the knife, covering the gurgling sounds and spasmodic attempts to push Billy off.

Devlin eased the M16 into his lap. He couldn't believe the guts it took to pull that off. He breathed slowly and deeply, trying to come back to himself. The enemy troops were well past them when Billy popped up into view, his shirt soaked in the blood of the enemy, and motioned for Devlin to come forward.

They made it down the hill, dragging the still comatose McNally with them. They crouched under deep cover while Billy radioed for a helicopter to pull them out, but the Army air rescue told them they had to wait. Army personnel weren't supposed to be in Cambodia. How could they authorize a chopper to get people who weren't there? They told Billy to standby.

Devlin hadn't listened closely to Billy's conversation on the radio. He had made it off that goddamn mountain. It was over.

All he had to do was wait for the helicopter. Billy turned to him and smiled, "Guess what, brah?"

"What?"

"I don't think they're coming anytime soon, and we don't have time to wait."

"What?"

Billy shrugged. "We ain't supposed to be in Cambodia, dude. The assholes in charge gotta run the request up the line before they send a chopper in here. We're gonna be fucked if we wait for them to get their thumbs out of their ass. Too many NVA crawling around. C'mon. We can make it. You're a big strong lucky rookie motherfucker. You can do it."

"Make it where?"

"Other side of the border, man." And then Billy Cranston looked wide-eyed at Devlin and said, "What the fuck, it's only about twenty clicks. Just five or so clicks east of here, we'll be clear of all these fuckin' NVA, and we'll be safe as houses."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I don't know. Heard some Brit say it. I like it. Let's go. You can do it."

And at that moment, Devlin believed he could. He didn't think about how dense the jungle was. He didn't think about dragging a dying man behind them. He didn't think about how many NVA soldiers were looking for them. Billy Cranston had that kind of effect on men.

As night came on, they stumbled through the tropical mess for almost eight hours, dragging McNally behind them. They were still alive in the morning, but McNally had died from blood loss and shock. Cranston insisted they drag the body with them. Devlin didn't argue. They wrapped the tarpaulin completely around their dead comrade and kept walking. Cranston took the lead, chopping a path through the thick forest and vines, Devlin stumbling behind him, constantly struggling to pull the dead weight of McNally's remains.

When Devlin began tripping and falling from exhaustion, Cranston hacked away with one hand and helped him pull the body with the other.

For the rest of that night, they slowly made their way toward the border. Dehydrated, without food, still hurting from the mortar attack, abandoned, Devlin almost wished the enemy would find them and shoot them, so the struggle would end. But Billy Cranston never wavered, never complained, continued to tell Devlin they would get out.

Billy kept track of their position. Kept contact on the radio in short bursts. Kept working to find a way out. And sure enough, near dawn, they received instructions to hike due east for two miles until they reached a rutted jeep trail.

Billy lied to Devlin about how long it would take. Told him how tough he was for a two-month, in-country, lucky fucking rookie ass-kicking grunt. Told him he would never be hurt again in 'Nam because he had already been through the worst. The words helped, but they weren't what kept Devlin going. They both knew it was all just a bullshit pep talk. It was that goddamn dazzling hero smile that mesmerized Devlin, kept inspiring him to put one foot in front of the other, kept him believing.

They finally reached the road. Actually, just two overgrown tire tracks in the jungle. And by what seemed like a miracle of Billy Cranston's willpower, three hours later, they heard an old, beat-up truck slowly bumping its way through the tropical forest.

Cranston stepped out, and a tiny Vietnamese man who looked to be at least eighty stopped the truck. Cranston helped Devlin lift McNally's corpse into the truck bed, he climbed in next to the driver, then helped Devlin into the front passenger seat. Devlin drank from the canteen of warm water the old man handed them. Then he slumped down, lay his head on the back of the seat, and fell into an exhausted unconscious sleep listening to Billy Cranston try to talk to the old Vietnamese driver.

