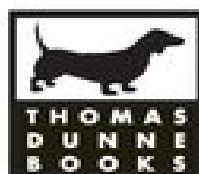


DIAMOND HEAD

CHARLES KNIEF





*DIAMOND
HEAD*



CHARLES KNIEF



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
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This one is for Ildiko, who rescued me.

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1

The last two hundred yards of my daily run are always the hardest and that early summer evening was no different. It wasn't merely because the grade was all uphill; my mind was just about that far ahead of my body, anticipating the recovery, looking forward to a quick shower and a chilled glass of California chardonnay.

My feet pounded the asphalt past the Marina Restaurant. I stopped and walked the quarter mile to the joggers' fountain to warm down. There used to be a sign that marked it, but one of the patrons left the Marina early one morning and ran over it. Now the sign is gone and there's only a bubbler atop a galvanized pipe protruding from the lawn at a forty-five-degree angle.

I had been rounding back into shape after a six-month battle with injuries and indolence, the kind of injuries you get when you push your nose into other people's business and the kind of indolence where you're not certain you can start all over again. The first law of thermodynamics is even more certain as you approach your middle years. A body at rest does, indeed, tend to remain at rest.

The warmdown lasted until my heartbeat slowed to the legal limit and I could go home. Home was *Duchess*, a fifty-six-foot ketch-rigged sailboat I'd purchased in Singapore from a bankrupt Chinese merchant and sailed to Hawaii in the mid-eighties. *Duchess* is a generous lady, one of the few I have known. And for a while she'd been the only one in my life. I had been heading for California but got blown off course by a hurricane. By the time she was repaired I'd found my own patch of paradise and decided to stay.

Mine is the largest boat in the marina and draws the most water. Consequently she is farthest from the quay. I walked down the dock to my slip, watching the sky. The sunset was flaming, fluorescing. The volcanic ash Kilauea was shooting from the south coast of the Big Island all the way into the stratosphere. Across Pearl Harbor's northern shore the water reflected gold and fiery red. Against the far mountains the last gasp of the day's cane harvest fires showed white against the black slopes, and black against the sky.

While watching the sunset I nearly missed seeing the bulky silhouette of a man sitting on *Duchess*'s stern, outlined against the evening sky. Even with his features in shadow I could tell he was big and fit, a carnivore, accustomed to occupying the top of the food chain.

"Good evening," I said in measured tones, angry at the trespass but not giving anything away. The way I earn my living sometimes causes me to make enemies. I live close and I live careful, and I've found it worthwhile to make some fast judgments before acting. The old body's not as quick as it used to be and my mind has learned to compensate for the slowing reflexes. "Anything I can help you with?"

"It's true what I heard about you white boys. You sure do sweat," said the man, his mature, gruff voice still heavy with the origins of his birth. It was a voice I immediately recognized. He stood and looked down at me, a benevolent, flashing smile adding another crease to the dark and fearsome face I knew so well. "Wipe yourself down, boy. I came by to have a drink with an old friend."

"Max!"

"It's been a long time, sailor."

"When did you get in?" I climbed into the cockpit and embraced the man who had been closer than

any brother.

~~“This morning. You’re a hard man to find, even on an island this size. Had to look for your boat. There’s a master chief at the CPO club who covers for you pretty good. Had to show him my pedigree before he even admitted knowing you.”~~

“Old friends.”

“The only kind,” he allowed. “You’re getting back into shape,” he said, punching me in the stomach with a playful jab.

“Starting to. Ran eight miles tonight.”

“You might make it out of the wheelchair before long.”

Max was dressed like a tourist in a tank top and shorts and white Nike lowtops with no socks. His t-shirt had startling green capital lettering that said HAWAII—IF IT SWELLS, RIDE IT!, pulled tight over hard muscle. He resembled a tourist the way a tiger shark resembles a goldfish. For a man in his late forties he was as solid as a rock. Hurricanes couldn’t put him down.

Max pointed toward the restaurant above the boat slips. “They serve drinks up there at that shack?”

“Let me shower, then we’ll talk.”

I unlocked the cabin and went below to change. Max remained in the cockpit, catching the last rays of the warm summer sun on his face. He was still there when I returned, watching a small fleet of canoes racing to the buoy near the north shore of Ford Island. He wore a bemused expression of contentment.

Remembering how he had loved the local beer when we were stationed in Germany, I handed him a cold bottle of Edelweiss *Dunkel*. “Talk here. It’s as good as any place and there’s no cover charge.”

Max accepted the beer, his smile widening. His eyes shifted from the sweating paddlers to me and back.

“This is peaceful, John,” he said, his voice a reverent whisper, the way you’d speak in a cathedral. “You have truly found paradise.”

“Had to get as far away from everywhere as I could.”

“Did you find peace?”

“Close as it gets, I guess.”

I piled some cushions against the opposite bulkhead and slid down against them. I was drinking my wine. I’d been thinking about the bittersweet flavor on my tongue during my run, been planning on drinking alone. But this was better.

“I have lately been to Europe,” he said. “An all-expense-paid tour of the Balkans. You know that place. Where the First Big Mistake started when somebody shot some duke.”

“Was it as bad as they say?”

“Worse, John. Worse than Lebanon. Worse than Somalia. We had no mission. The assholes put us out there for show one more time. A lot of good men died when the shooting started and they wouldn’t back us up.”

I hadn’t been to Somalia, having left that life long before. But I’d been out *there* before, without backup from those whom Max had called “assholes.” We’d been out *there* together more times than could count. “Nothing more dangerous than your own politicians,” I observed.

Max drank from the bottle, nodding and rolling his eyes in assent. “Goddamned whores are changing everything these days,” he said. “But they never change. Probably been that way since the legions were marching along, rolling over all the known world in the name of Rome. But if they get into trouble ...” His voice trailed off. “Soldiers don’t change much. Neither do the politicians. Whores send out the soldiers every time.”

I let him drink and talk, unwinding from his travels. I knew he hadn’t flown halfway across the Pacific just to look up an old shipmate and tell war stories. Max wasn’t like that. He always had

mission.

“You still doing favors for friends?” he asked.

“When I need the money.” Max never did accept the fact that I’d pulled a private detective license in this state. He didn’t think a living could be made that way. He called it “doing favors for friends.” I didn’t argue with him. In a way, that was how it seemed to work.

