

JC^{INC}
NOVEL

JOHN CLARKSON

***ONE
WAY
OUT***

***A NOVEL OF
SURVIVAL***

***BY THE AUTHOR OF
AND JUSTICE FOR ONE***

PROLOGUE

JOHN PETCHEK THOUGHT TO HIMSELF, I HATE THIS. I HATE WATCHING them see me sweat. I hate standing in front of their animal eyes not knowing what the fuck they're saying in that stupid West Indian singsong shit they call talking, knowing they can't wait to see me walk out of there with enough cocaine to get me busted for five to seven years minimum.

Petchek smelled the acrid odor of his tension-induced sweat. It filled the inside of his car, a 1970 rusting yellow Rover with no radio and a thick chain that locked the steering wheel to the floor.

If the London traffic wasn't too bad, he could make the drive in a little over an hour from his loft south of the river north into Hackney.

The Jamaicans processed their coke in an abandoned section of the Frampton Estates just off Mare Street.

Petchek would make the drive, walk into the estate, and get his consignment. Then he would keep his head down and drive back to his London loft where he would skim what he could get away with, mix in the right amount of baking soda, and deliver the powder to Uncle Frank.

This deal would net him £1,200 in big, crisp hundred-pound notes. Plus, he'd make another four or five hundred selling grams to pretentious artists and hangers-on who frequented the latest hotspots in Notting Hill and Soho.

Petchek enjoyed being the one who had the shit for sale. And he enjoyed looking the part of a hip artist. Tall, slim, with thick dark hair worn long to go with his perpetual three-day-old beard, black jeans, and paint-stained shirts. Petchek even managed to make sure there was a bit of acrylic on his hands and under his fingernails.

He told himself selling cocaine was part of staying outside the reach of square society. Part of living the life of an artist. But deep down, he knew that was a lie. He sold coke for the same reason low-life criminals sold it. Money. And Petchek knew there would be more money as Uncle Frank increased his purchases to a level that Petchek doubted this particularly vicious crew of Yardies could handle. Enough money so he could maintain his lifestyle, whether he sold his paintings or not. Enough money to pay the mortgage on his loft in the up-and-coming Butler's Wharf section of London, and dine out, and send the kid to school, and pay the damn Visa every month. Christ, he thought, we go through fucking money like water. So as much as John Petchek hated driving into Hackney to pick up the cocaine, he did it, enduring the acid fear eating away at him.

As soon as he pulled into the section of the estate where the Jamaicans had set up their operation, he spotted three of Oliver's bad bwouys keeping watch. They tracked him with their vacant eyes from the moment he parked until he reached the building entrance. Petchek avoided their gaze and tried not to think about how quickly they would hurt him the second King Oliver gave the word.

It didn't look like there was anything worth standing guard for in front of the rundown estate building. The building had been left for demolition as part of a public housing estate too run-down and decrepit even for London's poorest. All the windows on both the ground floor and the upper two stories were covered over with sheets of warped, unfinished plywood. The structure seemed lifeless, but just the sight of it sent a ripple of fear sweeping up from Petchek's scrotum to his throat.

As he stepped into the dimly lit ground floor, Petchek's presence sent Oliver's Doberman pinscher guard dogs into a frenzy of snarling and barking. They were locked up in an apartment next to the stairwell that led to the upper floors. Petchek heard them scratching and throwing themselves at the locked door. He cursed and quickly walked up the stairs, hoping the dogs would calm down if he moved away from them, but they howled and barked all the louder in frustration.

Oliver's men kept the dogs ravenously hungry and tormented them so they would be as crazy and vicious as possible.

Petchek finally reached the second floor and pounded on a thick, reinforced door.

He waited, his anxiety ratcheting up while the guard checked him through a peephole and then opened all the locks.

"Fuck it," he muttered. This is what he wanted. He'd worked his way up to this. His biggest buy yet.

The door finally swung open. The bright fluorescent lights made Petchek squint. The sweet, sharp smell of ether and alcohol stung his nostrils. He stepped inside, head lowered against the glare, and handed a small green duffel bag filled with money to a guard, who took it without comment and slammed the big door shut.

The hip artist who wanted everyone to notice him in Holland Park or Chelsea stood near the locked door in Hackney trying to be invisible.

