



The Crack of Doom

USCG Cutter *Kauai*, Atlantic Ocean,
ten nautical miles east-southeast of
Hollywood, Florida
02:27 EDT, 11 March

Sam

Lieutenant Samuel “Sam” Powell watched the image of the “go-fast” boat on the right-hand multi-function display of the Bridge’s Fire Control/Command and Control or FC3 station. The ghostly green image was transmitted from a Customs and Border Patrol DHC-8 maritime patrol aircraft, flying at a minimum speed at

two thousand feet, zigzagging back and forth to avoid overrunning the target. The aspect of the speeding boat’s image gradually changed as the plane traced a broad S-shaped pattern behind it while the data display overlaying the bottom of the screen showed its latitude, longitude, heading, and speed. An open forty-footer with three large outboard engines and eight people on board, the boat was on a course leading slightly ahead of *Kauai*’s current position on this heading, but the latter’s slow motion would bring the two vessels to the same point in the ocean in about five minutes.

It was the darkest of nights, a solid overcast blocking out both moon and stars. The only light was the glow of the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale metroplex stretched across a broad arc of *Kauai*’s starboard beam. Sam would have preferred meeting the target boat further offshore, where the city light would not silhouette his patrol boat, but this was the only place the intercept geometry worked. Both seas and winds were very light, making for a comfortable ride. The only sound was the low and steady hum of the three diesel engines. All things considered, they had a pretty good chance of catching the incoming smuggler by surprise.

It was *Kauai*’s first operational mission after completing an extensive rebuild and a few weeks of shakedown training. They should be heading for the Atlantic Undersea Test and Evaluation Center, better known as AUTEK, at Andros Island in the Bahamas, to complete testing and evaluate the new gear added to the cutter. However, the Coast Guard had hard intelligence; the boat racing toward them carried a high-ranking member of an Eastern European human-trafficking gang, whose notoriety prevented travel to the U.S. by conventional means. He was a high-value target, or HVT, armed and dangerous, and had to be stopped. But the boat also held other people, illegal immigrants, yes, but people undeserving of being caught in a

lethal crossfire between a dangerous sociopath and law enforcement. Sorting out this dilemma was the type of mission for which *Kauai* was rebuilt and her crew retrained.

“Target still constant bearing, decreasing range. Range now two-point-four, ETA four minutes fifty,” said Electronics Technician First Class Joe Williams. He sat in the center position at the FC3 console, the tactical station controlling the cutter’s 25-mm main gun, the automated searchlight, and the new “entangling weapon” mounted just forward of the main gun they had spent the previous week testing. Operations Specialist Third Class Natalia Zuccaro sat to his right, monitoring navigation and radar, and Electronics Technician Third Class Darryl Bunting sat on his left, tending to systems and communications.

“Very well,” Sam replied. “Warm up the Squid and start the targeting feed.” “Squid” was the nickname for the entangling weapon, essentially a three-barreled recoilless cannon shooting encapsulated nets that popped open at the end of their flight and landed in a pre-set pattern. The launcher took target and environmental data from Williams’s console and adjusted the firing bearing and elevation to deploy the nets in a pattern a speeding boat could not avoid. The boat would overrun a net, foul the propellers, and be stopped without using lethal gunfire. Hopefully.

The sad fact was a lot had to go just right for this device to work. The target needed to be within two hundred meters of *Kauai*, with both vessels on parallel courses in calm seas. It was a calm night, and Sam had absolute confidence that his Officer of the Deck, or OOD, Chief Operations Specialist Emilia Hopkins, would bring *Kauai* into position in the minimum time possible. The rub was their opponent—success depended on him turning to the left to avoid *Kauai*. If he turned right, he would scoot past their tail and be out of range before they got the heavier patrol boat turned around. Sam had positioned the cutter’s Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat, referred to as “the rib” for its acronym RHIB, two hundred yards to seaward and slightly behind to counter this possibility. The RHIB’s crew would unmask their floodlight as soon as *Kauai* illuminated the target with her searchlight, which should persuade the incoming boat to turn left to escape. Of course, he could also turn back to Bimini—not as good as a seizure, but it was still a win.