“How you fixed lately?”

“That depends.”

Max took a last gulp from the Edelweiss, draining the bottle. “Depends upon what, the friend? How about me?”

“Just ask.”

“You remember MacGruder?”

I remembered. He’d been our commanding officer once upon a time when it had been decided by our nation to waste thousands of its best and its brightest in an Asian war. He was the best of the best and the brightest of the brightest. He never let any of his men down. And when our country’s politicians led us into yet another ill-considered and poorly conceived battle for a godforsaken piece of real estate in the South Caribbean he was there again, not for the glory or because he agreed with the cause, but because duty called. He’d always backed me up, and he had saved my life more than once. That last time he’d put his career on the line for me and my men. Our SEAL team had been pinned down by Cuban “construction workers” who just happened to have heavy automatic weapons and knew how to use them. He reversed the decision of a higher officer to abandon us and sent in a company of marines to relieve the pressure, allowing us to withdraw intact.

“Captain MacGruder?”

“Admiral now. Vice admiral. He’s jumped a couple of pay grades since Grenada. That was the last time you saw him?”

I thought about it. “I guess it was.” I left the navy soon after, unable to stomach the disaster the politicians were calling a victory. Too many of my best friends had died for the worst of reasons.

“Did you know he had a daughter? Lived here on Oahu?”

I shook my head.

“Named Mary. From what I knew of her she was a wild and beautiful girl. Chip off the old block but looked just like her mother. Graduated from Radford High. Then she went to some Ivy League college on the East Coast. After college she came back to Hawaii, because she loved it here when he had been assigned to CINPAC. Worked as a cocktail waitress in one of the big hotels in Waikiki. Got into some other stuff that wasn’t so good.”

“She okay now?”

“Depends upon your theology, I guess. Got herself murdered about three months ago. Raped and murdered. Left like some trash out on the Waianae coast.”

“I hadn’t heard about it.”

“No reason for you to pay attention. You didn’t even know she existed. I heard you were in pretty bad shape yourself about then, anyway.” Max smirked at me. “Got it in the right leg again?”

“That was the one.”

“What is that, three times in the same leg?”

“Twice, but that’s enough.”

He smiled and nodded. Through all the bad times Max had never been so much as scratched, though bullets bounced off him. I’d caught most of it. More than once he’d taken my nearly lifeless body out of some hairy places, with hot, fast metal moving through our space, carrying me over his shoulder as if he were out for a jog in the park on a sunny day. Max, my Kevlar friend.

“Healing up pretty good now?”

"It's coming along."

"~~Could be you're getting kind of old to go whacking at windmills,~~" he said. "Got another one these?" He held up the dead soldier. I took the empty bottle below, pulled another beer from the cooler and returned to the cockpit. The sky was a deep purple over the Waianae Mountains with night settling in. It was beautiful, but now I could only picture a dead thing beyond the distant peaks.

"Could be you're right, Max. I've got no other skills. Guess I could sell insurance."

"Guess you could, John, but it'd kill you. We're twins, you and me. I just stayed in, even though I'm old and tired. You got out because you couldn't stand the bullshit."

"So?"

"The police do not claim to have a suspect."

"What do you think I can do about it?"

"The admiral is a broken man. His wife died of cancer six months before his daughter was killed. You remember how he loved that woman? That hit him hard. I was there and it was a messy death. I thought that was going to do him in, but he's a tough old bird and he came through it pretty much intact. Then his only child was murdered. Now there's some nasty talk. About the daughter."

"Bad news?"

"The worst. The admiral wishes to pursue a political career when he retires. Something nasty surfaces about his kin, well, you know how campaigns are these days. Something like this would kill it."

"Politics? I thought you hated politicians."

"Every one of 'em since Ike."

"What do you want me to do, Max?"

"Someone's got to find the killer before the cops do. You're here. It's your island. It's what you do. No one else can be trusted." Max leaned forward, his voice softening. "You do favors for friends. I'm a friend. The admiral's a friend. We've all got history; we've seen it happen a time or two. The cops have their own agenda. Admiral MacGruder will need a friend looking out for his interests."

When I didn't react, he shook his head sadly and leaned back against the cushions.

"You might even come up with something the cops can't. You know people in the strangest places." I nodded confirmation.

"And if you run across anything unfavorable about the girl, anything at all, lose it. Make sure she stays lost. Something nasty surfaces about the admiral's daughter, it'd finish him. Him and his military and political career."

"Why not have the Naval Investigative Service look into it. They're professionals. They can get all the information about the girl from the police."

"Aside from the jurisdiction problem, think about what you just said," said Max, settling against the cushions.

"The navy is a small institution, and anything they find out about the girl would soon be common knowledge."

He nodded. "Nobody keeps a secret anymore, John. Only friends do. Those boys and girls would hand the results of their investigation upstairs and one of the admiral's enemies would get hold of it and it would be certain to leak. There's only one way to keep secrets. Limit the knowledge. To friends."

Max was handing me two missions. First, find the killer, and then make sure anything about the girl that could damage her father would never see the light of day. There could be only one way to ensure that.

"I'm not an assassin."

"Not without good cause, anyway."

I winced, remembering a time in Central America when I was ordered to do so, and Max had worked support.

“I wouldn’t know where to start ...”

“You owe him, John.”

“We both do,” I said.

“That’s why I took a couple of days leave. It took me all day to find you. I have to be back in Coronado tomorrow night. I can’t do anything about this. Not while I’m in uniform. But you can.”

“All right, what can it hurt?” Max was right. I had a debt to pay.

2

We went to the Marina Restaurant for plates of ribs and greasy fried chicken, steak fries and coleslaw a real Hawaiian feast. We washed it down with cold bottles of Tsing Tao, toasts to absent companions and old sea stories. Max brought me current with the old bunch of guys who, it turned out, were actually a bunch of new guys I'd never heard of. Most of the men we'd served with had either retired, been promoted or died. Max was the only one left.

Max had lately been running groups through SERE Camp, a quaint little naval installation in the hills of northern San Diego County. SERE stands for survival, evasion, resistance and escape. Navy pilots are sent there to learn how to counter the physical and psychological torture they can expect if they get shot down in the Third World, the only place where military people ply their trade these days. Max reminded me that the first time we'd ever seen SERE Camp, we'd been together.