When Devlin woke, they were back at battalion headquarters. He and Billy shook hands and promised to keep track of each other. Just when Devlin was about to head off and report to his squad, Billy gave him a gift that stayed with him for the rest of his life.

He said, "Jack."

It was the first time Billy had ever used his name.

"Yeah?"

"You do know that you're a warrior, Jack, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"You took some heavy hits up there. Had your brains rattled real good, huh? Saw one soldier blown to shit, another die. You held it together when those NVA bastards closed in, and you wanted that fucking rifle in your hands, didn't you? Didn't you?"

Devlin remained silent.

Billy nodded once and said, "You'll be okay, brah." Billy tapped his chest. "You got it in here."

Devlin never saw Billy Cranston again. It didn't matter. He'd already experienced the best of the man.

#

Devlin asked Chow, "What happened to him?"

Chow came away from the window, sat across from Devlin, and poured himself a cup of tea. He spoke in a soft voice touched with a slight British accent, a voice that never failed to lend intensity to his words.

"We're not sure. Mr. Cranston was found in a remote area in the Puna District on the Big Island of Hawaii. In an undeveloped section of the Ola'a Forest Reserve, west of a series of abandoned subdivisions that were chopped out of the rainforest years ago but never developed. By the time they found the body, it had been ravaged by feral pigs and whatever other wild animals were wandering around in there."

Devlin jerked back as if the words were a slap. "What?"

“Not an ending anyone would wish for him.”

Devlin shook his head. “The man was a hero, William. How could that happen to him?”

“That’s what you must find out, Jack. Cranston’s father is retired now. He mustered out as a brigadier general. Jasper lives on Oahu. He asked me to investigate his son’s death. I assured him Pacific Rim would devote whatever resources necessary. As you know, Jack, General Cranston and I go back many years. I told the general we would find the answers he seeks.”

Chow stood up and walked back to the window, then turned and stepped toward Devlin. He remained in that position, hands at his sides, backlit by the red twilight. He was more an outline than a man. More a presence at that moment than a person.

“I know you and Billy Cranston served together.”

“For all of about three days. Long enough for Billy to save my life. Long enough to see everything that was wrong with that damn war and everything that was right with Billy Cranston.”

“That’s why I want you to be the one investigating this.”

Devlin couldn’t remain seated. He stood up and turned away from Chow. He looked out the window on his side of the room. Now the blankets of purple-red rolling fog reminded him of blood and bruises and death. He waited for a few moments before he spoke.

“What do the local authorities say?”

“Very little.”

“Why?”

“A reflection of how much they cared about Mr. Cranston.”

“What does that mean?”

“Apparently, Billy Cranston had degenerated over the years. He was living the life of a wandering soul. Virtually homeless. He was not a person of importance to them.”

“What the hell happened?”

Chow answered tersely, “I don’t know.”

Devlin tried to imagine Billy Cranston reduced to a homeless man wandering around a desolate rainforest in Hawaii. He simply could not.

“What about his father? What does his father say?”

“General Cranston believes his son was murdered.”

“Why?”

Chow pointed to the manila folder. “Read the medical examiner’s report. They estimated the body was in the rainforest about two weeks. Most of the intestinal cavity was rooted out and eaten. The rest of the soft-tissue organs were badly decomposed. However, the M.E. thinks, thinks he may have detected a nick, a cut on the periosteum covering the back rib on the left. Not the kind of cut that could have been made by an animal’s tooth.”

“A knife.”

“Presumably.”

Devlin turned away from the window and faced Chow. “It would have to have been a long knife to reach all the way to the back rib.”

“Yes.”

“On the left side.”

“Yes.”

Devlin said, “Shoved in by a right-handed person with enough force to push it almost completely through the body.”

“Yes.”

“And whoever did it left him out in a rainforest so that whatever animals roam around in there could feed off him?”

Chow nodded.

“And we have no idea why?”