Using the RHIB was a calculated risk—the target could try to force past it using ramming or gunfire, but the odds against that were long. The HVT might be armed and dangerous, but the smuggling crew’s priority was to stay alive. They knew if they assaulted law enforcement, the response would be both lethal and instantaneous. Far better to turn tail and outrun the plodding cutter, which they could easily do with their five-knot speed advantage.

“Captain, I have target lock and tracking now on EO,” Williams announced, referring to the cutter’s electro-optical camera. Although his nominal rank was lieutenant, Sam was addressed as “Captain” aboard *Kauai* by service tradition as her commanding officer. “Laser rangefinder is active, feeding data directly to searchlight, fire control, and the Squid. Range now one-point-nine, ETA three minutes fifty-two seconds.” As he spoke, the unlit searchlight swung out onto the bearing of the incoming target.

“Roger that,” Sam replied, then keyed the radio transmit button for his headset. “*Kauai* One, *Kauai* Actual, target in sight, ETA three forty-five.”

“Roger, sir, standing by,” replied the RHIB’s coxswain, Boatswain’s Mate Second Class Shelley Lee. Lee commanded the RHIB as the coxswain, even though her passengers included her immediate boss, Boatswain’s Mate First Class John Bondurant, and *Kauai*’s Executive Officer, Lieutenant Junior Grade Ben Wyporek, who would lead the target’s boarding once it had been disabled.

Hopkins keyed the intercom connecting the Bridge to the engine control station deep in the cutter’s hull. “Main Control, Conn, take engine control, expect Emergency Full Ahead in three minutes.”

“Conn, Main Control,” Drake’s baritone voice replied. “I have engine control, maintaining three knots, standing by for Emergency Full Ahead in three minutes.” “Emergency Full” was a command to route power from the battery bank and three diesel generators for rapid acceleration of the cutter’s two electric motors from a full stop or their current slow speed to maximum thrust, either ahead or astern. It required the transfer of engine control to Drake’s station, where he could watch the generator and motor instruments and achieve the highest acceleration with the safeties bypassed.

Sam watched the two screens on the FC3 station, one now showing the approaching boat from the view of the EO camera alongside the full-motion video feed from the plane. Williams had selected the boat’s range in yards, bearing, and ETA for the data display. Even at full zoom, no boat details were visible in the darkness, just the spreading white “mustache” of the bow wave. “Chief, we are at two thousand yards now. I’m going to light him up at two hundred yards. You are cleared to maneuver as required.”

“Very good, sir,” Hopkins replied. Emilia “Hoppy” Hopkins was a fast-tracker in the Operations Specialist rating and a twelve-year veteran of the Coast Guard. Thanks to Sam’s request to his superiors after their last mission, they upgraded her billet to E7 so she could stay on board *Kauai* while advancing to the coveted rank of chief petty officer. The tall and fit thirty-three-year-old widowed mother of twelve- and nine-year-old sons, Hopkins shared a house with her mother, who looked after the boys when she was at sea. Both Ben and Sam shared considerable respect, affection, and trust for their new chief, and she felt the same for them.

Sam watched the range readout tick down and, at three hundred yards, announced, “Stand by searchlight.”

“Searchlight ready, sir,” Williams responded. Then he leaned slightly to the right and nudged Zuccaro, then whispered, “Watch the EO screen when I light off the searchlight.”

“OK.” She nodded vigorously. Zuccaro had only been aboard a few weeks, an addition that came with the added functionality of the new FC3 console. She looked up to Williams as a mentor and with a bit of awe over his role in *Kauai*’s dustup last January—he had controlled the main gun in that engagement, and his shooting had saved the XO’s life.

Hopkins smiled at the interplay between the two petty officers and then keyed the intercom. "Stand by, Main Control."

"Main Control ready."

At 210 yards, Sam leaned over and put a hand on Williams's shoulder. "Illuminate target."

"Illuminate target, sir," Williams responded as he punched the light on/off button. In the same motion, he punched on the floodlight illuminating the Coast Guard "Racing Stripe" painted on *Kauai's* hull and the cutter's running lights.

"Main Control, Conn, Emergency Full Ahead," Hopkins ordered.

"Emergency Full Ahead, aye!" Drake replied as *Kauai's* engines roared, and she jumped forward into the darkness.