The marines ran it then. They'd taken five SEALs from Coronado, blindfolded us and dropped us off one by one in the middle of the night in the hills surrounding the camp, instructing us to stay low until the next morning. Before they abandoned us to the bush they kicked us, mocked us and swore at us in Cuban-Spanish and Russian. I remembered them as a jolly bunch. As they beat us they laughed a lot. The idea was that no matter how hard we'd try to hide they'd capture us.

That was the idea. They were elite recon marines, used to dealing with pilots who were accustomed to sitting in their weapons, not carrying them. We gave them something to think about. By 2300 we'd rounded up all twenty-eight of our "captors" and controlled the camp. That night was the cause of a policy change at SERE. Never again did they send more than two SEALs. If they send any at all now they double the marines.

After dinner I drove Max to Hickam Air Force Base where he squeezed onto a MAC flight to Alameda in California. He'd hop a civilian carrier from there to San Diego and be home by tomorrow morning. He wanted to clear the island. He didn't want to be around when I started stirring up a cloud of dirt. From what he'd told me, that was a possibility. He had nearly thirty years in and wanted to retire with a clean slate. I didn't blame him, but I wished he could have stayed. If there was anyone out there with murderous intent, there's no one I'd rather have watching my back.

Max's C-141 lifted from the runway just before midnight. Watching the big cargo jet arc over the lagoon, a realization hit me like an adrenaline rush that a hole in my life had been filled. I'd been irritable lately, restless and bored. Tired of my own company. The physical training had been challenging, bringing me back to within a few notches of my top form, but training for training's sake is dulling after a while. Max had done me a favor by asking for one of his own.

I didn't know much about murder investigations, but it seemed that a good place to start would be to find out what the police knew. They'd have a file, rich with information. I only knew two ways to get a look at a police file. I could ask the police, but I didn't think they'd give me any cooperation, Chawlie could get me a copy.

Leaving Hickam I got on the eastbound Nimitz Highway toward downtown Honolulu instead of heading back to Pearl Harbor. My old Rolex said it was twelve-twenty. It would take me five minutes to reach Chinatown and another fifteen to find a parking place, but there was no hurry. Unless he was dead, my man would be in his usual spot until well after three in the morning.

Hotel Street used to be the center of Honolulu's red-light district. During World War II there were no fewer than a hundred and fifty houses of prostitution within the ten square blocks of Chinatown. Now the area is mainly a tourist attraction with lei stands, Chinese, Filipino and Vietnamese restaurants and not a red-light house in sight. They're still there. You just have to know where to look.

The man I wanted to see was around the corner on River Street, a wandering road named for the meandering stream called Nu'uaniu that bordered Chinatown's western edge. I don't know his real name. He's known to me only as Chawlie. Chawlie can be found every night on a hard plastic chair in the foyer of the small restaurant facing the bronze statue of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, fifteen paces from the Nu'uaniu Stream.

Most people seeing the old man in the threadbare clothes might think he is there to share the rice bowl of the restaurant, an uncle fallen on hard times perhaps, living off the largess of a successful family. In reality he owns the rice bowl, the restaurant and possibly half of Chinatown. Chawlie knows everything that happens in town, both above and below the legal lines. Most recent politicians from the City and County of Honolulu have come to him for substantial financial help in their campaigns. There is an understanding, of course, that Chawlie will get whatever he wants in the way of civic assistance for rezoning or building permits or whatever else he wants whenever he wants it. Chawlie doesn't speak Latin but he understands *quid pro quo*.

I heard somewhere that Chawlie's net worth approaches two hundred million dollars.

Chawlie likes me. I don't see him much, maybe that's why. A couple of years ago he had a delicate problem he couldn't resolve without outside help. A "professional" woman got her hooks into him and tried to shake him down in return for what she had learned about the old man's bedroom habits. He's a proud man. Going to one of his many lawyer nephews might have solved the problem, but would have exposed a weakness. Seeking help from a *haole* lawyer was even worse. Reporting the extortion to the police was unthinkable. He needed to get the woman off his back in the quickest and most discreet way possible. Someone recommended my services to him. I'm an outsider, not of the clan. Somehow he found that reassuring.

For a small fee I handled his problem. The lady left the island, happier and somewhat richer than she had been before, but not as rich as she had planned. Nobody ever knew what it was Chawlie liked that got him in trouble. No one found the one piece of information that might have started his empire crumbling. I think at first he expected me to come back to him for more than just my fee, to exploit what I alone knew about him. It didn't happen. Now Chawlie introduces me as " ... John Caine. He's a *haole*, but he okay." It's his highest accolade.

I found him perched primly on an orange plastic chair, gazing into the night.

"Good evening, Uncle," I said respectfully.

Almond eyes tracked my approach, no expression on the face they inhabited.

"I see you, John Caine," said Chawlie, finally acknowledging my presence. "How are you feeling?"

"My health is good, Uncle."

Chawlie looked me up and down, as if appraising the veracity of my claim. At last he pointed to another chair, a companion to his own.

"Sit," he commanded. When I obeyed, he smiled. "You no come see me. Two years you go away from this place and not return. I know you here on island. All time I wait for you to come and ask me what about this, what about that. I know what you do and I know you need my help. I say to myself, This John Caine, he will want something someday. He come to me then." The eyes twinkled with merriment. "So. What you want, *haole*? You need money?"

"No, Uncle," I said, shaking my head. "I have no need of your money."

"Everybody need money. But that's good you not want any because I no loan money to you. You no

live so long, I think. You let people shoot you. Somebody kill you next time, you no pay me back.”

“I need a file. A police file.”

“You think I can get police file? Are you stupid?”

“I know you can, Uncle. If you want to.”

Chawlie studied me, his face impassive. I leaned back in my chair and waited.

“What kind police file?” he said after a while.

“Homicide, Uncle.”

“Oh, homicide! Something simple! Homicide police file! You know I cannot get a police file. And homicide file! You must think Chawlie can do anything!”

I nodded. “Yes, Chawlie. In this town I think you can.”

The face remained impassive but I knew I’d pleased him. “It is big problem.”

He watched my face for a reaction. I gave him nothing.

“It would cost much money. If I could get one for you.”

“How much money, Uncle?”

“Five thousand dollars.”

“When can you get it?”

“I never say I get it. Did I say I get it?”