“None.”

Devlin knew it was pointless to ask any more questions, except one.

“Where do you want me to start?”

Chow picked up the manila folder from the end table and handed it to Devlin.

“Read the file. Then talk to General Cranston. After that, you decide. The organization is at your disposal. Cranston insists he has the resources to fund our investigation, but it proves to be beyond his means, I will personally reimburse the company.”

“Understood.”

“I’m needed in Hong Kong. Please keep me informed.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chow took a step toward Devlin. He held his hands clasped behind his back and bowed his head for a moment before he spoke. When he looked up, he had Devlin’s full attention.

“I wish you had more time to recuperate from New York, help with your brother’s convalescence, mourn your father’s death. But assigning this to someone else is out of the question.”

“I understand.”

“Good.” Chow reached out and lightly grasped Devlin’s upper arm. “Please do your best, Jack.”

Devlin nodded, and Chow relinquished his grip. Somehow, by simply making physical contact, Chow had added his depth of feeling to Devlin’s.

And in the next instant, the meeting was over. William Chow, the only man in the world Devlin trusted enough to be his boss, picked up a small leather portfolio that had been resting on the hotel room desk and left, quietly closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER 2

Devlin avoided reading the report until the following day on the plane heading for Honolulu. He was in no hurry to immerse himself in the details of Billy Cranston's death. But now with his plane landing in a couple of hours, he couldn't put off the grim task any longer. As the big DC-10 streaked west, prolonging the fading sunset, Devlin switched on his overhead light and pulled the manila folder from the seatback pocket in front of him.

There were three pages of single-spaced notes on Pacific Rim letterhead summarizing the initial contact report with Jasper Cranston. There was a photocopy of the fifteen-page medical examiner's report on the autopsy performed in Hilo along with a copy of the report from the Puna District office of the Hilo police force – only a single page. And then there were the pictures. Twelve of them. Color. Eight by ten. Lurid. So unreal that they looked to Devlin like still frames from a cheap horror movie.

Devlin set aside the written reports and steeled himself for the photographs. Five shots had been taken in the bright outdoor light. The corpse looked like it had been propped against the base of an ohia tree, pushed onto its left side by the animals who had fed off the corpse. The area from the sternum to the abdomen was a black, ragged hole ringed with torn flesh mottled with decay. A dirty, ripped-open T-shirt ringed the rotting hole. Inside the cavity were speckled white bones – pieces of the spine, ribs, and pelvis along with clumps of black, rotting flesh, and decomposed remains

of cartilage and tendons. The head bent was sideways, arms outspread. His face a frightening death mask with sunken cheeks, mouth agape, dead eyes, and dirty, matted hair. The beard reached almost all the way to the open cavity in the center of the body.

Billy Cranston had ended up a ripped-apart, emaciated wreck in a hellish Pieta pose, a tree supporting the corpse instead of a virgin mother.

The rest of the photos were garish eight-by-ten blowups of the medical examiner's 35mm shots taken indoors under the saturating glare of a strobe flash. The dead body had been cleaned up, laid out long and flat. The skin was an ashy grayish-brown with necrotic patches around the ragged hole. The long beard and hair had been shaved off; the chest split apart; the skull cap removed; the brain probed.

Devlin wondered what internal organs had been left to examine. Not many he supposed. What was left of Billy Cranston seemed as close to an abomination as Devlin had ever seen. The once vibrant, magical hero of his youth, now a torn-apart, ravaged corpse laying across a stainless-steel table. Even the once bright, gleaming teeth looked like small, dead, dingy bones.

Devlin persevered through the written reports. They added little more than to document that a tragedy had occurred but told him nothing about why, or how, or when Billy Cranston had fallen so low and met such a ruinous fate.

Devlin closed the folder and his eyes, knowing the images would haunt him. Clearly, the answers would have to start with Billy's father, General Jasper Cranston.