The only furniture in the room was a long work table. Six women and one man dressed like demented lab technicians in hair nets and surgical masks sat around the long table cooking, cutting, weighing, and bagging rock cocaine into small packages.

Petchek didn't have to wait long. He was buying powder, not rocks.

Without a word exchanged, one of Oliver's men handed him back his canvas duffel bag. As he hefted the bag, he allowed himself a quick smile. Two kilos of almost pure cocaine. Shit, man, I'm

pushing some real weight now. All of a sudden, Petchek didn't mind the nervous, sick feeling. It was almost over. All he had to do was turn around, wait until the door opened again, then get the hell out of there and drive back to his part of London. The clean, civilized part, where he could stop in a friendly pub and down a nice pint of Murphy's. Calm down and congratulate himself.

But just at that moment, a door opened at the far end of the room, and Oliver appeared, followed by Hinton, a man Petchek did not want to see. Ever.

Oliver was compact, muscular, very dark, Jamaican. Top bad bwouy in Hackney. The current Don ruling one of the biggest Yardie crews operating in London. He sported a wisp of a goatee, a naturally menacing gaze, and three front teeth capped in gold. But it wasn't only the teeth that gleamed. It was Oliver's eyes. A smoldering rage added intensity to the way he looked at Petchek. There was no laid-back, cool-mon aspect to King Oliver now. He came right at Petchek, with that fucking Angel of Death, Hinton, one step behind.

Petchek felt an overwhelming need to flee. The embarrassing urge to empty his bowels hit him so suddenly he had to physically clench his anus shut. He forced a smile. What the hell was going on?

Oliver smiled back with a feral grin and said, "Yes, Mistah Petchek, here you are."

"Yes, Mr. Oliver. How are you?"

Still flashing the gold-toothed smile, Oliver answered, "Not good, mon, but lot better dan you."

In the few moments Petchek used trying to figure out what Oliver meant, Hinton slipped behind him. Just like that, he was surrounded. Oliver hot and glaring in front of him, Hinton icy cool, expressionless behind him. Petchek didn't dare turn to look at Hinton, but he felt the man's presence. Tall, lean, calm, with an evil hidden behind his dead eyes sunk deep into his pockmarked face.

Petchek knew that the big door wouldn't open for him now. His mind raced to find a way to stop what was happening, but too many questions plagued him. How much did Oliver know? Did Uncle Frank

complain about the cut? Why would he tell these savages? What has Oliver heard?

That question was John Petchek's last clear thought. Oliver's arm flashed through the air. Everything went black for a moment, and sharp, shocking pain engulfed the side of Petchek's face.

Oliver screamed, "I always be better dan a dirty dog like you."

And then Hinton rammed an eight-inch stiletto into Petchek's back. The blow felt like a searing punch. The point of the blade glanced off a rib, ripped all the way through Petchek's right lung, and cut into the side of his heart.

Petchek grunted. He staggered forward. Hinton ripped the knife out, causing even more damage to Petchek's heart.

The foolish artist/coke dealer dropped to his knees, then onto his hands. Blood seeped into his lung while his heart bled into the pericardial sac. In eight seconds, his heart stopped beating, and his breath ended with a cough that spewed blood on the floor.

Oliver knew death when he saw it, and his rage doubled because he knew Petchek was going to die too soon, too easily. Oliver kicked him viciously in the stomach. He spat on him and yelled, "Get up, goddamn ya, get up."

Petchek hadn't a prayer of getting up.

Oliver knew he was running out of time. He ran to the work table and returned with a machete. He swung it at Petchek. The blade opened a long slash in the back of Petchek's head. Oliver hit him again. The blade cut deep into the back of his neck.

Oliver moved around to get a better angle. He screamed, "Open da fucking door!"

The big guard fumbled with the locks and bars, terrified that Oliver's machete might swing at him if he moved too slowly.

Oliver grabbed Petchek's leg and dragged the body to the doorway. Petchek's heart fibrillated uselessly, but there was still enough blood and oxygen in his brain to keep him conscious. The door opened. He felt himself being dragged out. Out! A surge of

adrenaline kicked his heart. It flexed in a thunderous spasm in his chest. The pain was horrible, but a flash of consciousness burned through his brain. His heart pulsed again, tearing itself more, pushing more blood into Petchek's chest cavity and lung.