“I can have five thousand dollars here by tomorrow noon.”

“Tomorrow night. Here. Same time.”

“Midnight.”

He nodded. “What name is on the file?”

“The victim’s name is MacGruder. First name Mary. A young female. She was killed and left near Waianae about three months ago. I don’t know anything else about the case. I was hoping the file would enlighten me.”

“Take more than police file to enlighten you.”

I had been dismissed.

“Thank you, Uncle.” I got up to leave.

“John Caine!”

I turned. The old man was sitting as still as a statue.

“Stay awake tonight. Mebbe somebody will come to your boat with a package.”

“I’ll be awake.”

“And you be here tomorrow night with the money.”

“I will, Uncle. Midnight. I’ll bring the money.”

“Cash!” said Chawlie, the trace of a smile dancing across his lips. “No checks!”

“Cash,” I repeated.

“And don’t let anyone kill you before you pay!”

3

Dawn was still an hour away when a subtle shift in *Duchess's* motion woke me from a dreamlike slumber. My visitor was awkward and clumsy, and from the sound of the hard soles scuffing my teak deck, a stranger to a marine environment. I opened the hatch and invited the intruder in.

My visitor carefully climbed down the ladder, putting both feet on each step before attempting the next one. That was about all she could do in a skintight silk dress and four-inch spike heels. As she descended, it was obvious her dress contained a spectacular body.

"You are Mr. Caine?" She had a face to match her body and a voice to melt butter. This was a real dragon-lady-bitch-goddess.

"I am."

"This for you." The tiny goddess handed me twelve inches of photocopied pages. Chawlie had been as good as his word.

"Thank you. Chawlie sent you?"

She answered the question by alighting on the lounge settee and adjusting her stockings. They were honest-to-God stockings, not panty hose—I could see smooth flesh. She was exquisite in dress and feature, a rich man's toy, and the business with the stockings had been an intentional act. Not an invitation, just a demonstration: *I am unattainable for one such as you. But I can show you what you are missing.* Slouched against the bulkhead in cutoff sweatshirt and shorts, I felt like a peasant. When she stood and reached her full height I noted that the top of her head barely reached the middle of my chest. God knows what she'd been told about me, but she'd been expecting rape or worse.

"Uncle say to be careful until tomorrow night. He will be waiting for you. I go now." English was not her native tongue. I wondered if Chawlie had smuggled her into the country for his private consumption or if she was a prime choice from a regular load. I decided she must have been handpicked for the old man from the beginning; she was too perfect.

I extended my hand to assist her as she addressed each step of the ladder and I followed her up on deck to make sure she made it safely to the dock without falling overboard. When her spike heels touched the relatively stable surface of the dock she took off like a rocket. I watched her until she disappeared beyond the darkened restaurant, the sound of her hard little heels tapping a staccato beat against the concrete. I heard a car door shut and saw the profile of a large, dark sedan leave the parking lot.

One of Chawlie's women. She would be heading back to his bed, escorted by a keeper or two. She would report, and would be rewarded for her courage in entering the haole's lair.

It's a tossup who's more racist, the Japanese or the Chinese. Either one makes the KKK seem as innocuous as Barney. My vote is for the Chinese. They view themselves as the only human race. The Mandarin word for the Chinese people is *han*, meaning "human beings." No one else qualifies. And yet they have been discriminated against throughout the rest of the world. Most people do not know that the Vietnamese boat people of the late seventies were nearly all ethnic Chinese, descendants of a great diaspora eight hundred years earlier. Though they had lived in Vietnam for eight centuries, they had not intermarried and had retained their ethnic and cultural identity. The Chinese have a strong sense of family and a great appreciation of education, and they became entrenched in the arts,

medicine, in the bureaucracies. And they were sorely hated by the Vietnamese. The feeling was mutual. Chinese do not like outsiders. Chawlie deals with me only because I have a commodity he can acquire nowhere else: absolute trust.

I could have given the woman the money to take to Chawlie, but I wanted no one to know I kept that kind of cash aboard. I don't trust anyone that much. I'd see him at midnight and make a show of going to the bank before. But nearly everything I owned was on this boat, ready to leave in a moment's notice.

The stack of photocopied files lay on the lounge table demanding my immediate attention. I made a pot of Jamaican Blue Mountain as the sun rose over Makalapa Hill, and started working.

So how do you find a murderer? Police will tell you nearly every homicide is the result of a dispute between people who knew each other. Lately Hawaii has experienced more of the random violence that is engendered in the squalor of the big mainland cities—serial killings and drive-by shootings—strangers killing strangers. This didn't feel like that kind of killing. There hadn't been anything in the newspapers about a local serial killer and it may not have been random. The chances were good the killer's name was contained in the file, or that there was a lead to the man who did it.

I found the medical examiner's report. There was semen in the vagina, type AB positive, not the rarest of blood types, but not common either. It is less rare in Asians. There was evidence of bruising of the external genitalia, but that didn't mean anything either. Pubic hairs combed from the body were found to be ovoid in shape and therefore Asian. There were ligature marks on the wrists and ankles tight enough to have broken the skin. Lacerations on the buttocks, elbows and upper back, with splinters of Wolmonized Douglas Fir embedded in the flesh, was evidence the victim had been tied to a cross-brace formed like a giant X. One page showed a detailed drawing of such a construction. The depth of the strangulation cord, up to a half inch deep into her flesh, told how she died. It was an ugly picture. A young, vital woman used up and thrown away, decades of bright future squandered. And for what?

There is never an answer to that question. Never a satisfying answer, anyway. Too often, it comes back simply: *Because*.

I put the medical examiner's report aside. I quickly sorted through the copies of photographs that went with it. They did not make me want to linger. A blood-darkened face with the jutting black tongue gave no hint of the beauty that must have been there. I shuddered, imagining what kind of horrors these pictures must have given MacGruder had he seen them. He had bounced this nightmarish thing on his lap when it was a golden-haired pixie with big blue eyes; had been there when the tot cut her first tooth; had looked on in awe when she spoke her first word. And now this. I hoped he had been shielded from these photographs. They were enough to make a man stop believing in a god but not enough to make a man stop believing in the devil.

I turned the photographs over. They could tell me nothing now.