Flying toward the sun had elongated the day, but as the plane approach Honolulu, day turned into night. Looking down, Devlin had no sense of being in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean. The view of the city below showed the same strings and clusters of lights poking through the darkness as the other cities Devlin had flown into.

The sameness continued as Devlin walked off the plane into the terminal. He could have been in any Mainland city. It was only when he reached the juncture where the gate area merged with the corridor leading into the main terminal that Devlin knew he'd landed on a tropical island. There was a floor. There was a roof to keep out the rain. But long sections of the corridor were open to the elements. The balmy Hawaiian air surrounded him. Even laced with jet fumes, it still felt welcoming.

Everything else about arriving fell into the usual pattern. Get the rental car. Drop his bag onto the passenger seat. Shove the rental forms in the glove compartment. Push the seat back. Adjust the mirrors. Find the switch for the headlights and drive out.

It was all very familiar and routine except for one thing. As Devlin drove north out of Honolulu, in a small office at the east end of the airport all the passenger lists for the evening's incoming Mainland flights landed on the desk of Keeko Ramon, a wiry, intense man of Portuguese descent who worked for the company that provided security at the airport. Keeko wore the standard brown uniform with a square badge on the right shirt pocket and the insignia on his left sleeve that made him look almost like a cop. But he wasn't a cop. He was another underpaid worker, just in a better uniform than most.

The acronym for the company befitted the man who owned Hawaiian Islands Security. Eddie Lihu believed whatever he wanted should rightfully be HIS. Whatever arrived on the Hawaiian Islands – tourists, consumer goods, drugs, prostitutes, whatever – Lihu's reason for living was to get his piece of anything worth something. And that started with knowing who and what came in.

So Keeko Ramon scanned the passenger lists of three airlines. His task wasn't complicated. He was looking for names that fit a certain profile: individual men or pairs, individual women, and people with names that seemed African American or Hispanic.

First, Keeko checked the coach class passengers, carefully picking out the chosen few. Then he checked first class. The name Devlin didn't stand out. It wasn't like Brown or Williams, which Keeko always assumed belonged to blacks. A single man named Brown or Williams always made the list. Devlin wasn't a Jewish name, which Keeko tended to ignore. Nor was it Hispanic. But the name Devlin belonged to a man traveling alone, flying first class, so Devlin made the list along with sixteen other names. Ramon typed them in alphabetical order with the flight numbers and faxed them to the HIS main office in Honolulu. As soon as the fax connected, Keeko headed for the coffee machine. He still had three hours left on his shift, but he'd pretty much finished his night's work.

CHAPTER 3

The drive to Cranston's house on the North Shore of Oahu took almost an hour. Devlin knew the roads. Had traveled them before, but even in the dark, he could see that the surroundings had changed. As the H2 Freeway dwindled down to the two-lane Highway 99 and farther down to the 82 Kam Highway, there were more intersections, more stoplights. Even the pineapple fields seemed smaller.

It rained on and off during the drive until he reached the small town of Haleiwa on the North Shore. Then the air stirred with a fresh breeze off the ocean and blew away the rain clouds. Devlin rolled down the windows of his rental car and slowed down to the 35-mph speed limit. The slower speed made it easier to spot the landmarks Cranston had given him: Jameson's restaurant. Sunset Beach. Foodland. They eliminated the need for a roadmap, which Devlin couldn't read while he was driving. And they relieved Devlin of trying to decipher the long Hawaiian names attached to the few road signs he was able to catch. It would take him a couple of days to re-adjust to the Hawaiian names for the various roads and towns, many of which were exactly the same names used for different roads in other towns on Hawaii's other islands.

As he drove closer to where Cranston's house was supposed to be, Devlin began looking for a long five-foot-high wall made of lava rocks on the ocean side of the road. The wall's length and height made it hard to miss. He slowed down, looking in the dark for a driveway or entrance. After about a hundred yards, he finally

reached a chain-link gate on wheels about fifteen-feet wide, closing off a driveway which led to a two-car garage. After the gate, the wall continued for about another thirty feet.