His car! Could he get to his car and make it to a hospital? Raw survival instinct filled him. Oliver's voice raged in a dark ringing tunnel.

He felt himself being pushed and kicked toward the doorway.

And then Hinton grabbed Petchek's stylish long hair and wrenched his head up off the floor. Oliver moved into position, gripped the machete with two hands, and swung with all his strength at the back of Petchek's neck. The blow severed the spine, tendons, muscles, but a good bit of ligament and cartilage held. He swung again, and again, chopping, hacking, splattering blood on the implacable Hinton.

Finally, the head came free. Hinton lifted it away from the body and tossed it toward the door. Oliver ran after it and kicked Petchek's head down the stairs. He spat at the bloody, tumbling body part, then turned to grab at the corpse. Hinton and the guard helped Oliver shove the torso over the edge of the top step. As the corpse slid and tumbled down the stairs, Oliver slashed at it with the machete, ripping a wound across the back of Petchek's calf.

What was left of John Petchek rolled and tumbled down the stairwell. Blood slapped and spilled across the stairs and walls. Oliver reached up and grabbed a chain that ran down to a latch on the ground floor door. The scent of Petchek's blood sent the Dobermans into a screaming, barking frenzy. Oliver pulled the chain. The door burst open, and three crazed animals exploded into the stairwell, scrambling and slamming into one another as the bloody, mutilated body hit the pack, and the dogs went finally, unalterably wild.

CHAPTER 1

AN OCEAN AND A CONTINENT AWAY, JACK DEVLIN STOOD ON THE EDGE of a beautifully burnished cherrywood veranda. He listened to the soft trill of wind chimes as he absorbed the serenity of the Japanese garden in front of him: plants, moss, and bonsai amidst the garden's dark earth and gray rocks. Heard the sound of softly gurgling water. Breathed in the cool evening air, lightly scented with pine.

The garden was beyond peaceful. It was a true oasis. A haven, hidden away from the busy streets of San Francisco. The setting sun bathed it all in a soft golden glow.

Devlin stood without moving, dressed in gray linen slacks and a burgundy-colored cotton polo shirt. The clothes fit him well. Devlin had the body of a thirty-year-old pro linebacker, except for scars.

Behind him, William Chow sat seiza-style at a low cherrywood table made by the same craftsman who had fashioned the veranda. Although the house and garden had been built in the Japanese style, Chow was not Japanese. He was a mixture of several Asian bloodlines. His connections extended widely throughout the Far East and were as complex as his heritage. As the business of the East had become more intertwined with the business of the West, Chow's interactions between the two regions had grown accordingly.

William Chow ran one of the world's most respected private security agencies, Pacific Rim Security. He provided services for several multibillion-dollar conglomerates in Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea, as well as for a limited roster of wealthy private individuals.

Jack Devlin was one of his most experienced and trusted operatives.

With his tailored Armani suit, his tortoiseshell glasses, and his graying jet-black hair, Chow had the appearance of a corporate executive. At the moment, Chow was trying to calculate something more complicated than a balance sheet. He was trying to evaluate the toll Devlin's mission in Hawaii had taken on him. He had been reluctant to send him on that assignment, knowing that Devlin had not yet recovered from a difficult situation in New York, but circumstances required that Devlin take on the task. Chow was now even more reluctant for Devlin to take on another job, but he also knew he had little say in the matter.

Devlin sensed Chow rise behind him and waited for the older man to step onto the veranda. For a moment the two colleagues stood side by side listening to the twilight sounds.

Chow spoke first. "Hawaii was difficult."

Devlin turned toward his mentor. "Yes. It turned out to be more than expected."

Chow stepped off the veranda. Devlin fell into step next to him. He knew Chow was struggling with what he was about to say. He moved quietly and fluidly alongside the smaller man, waiting.

After a short, silent walk, Chow stopped near a small pool of water alongside the garden path. It contained two goldfish. They were fourteen years old and had grown to the perfect size for the secluded pool. Their constantly flexing bodies matched the protected space of water allotted for their existence.

Devlin listened to the sound of a miniature waterfall that flowed over pure white granite rocks before gently falling into the fishpond.

Finally, Chow spoke.

"You've been contacted by a friend on a personal matter."

"Yes."

"Jack, have you recovered enough to take this on so soon?"