I read through all of the detectives' narratives. There was a faint whiff of a suspicion of narcotics somewhere in the investigation, but nothing definite. I went back to the forensic file.

Examination of the knots was inconclusive. The knots used on her hands and arms were square knots, different from the ones on her ankles. Those were granny knots, indicating that the person who tied the cord at her feet was either untrained or had been a different person from the one who tied her hands, or both. The direction of the knots hinted that the one who tied her hands may have been left-handed. Toxicological tests came back negative for drugs. There was only a trace of alcohol. I didn't see where drugs could be involved. Perhaps it was because there wasn't any evidence directly relating to drugs. Perhaps it was because I've learned that where there's smoke, there could be a smoke screen.

I poured my last cup of coffee and went out on deck. The sun was shining proudly behind a low band of clouds scudding across the sky. Rain in the mountains above Pearl Harbor gave me a rainbow

arching over Pearl City and Makakilo. The clouds would go away and the sun would stay, and it would be another perfect, beautiful day.

What did you do, little girl, I thought, that got you into so much trouble? Who were you running with that did that to you? There were no answers. There was only the breeze, slapping the rigging against the mast.

Someone had profited from her death. That was an assumption, a logical place to start. No one but a thrill killer does this unless there is a profit. Could the profit have been pleasure? It was plausible. There are some sick people out there and she had been ill-used before her death. Could it have been a rough game gone bad? Perhaps. She was young and strong, and I could not imagine how a man could have forced her to get on the X-brace without her cooperation. Even two men. Could the profit have been something else? Something like guaranteed silence? Protecting what? Nothing in the file specifically stated anything about her behavior. But implications were everywhere.

I went below and forced myself to look at the photographs again. She had been discarded on the rocky coastline near the mouth of the Shark Cave, north of Makaha. That's rough country, rough in the sense that blond haoles like me just do not go there at night. It's also Hawaiian Homelands, run-down slums set aside for descendants of the original inhabitants of these islands. Was someone trying to shift the blame to the people who lived out there?

Years back, a band of Samoans rampaged through the area, killing haoles sleeping on the beach, but they had been an aberration and were quickly caught and convicted. This was not that kind of thing. Mary had been killed somewhere else and dropped there. And the location had been for a reason.

I dug out my map book of Oahu. The Shark Cave is a legendary lava tube halfway between Makaha and Kaena Point, the end of the road. There is no way even a sturdy four-wheel drive can make it around the point to the other side anymore. The roadway used to be the route of the old cane railway but the tracks were removed more than fifty years ago and the roadbed eventually washed out. It's as close to nowhere as you can get on this island.

The file had not been illuminating. The interviews and narratives were too vague, filled with sparse and unintelligible references to files not available to me. There was something going on here, but I couldn't afford to ask for more files from Chawlie. I needed to speak to the lead investigator on the case. But first I needed to see the place where the body had been found.

I did my morning exercises and took a quick shower, washing away the cobwebs. Lately I'd dropped to my fighting weight of 190 pounds. I'm not a heavyweight. I don't have the bone structure. For most of my adult life I've drifted between 185 and 210 pounds. Once or twice, when I got real lazy, ballooned up to 220. The effort to get back to my prime weight gets harder every year. The effort to maintain it is less difficult than allowing myself to lose control and get sloppy again. Staying in shape is actually taking the path of least resistance. When I finally give up and get totally out of shape I have to retire. There's no way I can stay in this business and not be in top physical condition. Not with the creatures out there I have to deal with.

So at my age I tend to stay close to my optimal weight, watch what I eat and restrict my alcohol to two glasses of wine a day. And I don't drink those unless I've earned them. To earn them I have to do my MDR—minimum daily requirement—of two hundred push-ups, two hundred sit-ups and an eight-mile run. I like to eat the rare steaks and I like the sauces the good chefs make, and if I don't do the exercise I start to get soft within two weeks.

That's my biggest fear. I hate being soft. All my life I've been the guy people instinctively run to for help. It wouldn't fit my self-image to have to run to someone else. So I do the reps every morning and I pay my dues at sundown every night. Psychologists would have a field day with me until they found out why I do it. Then they'd be out there with me, pushing me for that extra mile.

4

Other than *Duchess* and a ten-speed bike, my only transportation is an ancient, military-issue, World War II Jeep. Four-speed, four-wheel drive, it's a 1944 Willys. Not a Chrysler. Not even American Motors. This is the original gosh darned *Jeep*. The only concession to its civilian status is its battleship gray paint. It gets thirty-four miles to the gallon and has a top speed of fifty-six miles per hour, which is perfect for this island. If you go any faster, you're in danger of driving off land's end.

It was a long drive past Makaha on the Leeward Coast. Oahu is a small rock in the middle of a big ocean. Most of the state's population resides on this island, and most of them are in Honolulu. Away from the population center Oahu is just like the rest of the state: rural, agricultural, and with notable exceptions, relatively poor. The Leeward Coast is one of the poorest on the island. Little rain falls there. The rain-giving clouds drop most of their moisture on the eastern slopes of the Waianai Mountains. That's good for Dole and C&H Sugar, but it's bad for the residents of Waianai and Makaha. Most of the Leeward Coast resembles a slum in the desert. A desert possessed of the most beautiful and uncrowded beaches on this planet, but a desert all the same.

Few tourists make it to the Leeward Coast. There's only one road to and from, and it takes over an hour from the hotel district by car. At Kaena Point, a rugged arrow of land jutting into the Pacific, you're as far from civilization as you can get. There are no amusement parks, no hotels, no cultural centers, no attractions of any kind to lure the tourists from Waikiki and the North Shore.

It's probably a good thing there aren't too many tourists. They're not particularly welcome on the Leeward Coast. The word *makaha* means "fierce" in Hawaiian, and the story goes that long before Captain Cook met King Kamehameha a tribe of cannibals lived in Makaha. They would wait for the occasional traveler making his way along the coast and then attack, kill and eat him. People have been killed for their cars there. The local police station is called "the Alamo," in reference both to its Spanish-fortress architecture and to an attack by the locals a couple of years ago. The place just does not have the Aloha spirit that tourists have come to expect.