Devlin pulled the car over on a grassy strip just before the gate, got out, and peered through the fence at a large house that occupied a plot of land running along the shoreline. There was a single yellow light burning near the front door.

Devlin looked around for a bell or intercom but could find neither. Nothing about Cranston's house invited entrance.

Devlin tested the rolling gate and found it latched but unlocked. He lifted the latch and rolled the gate open just wide enough to walk onto the property. Devlin rolled the gate shut behind him and had taken about ten steps toward the front door when a bullmastiff dog came running around the corner of the house, charging straight at him.

The dog had a terrifying, savage bark, which sounded as if the animal was intent on tearing Devlin's throat open. Even in the dim moonlight, Devlin could see that the charging dog had to weigh at least 150 pounds. There was no time to get back on the other side of the fence. Devlin was about to jump up on the fence to get above the beast, cursing as much at the dog as at Cranston for not warning him, when the dog skidded to halt between Devlin and the house and stood his ground. The terrifying barking turned into a steady, fearsome growl.

Devlin took two slow steps back, but the mastiff moved toward him immediately and started barking again. Devlin stopped, but the barking didn't. Devlin was ready to risk kicking the dog in the jaw to shut him up when the front door to the house opened, and Jasper Cranston stomped onto the porch yelling, "All right, Arthur, goddammit! Down!"

The dog stopped barking and dropped to the ground.

"Stay!"

The dog stayed.

“You must be Jack Devlin.”

“You must be Jasper Cranston.”

“Sorry about the dog. I keep him out on the property so the local mokes around here stay away from the house. I couldn’t find the fucking cur to chain him up. I was gonna sit on the porch and wait for you, but I didn’t want to get eaten by the goddamn mosquitoes that come out after sunset. Come on in.”

Devlin considered doing some of his own barking at Cranston, but he kept his mouth shut and looked at the man standing in the glare of the yellow porch light. He had never met Jasper Cranston. He looked like the type who would get along well with a monstrous dog. Cranston was a big man. Not as tall as Devlin, but with the heaviness that muscular men take on when they age. Even with the added weight, Cranston looked fit. He had a fine, full head of close-cropped white hair and a gruff air of command that reminded Devlin of a master sergeant more than a general. Devlin would have bet there was only one retired general in the U.S. Army walking around on a peg leg like a damn pirate.

Devlin let the adrenaline rush settle down and headed for the porch. He told Cranston, “You’re lucky I didn’t have my gun on my hip. I might have shot that beast.”

“I’m glad you didn’t. I like the dog. He does his job.”

Cranston extended a meaty hand, and Devlin shook it. The general spun on the tip of his peg leg and led the way into the house, asking over his shoulder, “Where’s your luggage?”

“In the car.”

“Come on in. We’ll get it later.”

Devlin followed Cranston into the well-lit interior of the house. Cranston wore a plain blue T-shirt and beige cargo shorts. His prosthesis had a plastic socket for a right-leg stump attached to what looked like the bottom half of a crutch. One side of the peg leg extended up the outside of Cranston’s thigh, ending just below the hip, the other side reached mid-thigh.

Without turning around, Cranston said, “I guess you can see why I didn’t feel like chasing around in the dark after Arthur. I could have put a bowl of food out, and he would’ve shown up pretty quick, but then he’d have had an extra meal, and I prefer he doesn’t get overweight.”

Devlin realized that the dog and his master had done pretty much the right thing. The house was located on a dark stretch of road, the entire back facing the beach where by law anybody could walk.

“Forget about it. You’re right. It’s a damn good dog. Obeys well.”

“Thanks.” Cranston pointed to a spot near the foyer and said, “Slip off your shoes and come on in.”

Cranston’s one foot was bare. Devlin felt overdressed in his long slacks, shoes, and socks. Getting the shoes off felt good.