Devlin said, "I had a few days in Los Angeles."

It didn't really answer his question. Nevertheless, Chow nodded and handed Devlin the telegram he had been waiting to receive from Chow. The message was brief and to the point: *Jack, sorry. Urgent. I need your help. I'm still in London. Annie.*

Below the signature was a phone number and address that Devlin didn't bother to read. The single word "Annie" was enough of a message. Images of her flashed in his memory. A physical feeling of love and loss hit him so palpably that he realized his breathing had stopped for a moment. It had been so many years, Devlin hadn't expected to hear from Annie Turino. Nor had he expected his reaction to be so intense.

Chow's soft, refined voice interrupted.

"I'm sorry. Messages of this sort rarely bring good news."

"No. They don't. I'm going to have to leave for London."

Chow bowed slightly, conceding without argument.

"We are at your disposal."

"Thank you, sir."

"But I do need to say we won't be able to do everything we might normally be able to. As you know, Jack, Western Europe is not one of our major spheres of interest. We have limited resources there."

"Understood. But this is a personal matter, William. Not something Pacific Rim should be involved in."

Chow waved a hand. "I don't separate the company's affairs from yours, Jack."

Chow extended his hand. Devlin grasped it. Neither of them needed to say more. Devlin held Chow's hand for just an extra beat and then turned toward the veranda. After a few paces, Chow called his name softly.

"Jack."

Devlin turned. Chow was silhouetted by the setting sun. For a moment, backlit by the sun, the man who was such a towering presence in Devlin's life appeared uncharacteristically ethereal.

"Yes, sir?"

“Try to keep perspective, Jack. Personal matters sometimes affect us with surprising force.”

“Yes, sir.”

And then Devlin was gone. Chow remained in the peaceful garden disturbed by not knowing what *Urgent* meant, and by the fact that Devlin had not explained who *Annie* was.

CHAPTER 2

AS THE BRITISH AIRWAYS JET BEGAN ITS DESCENT INTO HEATHROW, the change in air pressure woke Devlin. He had taken an early evening flight so that he would be in London in the afternoon. He wanted to meet with Annie Turino after her work day.

He brought his lie-flat seat into the sitting position, stretched, and turned, testing to see which parts of his body still ached from his Hawaii assignment. Nothing felt too painful, but he was eager to get off the plane and walk.

He finished the light breakfast they served in First Class shortly before he felt the unexpectedly hard bump as the big jet dropped onto the ground. By the time the plane had taxied to its jetway, Devlin was standing in the aisle with his carry-on bag wearing a quilted Barbour jacket suitable for the chilly London October weather. He disembarked with the other First-Class passengers, striding ahead of the group with purpose and resolve as he made his way toward customs.

He cleared customs, walked into the central terminal area, and stopped at a pay phone. It was 3:32 P.M. He tapped in the numbers of his calling card, punched in the direct-dial code, connected with an outside overseas line, and tapped in the digits for Pacific Rim.

He checked his watch and calculated the time difference. When a voice answered, Devlin dictated a message for Mrs. Banks. He had little idea of what he needed, so he asked that she compile a list of local freelancers available in the London area approved by

Pacific Rim, divided into the usual categories. He told the person taking the message he would call back with a fax number in about an hour.

While he talked on the phone, as was his habit, Devlin scanned his surroundings to see if anyone seemed to be watching him. He'd done that from the moment he got off the plane. Nothing caught his attention.

Devlin hung up and pictured the reliable Mrs. Banks dutifully working his request, and then just as dutifully passing on the information to Mr. Chow. Mrs. Banks was smart, tough, and absolutely loyal to William Chow. The fact that Chow had given Devlin direct access to her was an advantage that Devlin used to its fullest. Edith Banks was the key to all the resources of Pacific Rim Security.

Devlin's next phone call was to Annie's apartment. He reached into the coat pocket of his Barbour jacket and pulled out the telegram she had sent him. He used his calling card to dial the number and listened to the foreign ringtones. Again, he turned his back on the phone and watched the people moving about the terminal. Devlin was not one to face a wall for any longer than he had to.

He waited for six rings and decided Annie wasn't home. He didn't want to wait for an answering machine. He terminated the call, walked to the Thomas Cook foreign exchange kiosk, and exchanged five thousand American dollars for English pounds, then headed outside to find a taxi into central London. He felt focused, ready for whatever was ahead of him, but anxious to get settled and arrange a time to meet with Annie Turino.