I took it slow through the towns of Nanakuli, Waianai and Makaha. Nanakuli is just a cluster of small homes, but Waianai is a relatively large town. It has restaurants, banks and a minimall. It even has a McDonald's. Makaha is an outpost. There is a luxury hotel the residents of Honolulu use when they want to get away from it all, and there's a condominium complex way up in Makaha Valley whose location defies all logic. Aside from that, the town of Makaha is a collection of corrugated metal-roofed shacks along the beach.

I didn't know what I thought I would find. The crime was more than three months old. Forensic experts had gone over the site for any evidence that might have been there. I didn't expect to find clues. I just wanted to see the layout for myself, and to imagine what it would have been like when the body was dumped.

I pulled the Jeep onto the dirt strip near the Shark Cave. There weren't any other cars parked in the immediate area. Across the road an old man was fishing, the line from his pole lying atop calm turquoise water. We were the only people in sight.

I climbed down from the Jeep and entered the cave. The entrance was forty to fifty feet across and more than twenty feet high, soaring overhead like a cathedral, then dropping to meet an insignificant

hole in the ground reminiscent of where the rabbit went in *Alice in Wonderland*. I recalled what the place was like inside from a visit I had made out of curiosity one bright afternoon a few years back. The ground was littered with aluminum cans and the assorted detritus of modern civilization including an occasional condom. Graffiti adorned the rock walls.

I took the photographs of the body from the file and tried to orient myself to the glossy black-and-white background. I got lucky and found the spot almost immediately. Mary MacGruder's corpse had not been left inside the cave, but just at its mouth. From the way her legs and arms were splayed I could tell she'd been casually tossed to the ground like a discarded cigarette.

I imagined it as it had to have happened. The car pulled off the paved road, the driver getting close as he could to the cave. He couldn't get to the entrance because it was blocked by big lava boulders. Those same boulders also obstructed the view from the road. Mary's corpse had been hoisted up and over the rocks and left on the sheltered side. The car turned around and went back toward Makaha. The road to the north dead-ended near Kaena Point, so there was nowhere else the car could have gone.

The whole operation would have taken less than fifteen seconds to accomplish. There were at least two men, one to drive and one to wrestle the body from the vehicle and over the boulder. Taking a dead woman from a car would not be easy. Even an open vehicle such as a pickup or a Jeep would have presented problems. So what did they use?

There was only one answer that came to mind: the serial killer's best friend, the van. With cargo doors on the passenger side and at the rear, vans have been the choice of terrorists, serial killers, and professional killers for over three decades.

It wasn't much. It was merely an insupportable supposition. Yet my instinct told me I was right. It wasn't anything, but it was a start.

I left the cave, the file under my arm.

And froze in place.

Two young men were sitting in my Jeep. One had broken open the glove compartment and was rummaging through its contents. The other was busy with both hands buried beneath the dashboard. They were big, they were young, and they were trying to steal my Jeep.

I set the file down behind a rock, stepped out of my sandals and approached from the driver side.

I wasn't worried about the Jeep. No matter what they tried they couldn't start it. I'd installed a starter disable on the starter. There's no alarm, because I think they're useless and needlessly irritate, but a little infrared transmitter on my key chain disables the engine when I push the button. A would-be thief couldn't start it even if he had a key. I only kept insurance and inspection records in the glove box, but I didn't appreciate the attempt.

"Any luck?" I asked.

The youth looked at me, startled. He hadn't heard my approach. "Who're you?" he asked. The other thief sneered, trying his best to intimidate.

"Haole fuck," he answered for me.

"That's my Jeep," I said. "Who're you?"

"Fuck 'dis." The driver shoved hard against my chest. I backed away from his hand and his momentum carried him. He tumbled onto hard-packed ground, landing on hands and knees.

"Careful," I said. "You're going to hurt yourself."

The other young man came around the back of the Jeep, carrying something in his hand. I watched him approach, my hands on my hips, mindful of the driver struggling to his feet.

"Don't get in over your head," I warned the one coming at me. He held a short tire iron. His intentions looked far from peaceful.

I'd already decided on *aikido*, a form of martial arts that has no attack, and I centered myself for

what was to come. These two were young and probably had no experience in fighting, but I saw an innate meanness of spirit, too. They looked like they got through life by bullying whatever came their way. They looked as if another lesson in mean would not teach them anything they hadn't already absorbed. One more ass-kicking more or less probably would not matter in the overall scheme of their lives.

The one with the tire iron swung it overhead and brought it down where my skull had been. By the time it came full arc I was behind and beside him, catching his wrist in both hands, continuing the swing of his arm until he rolled onto his back. I released his hand before the shoulder broke, but twisted the weapon until it came free.

I tossed it over the road into the sea.

The one who had been in the driver's seat was now on his feet, scrambling toward me.

The passenger got up and clubbed at me, his fist traversing thin air. I assisted his turn, pirouetting him into his partner. They slammed together and sat down hard. It would have been comical had they not been so intent on caving in my head and stealing my vehicle.

"This is ridiculous," I said as they got up. "Nobody's been hurt yet. Let it rest."

"Haole fuck," said the one who had used the pry bar, seemingly stuck on that one expression. He leaned against the side of the Jeep, feeling around the footwell, apparently looking for a weapon of some kind. The driver hung back, unsure, as if the fight was gone from him.

"Go on home," I told them. "Have a beer. No harm done."

"Fuck you, haole." Having found nothing, the passenger launched himself at me, both meaty hands grabbing for my throat.

I moved to the side and let him run past. He stumble-stepped a couple of strides, tripped over his own feet, and sprawled onto his stomach.

I turned toward the driver, but he backed away, his hands in front of his body to ward me off.

"Go!" I shouted, taking a step toward him.

He fled.

Something hit me on the shoulder with nearly enough force to knock me down. I ducked as another baseball-size stone zinged by my head. A third kicked up a cloud of dust near my feet. The thief with the limited vocabulary and a propensity for hitting people with hard objects was pitching lava rocks at me as fast as he could pick them up. He had an almost unlimited supply where he was positioned, near the mouth of the cave.

So much for good intentions.

I charged into the barrage, zigzagging as best I could, avoiding most, but not all of the stones. One hit me in the chest and another staggered me when it glanced off my knee. As I neared, he abandoned the rocks and retreated into the cave. I followed, catching him from behind.

Two blows to the side of his throat felled him. He collapsed, graceless as a sack of cement. I checked him for vital signs. He wouldn't die, I had pulled my punches. I left him on the floor of the cave. It was cooler there, out of the sun.