He followed Cranston across polished floors made of deep brown koa wood. The floors were quite beautiful, as was the rest of the house. One side of the living room consisted of double-tier wall of windows and sliding glass doors that revealed a white sand beach and the Pacific Ocean not more than twenty yards away, both illuminated by silver moonlight. The ceiling in the main room peaked at twenty-five feet in the center, then tapered down to about twelve feet where it met the opposite wall made of dark wood, horizontal windows, and wooden louvers underneath. Oriental area rugs defined spaces for socializing, dining, watching television. On the left, an open kitchen space occupied a large area. Further left a hallway led to the bedrooms.

Cranston’s home was open, spacious, and airy. Tradewinds off the ocean constantly streamed through the house, cooling it, and keeping the air fresh. This was an Hawaiian house. A great deal of the outside came inside.

Cranston indicated the large sectional sofa in the center of the main room and said, “Have a seat. You hungry? Want something to drink? A beer?”

“I could go for a beer.”

Cranston walked to the kitchen area along the south wall and brought out two large twenty-five-ounce German beers. Cranston held two mugs in the other hand and set down everything on a coffee table in front of them. For a big man on a peg leg, he moved about easily with his hands full.

Devlin poured himself half a glass and drained most of it. Cranston filled his glass and took a long swallow. The beer was cold and very good. A strong, refreshing lager.

Cranston said, “I don’t imagine you want to go over this whole thing tonight, do you?”

“Maybe. Your dog did a pretty good job of waking me up.”

Cranston grunted and picked up a half-smoked cigar sitting in a large ashtray formed out of a chunk of molten lava.

“Chow told me you knew my son in Vietnam.”

“Yes.”

“But you weren’t in my battalion.”

“No. I got dragooned into surveilling a looking post with your son while I was awaiting assignment in the CIC.”

Cranston grunted. “I heard that didn’t go too well.”

“No. It went very bad.”

Cranston made another guttural noise, then said, “So you were an MP.”

“Yes.”

“How come?”

“I was a cop before I went in the Army.”

“Why didn’t you stay a cop? You could have kept your deferment.”

“I didn’t want to be a cop anymore.”

Cranston frowned at Devlin’s answer, but let it go.

“When did you go in?”

“Seventy.”

“Ah, it had really turned to shit by then. Just before Billy’s second tour. You hear what happened?”

“No. We didn’t really keep in touch after that mess in Cambodia.”

“You guys should have never fucking been there. We had no business doing half the shit that went on over there. Too many kids like Billy got ruined.”

“What happened?”

“To Billy?”

“Yes.”

“My son was cursed with the propensity of young men to believe they are invincible. Took all sorts of crazy risks. I thought I’d be able to keep him out of trouble under my command, but ...”

“What?”

“Just before he was scheduled to come home, the poor bastard got captured. Spent over two goddamn years in a POW hellhole before we traded him out on a prisoner exchange. It was too much. Whatever fight he had left in him was used up in that camp. They went at him hard, Mr. Devlin. Billy was never the same.”

“How so?”

Cranston jammed his unlit cigar in his mouth as if to stop the words, but they still spilled out in a bitter torrent. “Aw hell, post-traumatic stress syndrome. I guess that’s what they call it now. In my day, they called it shell shock. Or battle fatigue. Amounts to the same thing. You’re confused, paranoid. Can’t be in a room with people. Can’t concentrate. Loud sounds can spin you out of control. You wake up with night sweats. Can’t hold a job. I imagine someone like you who served in the Criminal Investigation Command saw a good of that.”

“Yes.”

Cranston chewed on his unlit cigar and grunted again. “Yeah, well, nobody much wants to hear about it anymore. Even those of us who were over there.”

“Sometimes especially those of us who were there.”

“I’m not ashamed of what we did, Mr. Devlin.”