CHAPTER 3

AS DEVLIN'S JET ROARED TOWARD LONDON, HINTON GUNNED THE engine of his red Saab, downshifted smoothly, and gripped the leather-wrapped steering wheel as he turned the corner onto Coldharbour Lane in Brixton.

He continued up Coldharbour under the British Rail tracks and turned again, entering a maze of small lanes packed with row after row of four-story flats. Rental laws, the dole, and drugs had ripped the heart out of these dwellings. Landlords repaired nothing, the people asked for little, and life in Brixton remained grim.

But not for Hinton. Now, more than ever, places like Brixton and Hackney and Stoke Newington were places that suited men like Hinton and Oliver and their crew of Yardies. The world of the Yardman revolved around two things: crack cocaine and guns. With crack, you made money. With guns, you protected the money.

Along with crack cocaine came prostitution. Crack produced women who needed to sell themselves for the drug, which presented Oliver and his crew with an opportunity to add extra cash to the bottom line.

This quiet section of Brixton was perfect for Oliver's whores. All he had to do was make sure the operation conformed to the hypocritical UK laws regarding prostitution. A flat where one woman offered sexual services for money was not a brothel, and the woman was not a prostitute. A flat where two women were offered sex for money was a brothel, and the women were prostitutes. So, all of

Oliver's buildings in Brixton housed separate flats for each sex worker—one on the ground floor in the rear and two on each of the other floors. In one of the buildings, Oliver used the top floor for himself.

Hinton parked his car. He got out, admired the red finish on the bonnet where the water from a light rain had beaded.

As he entered the flat that housed Oliver's headquarters, Hinton breathed in the spicy smells of Jamaican food cooking. The tangy odors, plus the scent of cat spray and garbage, brought back memories of his childhood in Kingston. Close, but not exactly the same as his old yard. Maybe it was the lack of unrelenting heat that changed the odor. The perpetual wet cold of London's winters never brought enough sun to beat down and bring everything to the proper ripeness. Or maybe there just weren't enough good West Indian blacks to get the smells right. Too many Pakis and Irish and white yobs mixed in with everybody else. So be it. London was home now. And by any measure, London was better than the grinding poverty and relentlessly dangerous backstreets of Kingston.

Hinton had survived everything the island had thrown at him, including eleven years in a prison where you had to maim and kill if you wanted to live. The strong ate the food, wore the shoes, slept in the beds. The strong survived. The weak didn't. Hinton knew that there were very few things on earth that could be worse than a Jamaican prison. Certainly no jail in England.

It was in the dark, dangerous prisons of Jamaica that Hinton had tapped into the inhuman part of himself and found solace in the inscrutable netherworld of African/Christian gods. The world of Voodoo and Santeria, specifically the world of his chosen patron god—Chango.

When he reached the top-floor landing, Hinton approached a wire-mesh gate that closed off the landing from the stairwell.

Oliver's guard saw that it was Hinton and buzzed him in. Hinton

walked to the front door of the apartment. The door opened, revealing a woman who was so large that she nearly filled the doorframe. Hinton bowed his head.

“Mam.”

The big woman was Lydia Ciento. She was a mix of Haitian and Dominican but had lived much of her life in Jamaica practicing a blend of Voodoo and Santeria. She wore a head wrap made of a colorful blue and red print material along with a large shapeless dress made from the same fabric as her headdress. Heavy rings and bracelets adorned her hands and arms.

She stood at the door examining Hinton without uttering a word for about five seconds. Only when she was satisfied that Hinton was clean, sober, well dressed, and sufficiently humble did she extend her hand. Hinton took the large, pudgy hand of the priestess and kissed it.

Lydia Ciento turned and allowed Hinton into the main room of the apartment. The space had been completely transformed into an altar room for various icons and gods, including Hinton’s patron, Chango.

All the windows in the room had been painted and covered with drapes. The only light came from a single red bulb gleaming in the middle of the ceiling and dozens of flickering votive candles. Scattered area rugs covered the floor. The walls, like the windows, were covered with drapes. Every fabric was some shade of dull red.

On the main altar, the effigy of Chango, a denizen of hell, glared at Hinton.