I retrieved the file and my sandals and went to the Jeep. It took about five minutes to repair the damage done to the ignition switch, and to realize I'd thrown my own tire iron into the Pacific. Before I left I checked the young man in the cave again. He would awake soon and be able to prey on his fellow humans some other day. He might even improve his language skills.

Of the other thief there was no sign.

I smugly congratulated myself on the outcome of the battle. I'd taken my lumps and had given a few; one foe was vanquished, the other fled. They'd been warned early on. Only their persistence had caused them hurt. That they were both at least a quarter century younger was satisfying for the moment.

But as I drove back toward Pearl Harbor I still felt as if I'd kicked the family dog.

5

It was too soon to talk to the detective in charge of the case. I didn't yet know enough to ask intelligent questions. My level of understanding wasn't what it should have been, and only a dose of old-fashioned hard work would remedy that deficiency.

According to the file, Mary MacGruder had worked in one of the hotels along Waikiki Beach. That place was one of the landmarks of Hawaii, and once upon a time I'd spent a pleasant week playing tourist there with a woman I'd hoped might be the love of my life. She would have been, were she willing to settle down to a forty-hour week, pension plan, health benefits and a 401-K. She hadn't made those demands. She hadn't made any, but she'd expected me to make the offer, and the absence of the offer hung there between us until she got smart and went back to the mainland. I was another disappointment in her life, a familiar part for me to play.

The hotel had seven bars, and with the sun going down it wasn't the worst assignment I'd ever given myself, moving from bar to bar, nursing white wine and making small talk with the waitresses to find someone who might have known the admiral's daughter. The turnover in those places is high, but there's always one waitress who's been there since they poured the foundation, and in the third bar I tried, the one on the lanai next to the white sand beach, I found Louise.

My table was about the size of a cocktail tray, wedged against some boulders between two palm trees. The bar was crowded and Louise was busy hustling drinks, but she was the kind of waitress who could talk fast and serve fast and never lose her nerve or her memory. I vaguely remembered her as a cocktail waitress from my romantic interlude here. Hers was a personality that sticks with you. You get the service, you get what you order, and if you're any kind of interesting at all, you'll get fast popping sarcasm to go with it. If anyone would remember Mary MacGruder, it would be Louise.

Security guards were shooing people off the beach while carpenters assembled a portable stage on the sand in front of the bar. Most of the big hotels have some kind of commemoration marking the end of another day in paradise. The Hilton Hawaiian Village shoots fireworks over its own lagoon and the Royal Hawaiian has a luau, complete with a roasted pig. I didn't know what this hotel had planned for the event, and I didn't care. The bar would be packed until the show was over, and then it would be deserted as the tourists sought their celebration elsewhere. I gave up my table to a young sunburned couple wearing matching Aloha shirts and new rings on the third fingers of their left hands.

I removed my sandals and walked along the edge of the Pacific, watching the sun go down beyond the reef. It was another of nature's spectaculars, something we expect as an entitlement as *Kama'aina* children of the land. Clouds drifting south from Barber's Point reflected a limitless, flamingo orange-pink sky.

My shoulder ached. My knee hurt. Max had warned me I was getting too old for this. Maybe he was right. He would know better than most. It didn't bring me joy, banging on those car thieves, and it didn't bring satisfaction, either. Violence always left a bitter aftertaste, a bile from the soul. But I wouldn't deny that part of me, either.

After the incident at the Shark Cave I went to my bank to visit my safe deposit box. There isn't any money there, that's aboard *Duchess*, but if Chawlie had anyone watching me I didn't want him reaching the right conclusion. I carried a day pack with a few odds and ends and the five thousand

dollars in cash. The fifty bills were a heavy load inside the pocket of the pack.

I am not normally a nervous person. Two or three times I've carried more cash in places where the locals would have happily cut my throat for fifty cents American. But that money belonged to someone else and it was back in the bad old days when I needed an adrenaline rush with every job. The "crank" was as necessary for me as the income. I no longer am an adrenaline junkie. Having that kind of cash money makes me jumpy. And things have changed here. Parts of the island are no longer safe at night. Roaming gangs of vicious children are beating, robbing and raping both tourists and residents, choosing their victims with equanimity. Elementary-school arsonists are setting the mountains on fire. Waikiki no longer has the harmless Disney atmosphere it had ten years ago. At night, Kapiolani Park feels like Central Park.

I'm not particularly worried about my own safety, but it was a comfort knowing the money would be out of my hands in a few hours.

The memories and the sunset and the newlyweds and the alcohol combined to make me maudlin and I wondered about the woman I had disappointed. I remembered her walking away from me near this very spot, marching off with a stiff back, her head held high. That she was better off without me was a foregone conclusion. She thought I could have been right for her, but she didn't really know me and there were too many qualifiers. I knew she wasn't The One. I'd loved that one long ago, and they'd killed her.

I cut through Fort DeRussey and wandered back down Kalakaua Avenue toward the hotel when I judged the sky was dark enough and the crowds were thinning along the beach. When I got to the entrance of the hotel I found I'd judged it right. Feeling like a salmon on a spawning run, I bucked against the pedestrian traffic flooding onto the street.

The bar was empty of patrons. The sun was gone and so was the view, replaced by a vast darkness. Louise was leaning against the bar, resting her elbows on the ceramic tile, easing her back and her feet. She watched me enter the bar with such visible mixed emotions it made me smile.

"I'll sit at the bar," I told her. "Make it easy on you." I slipped onto the bar stool next to the waitress station.

She smiled and didn't move, her weariness and gratitude both visible. "What'll you have, sugar?" She had a voice constructed of equal parts Louisiana bayou, cigarettes and cheap whiskey.

"Chardonnay."

"You were here earlier. You stayin' here?"

"No, ma'am."

She leaned toward the bartender, who'd heard the conversation. He nodded and reached for the house bottle.

"Six fifty," she said, placing the wine on the tile in front of me. I handed her a twenty and told her to keep the change.

"Kinda steep, ain't it?" she asked, instantly wary.

"Cost of doing business," I said.

"Expense account, huh? You working?"

"Looking for information on a girl who used to work here. Thought you might have known her."

"I probably do, mister," said Louise. "And if I do, it's probably best if you don't ask."

"This girl was killed about three months ago. She worked here before then, but I don't know who or how long."