“Perhaps that’s because you were able to avoid doing things that were shameful.”

Cranston’s response was to push himself up off the couch and walk into the kitchen. He pulled open a drawer and rummaged around for a box of kitchen matches to light his cigar.

“Whatever, I survived with my head in mostly the right place.”

Devlin asked, “What happened to your leg?”

Instead of responding, Cranston busied himself with firing up the cigar. Then he reached into a cabinet above the kitchen sink, took out a bottle, and poured himself enough Maker’s Mark bourbon to fill half of an eight-ounce tumbler. He came back into the room puffing a trail of acrid cigar smoke as he made his way across the koa wood floor. He dropped back down on the couch, took a swallow of the bourbon, and said, “Got shot stepping out of a helicopter. That’s mostly what I did over there. Ride around in a fucking helicopter checking on things. Was barely out of the hatch when some big-ass-caliber bullet hit me about two inches above the ankle. Separated the right foot from my leg in one shot. They had me back on the helicopter with a tourniquet and ten milligrams of morphine injected into me so fast I hardly felt a thing.

“Aftermath was the usual mess, but the problem is the damn stump keeps going bad. About every five or six years they gotta chop off another bad piece of bone. They keep telling me the stump will last longer if I don’t walk on it. Like I’m going to fucking roll around in a wheelchair. Not likely.”

Devlin didn’t respond.

“I don’t think walking on it has a damn thing to do with it. I picked up something rotten over there I can’t get rid of.”

Silence fell over the two men after Cranston’s speech. He took another swig of his bourbon, chased it with beer, and looked at his watch. “It’s about an hour past my bedtime. I’m usually up about five or six. Except for a couple of old-man trips to the head to piss at night. If you’re on Mainland time, you should be ready to knock off.”

Devlin would have preferred to talk instead of sleep, but he knew he wasn't going to convince Cranston.

"All right. We'll pick this up in the morning. I'll get my bag."

When Devlin returned with his carry-on, Cranston led him down the east-wing hallway and showed him the bathroom and bedroom he could use. The bedroom had two large sliding glass doors that faced the ocean. Cranston said good night and thumped off to his bedroom.

Suddenly the house was very quiet. The sound of the waves outside became more distinct. Devlin looked at the moonlight filtering through the ironwood trees for a few moments, then turned and went into the bathroom.

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While Devlin showered off the jet-fume travel smell that lingered on him and readied himself for bed, five-hundred yards south of Cranston's house a group of three men sat under a blue tarpaulin strung between palm trees near the beach. They were what Cranston had referred to as mokes – low-class, poor, indigenous people that were often part of the criminal underclass. Dispossessed, disgruntled, and at times dangerous.

The three mokes were sitting on a strip of beachfront land that had once been a junkyard. The land had been repossessed and cleaned up by the state. But the bureaucrats couldn't agree on what to do with the small strip of land, so the homeless had turned it into a makeshift public park and refuge. Depending on the day, families, couples, single men, small groups, even destitute tourists could all be huddled around dilapidated tents or makeshift shelters made from plastic tarps.

The three men fit in easily with the displaced locals. However, they only appeared to be unemployed. In fact, they had a job. Their job was to keep an eye on Jasper Cranston and report his activities to their boss, a former Hell's Angel named Big Daddy

Dwayne Bukowski, who ran a local gang based on the Wai'anae Coast. Bukowski, in turn, reported to Eddie Lihu. Two hours after Devlin parked his car in front of Cranston's house, a fax bearing the license plate number of his rental car appeared on Eddie Lihu's desk, joining the pile of faxes that included Keeko Ramon's fax.

Just as Devlin had been unaware of being flagged at the airport, he had no idea his visit to Cranston was also being reported. He fell asleep bathed by the cool Hawaiian night breezes and the soothing sounds of the Pacific, thinking about a wounded, angry man drinking heavily behind a big wall guarded by a big dog, while something slowly rotted inside him.