Hinton bowed before the statue and placed his token of worship into a brass dish—a crisp hundred-pound note. It wasn’t only the denomination that mattered; it was the newness and freshness of the bill that made it a respectable offering.

Burning incense clouded the room. The priestess watched Hinton from behind. She had a scowl on her face as if she had tasted something bad.

Hinton deferred only to his religion. Momma Ciento was a part of it. He granted her respect because he genuinely believed that the power of Voodoo and gods such as Chango existed. He believed that the god of thunder and lightning bolts had saved him from the living hell of prison. How else could he explain his sudden and unexpected release, not only from prison but into this heaven of opportunity, this soft ripe plum of a city waiting?

When Hinton rose from his knees, the big woman motioned him toward the hall leading to Oliver's office.

"He's waiting for you."

Hinton nodded.

Oliver was talking on the phone when he entered. He motioned for Hinton to sit down.

Hinton looked around the office. It was all glass, chrome, and fluorescent light. The opposite of the altar room. Oliver had little to do with the honsi, but he, too, believed in the workings of the primitive religion. As did many of his men. Thus the need for a resident priestess and altar room.

Oliver sat listening to the voice on the phone. He wore an expensive dark blue suit and a black silk collarless shirt. Unlike many of his peers who favored large gold *cargo* in the form of chains and other ornaments, Oliver's only affectation was a thick gold chain wrapped around his left wrist.

Oliver spoke in a low, guttural Jamaican lilt. Hinton knew he must be talking to one of his underlings.

In the lawless world of West Indian gangs, power and survival depended upon the ability to terrorize. Oliver had built a formidable crew by gathering men around him who were capable of killing with a matter-of-fact ruthlessness. But even amidst this group, Hinton stood out. He not only killed easily, he killed religiously. Some of the hard men of the Yard liked killing. Hinton *believed* in killing.

As he talked on the phone, Oliver pulled out small stacks of

pound notes from his desk drawer. He divided them into two piles. Oliver paid by the inch.

He hung up the phone and handed a one-inch pile to Hinton.

“For you, bredrin.” Then he handed Hinton a quarter-inch pile. “And da bonus.”

Hinton took the money and pocketed it without counting.

Oliver didn’t like his hirelings to count money in front of him. He felt they should just take what he gave them.

“Hail up. We got a lot of business to take care of.”

Hinton raised his chin and gave Oliver his attention.

“First go on over to King’s Cross and check on Louis and Pudgy. See if da trash hanging aroun’ der be causing any trouble. If so, you know what to do.

“Then you find Lionel. Him over in the Wicks by da factory. He got a lead on dat white scum we dealt wit’. Also, a clean piece for you. Bring Lionel with you. Take care of it. Ya clear, right?”

Hinton nodded and stood up to leave. He was anxious to get started.

“One more t’ing. Very important. We be meeting tonight with da Yugoslav.”

Hinton frowned. “Where?”

“A place called da Yard in Soho. Rupert Street. He thinks he’s funny, maybe. Or maybe he’s stupid.”

“So you going to deal with him?”

“Of course. He got two t’ings I want. Money and guns. More of it dan anywhere in dis yard, mon. So finish your business and meet me at ten.”

“You expecting trouble with the Yugoslavs?”

“Cuz we kill that piece of shit?”

“He was their boy.”

“I always expect trouble. That’s why I’m still alive. Maybe I don’t kill as quick as you, my fren, but I always be da mon who kill first. Go on, now. Later.”

Hinton left the office and made his way back through to the altar room. The big woman sat on a straight-back wooden chair with her fat arms folded. She was still glum.

Hinton went down on one knee and asked for her blessing.

The woman took Hinton's head in her hands.

"Do you believe in the power of the god?"

"You know I do."

"Or do you believe more in the power of your gun and your knife?"

"What have I done to offend you, Momma?"

The big woman looked up at the ceiling as if she could see the sky. Outside it was growing dark. A thunderstorm was sweeping down from the north. It would rain heavily soon. The distant rumble of thunder filtered into the room.

"Be careful, my son. One rainstorm can touch many people."

With that, she extended her blessing. Hinton made the sign of the cross and stood up. He wasn't interested in discussing her cryptic message. All he wanted was her benediction. That would bring the protection of his god, Chango. With that, Hinton believed he would not die. At least not today.