"That MacGruder girl? The one that was in all the papers? That's the one you mean?"

I nodded.

"That poor little thing." She looked at me again, this time really appraising me and my clothing. I changed at the boat, putting on my best shorts and a long-sleeved white Egyptian cotton shirt with

straps on the sleeves so you could roll them up and secure them with a button. It was the equivalent of my Sunday best. "You a cop?"

"I'm looking into the matter for the family," I said. It was the truth, as far as it went.

"Some kind of a private cop?"

"Just doing a favor for a friend."

"You ain't no tourist. I knew that right off. Thought you were military, the way you move, the shape you're in, that 'ma'am' stuff." She pursed her lips. "Look, sugar. You've got an honest face, but the management here don't like me chawin' with the customers, if you know what I mean? I get off about thirty minutes, soon as my side work's done and Leeanne comes in, if she can get off from her other job on time and her baby-sitter's not late. You're gettin' expenses, you said. You can buy a tire lady some dinner and I'll tell you anything I can about that poor child."

6

The open-air Denny's above the ABC Store at the corner of Kalakaua and Kapahulu is without question the best location in the chain. The food's identical to all the others but the atmosphere is definitely above the standard. Louise and I found a table in the bar, away from the distractions of the nonstop beach party below. Louise ordered a Grand Slam and I had coffee.

"Mary MacGruder first came to work for us about two years ago. She was almost too young to serve drinks, and she had that look of, I don't know, she was unspoiled, I guess would be the word."

"Unspoiled."

"Virginal. You know, like a guy wouldn't want to *admit* to her that he drank alcohol, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"She was too young."

"That's not it. She was young, Lord knows. Young, blond and sweet. There was a feeling of grace about her. That's it! She looked like Grace Kelly used to, when she was makin' pictures, and she acted like a princess. For a while, some of the girls called her that—Princess—until she got mad and made them stop. Her name was Mary, she said, and she insisted that people call her by her name." Louise's dinner arrived. "Hungry," she said, and started eating. She was the kind of woman who could eat and talk at the same time and she wouldn't miss a crumb or a syllable.

"Mary could be quite strong when she wanted to be, hard even. Not at all the shy type. But she looked fragile. It fooled a lot of people. Anyway, none of us believed what happened to her. I mean there just wasn't any way to know."

"It was a bad way to die."

"That's not it. You don't know, do you?"

"I guess not."

"She got fired. The company had a surprise drug test and her sample came up positive for cocaine. We're not supposed to know, but there are no real secrets around the hotel, you know."

"When was that?"

"About a year ago. It shocked all of us."

"Did you talk to her about it?"

"I'm not ... I wasn't her boss. We were even on different shifts then, so I didn't see her all the time and when I did it was just a 'Hi, how are you?' kind of thing."

"What else did you hear?"

"Nothing. One day she was there and another—Bam! Out of there! When that happens, people talk in whispers about it and then they stop talking about it altogether."

"Did she have any family, any friends around?"

"Didn't see any when I worked with her."

"And you never saw her again?"

"I saw her a couple of times. She came in once, about three months after they fired her. She and another girl and a big fella, not local, but real, real big. Bigger than you. Taller, broader. White teeth. Rich guy, spent money by the bushel. And Mary and this other girl were hanging all over him.

"You know, it looked like they came in to just rub it in our faces. It was like she could come back

any time she wanted and we couldn't do anything about it. She really acted the princess that night—treated us all like we were peasants. And a couple of the girls saw it, too, the way Mary and this b—guy touched the other girl like she was some kind of a plaything. Like she wasn't real."

"What did the girl look like?"

"Young. Younger than Mary. Not bright, but pretty. And either drunk or stoned."

"And Mary and ..."

"Somebody told me he was her boyfriend, but nobody knew his name. Don't remember who told me. Big, big guy, like I said. Huge shoulders. Lifts weights. A freak."

"You said you saw her one other time."

"I live on the North Shore. I was on the way to my dentist in Pearl Ridge and I stopped in Haleiwa for a shave ice. Mary was alone. She looked bad. Dirty, like she hadn't changed her clothes in a week. Dirty, matted hair, crud under her fingernails. She didn't recognize me and I almost didn't recognize her."

"When was this?"

"Three or four months ago. About then."

"She was killed three months ago."

"It was longer than that. Look, I felt sorry for her but I got my shave ice and went to see the dentist. Looked like her boyfriend kicked her out and she didn't know where to go. She might have been sleeping in the streets. But she wasn't my problem and I had other things to do. I didn't have anything against the girl. But she'd made her decisions, and she paid the price, I guess."

"It was a pretty steep price to pay," I said, remembering the photographs.

"I suppose it was, her bein' so young and all. I tell you, Mr. Caine, I've never seen a body go downhill as fast as that poor child did. When I first met her she was like some kind of a dream child—like the blue fairy in *The Wizard of Oz*, all sweet and innocent and beautiful. And the last time I saw her she looked kind of crazed and evil. To tell you the truth I didn't want to have anything to do with her. She scared me."

I nodded. What else was there to say?

"So you're workin' for the family. Guess they fired the other fella."

"What other fella?"

"About a month ago, when the police didn't seem to be coming up with anything, a private detective came around, said he was working for the girl's father. He some kind of army officer?"

"Some kind of officer," I said.

"This guy, he went to Human Resources, just like the police did, and they wouldn't tell him a thing. Not without a court order, or so I was told."

There wasn't anything about her being fired for drugs in the police file I read. "Did the police know about the drug thing?"

"How should I know what the police know? But I kind of doubt it. HR won't hold on to something like that if the employee doesn't sue, you know what I mean? They don't want to get sued by anybody for anything, so they keep that in the file only as long as they think the fired employee has a chance to complain or sue the company, and then they deep-six it so it doesn't leak and the employee can sue the company for tellin' on him. That make any sense to you?"

"It makes a lot of sense." I knew something the police didn't know. And it didn't get me anywhere either. "Do you know the name of the other detective?"

"I'm good with names, sugar. Gotta be in my profession. But I don't think anybody ever told me his name. He was a local boy. Looked *hapa* Portagee to me. I never spoke with him, and he wasn't interested in talking with the help. But he was a local boy, just like I said. If he's in the book, he's bound to have a name that ends in an A."

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