The searchlight flickered on and directed a fifteen million candela beam directly into the approaching boat's cockpit. Williams smiled with satisfaction, watching the driver's eyes widen and jaw drop in shock on the EO display, then turned to Zuccaro. "Ah, the 'Oh, shit!' moment. Now THAT never gets old!"

As Williams chuckled, the RHIB's floodlight came on to the target driver's right. He glanced in that direction for half a second and then spun his steering wheel to the left, nearly capsizing the speeding vessel during the turn. The boat steadied on a southerly course and picked up speed rapidly, slowly drawing ahead about sixty yards away from *Kauai's* port bow.

"Conn, Main Control, that's all I can give you right now," Drake's voice came up from the intercom.

"Conn, aye, hold that." Turning to the helmsman, Hopkins ordered, "Left five degrees rudder."

"Left five degrees rudder, Chief," the helmsman replied. "Chief, my rudder is left five degrees."

When Hopkins was satisfied the vessels were running parallel, she turned to the helmsman. "Rudder amidships."

"Rudder amidships, aye. Chief, my rudder is amidships, heading one eight three."

"Very well," Hopkins responded, then turned to Sam. "Target aspect and relative motion stable, Captain."

"Very well. Williams, prepare to fire Squid."

Williams noted the yellow "Solution" light on his panel, showing that the projector's control system had locked onto the fleeing target boat. Its internal artificial intelligence had calculated the required azimuth and elevation to lay down an optimal pattern of the three nets. "Targeting solution achieved."

"Match generated bearings and shoot."

Williams hit the activation switch. The projector pivoted to match the generated azimuth and elevation angles, resulting in a green "Ready to Fire" light on the panel. Williams announced, "Firing Squid." Then he pressed the trigger.

Ben

Ben sat on the RHIB's left side and glanced across the water at *Kauai*, visible in the city glow two hundred yards off the boat's starboard side. He looked back into the

boat. Lee was sitting at the helm, making minor adjustments to keep station on the larger cutter as they crept through the water. Lee was single, twenty-five years old, and on the short side for a boatswain's mate, barely five-foot-three, but very athletic. Ben liked Lee; besides being close to his age, she was competent and dependable. She was also the finest coxswain he had ever known—she *lived* for driving the RHIB.

Ben's gaze moved to Bondurant, sitting on the opposite side of the boat, holding the floodlight. He was a full foot taller than Lee and powerfully built. The thirty-four-year-old father of two high school-aged boys, Bondurant was Ben's choice for known hostile boardings. Not that Lee couldn't handle herself, quite the contrary, but violent idiots were discouraged from trying anything physical by the size of the hulking Bondurant. Better to avoid the fight to begin with, a philosophy with which Lee heartily agreed—she couldn't drive the RHIB if she were in the boarding party.

"*Kauai* One, *Kauai* Actual, target in sight, ETA three forty-five," came over Ben's headset, followed by Lee's acknowledgment. Ben smiled as he pictured Sam calmly walking around the Bridge two hundred yards away. To Ben, Sam had the total package: knowledge, judgment, experience, and "people sense." He considered him a model officer and his closest friend. He was about an inch taller than Ben and similarly slim and athletic.

Ben himself was a little over average height at five-foot-ten. At twenty-four, he was also among the younger members of *Kauai's* complement. Although somewhat awed by his fight with the drug gang a few months previously, the crew appreciated his cheery demeanor and the respect he showed them as valued professionals. His close brush with death dispelled whatever boyishness he had, but he kept his bright wit and approachability.

Ben gazed out to seaward. Not long now. They would hear the incoming boat long before they saw it and act when *Kauai's* searchlight activated. In the meantime, they were to hold station on the cutter. Ben's thoughts returned to the worst case, the boat turning right. If they tried to ram and Lee wasn't able to evade.... He glanced at Lee and noted her rapid visual scan and cool look in the soft light of the RHIB's instrument panel. Ben smiled to himself and looked out to sea again. *Yeah, as if!*

Across the boat, Bondurant stirred. "I hear them!" He brought the floodlight to the ready and unlocked the shutter. The light was already turned on, so it would be instantly available. Both men kneeled and braced themselves for a quick start. Ben could hear the roar of the target boat's engines now, coming from left to right across RHIB's bow. Almost simultaneously, *Kauai's* engines roared to full power, and the cutter's searchlight settled on the incoming boat.

"Light him up!" Ben shouted.

Bondurant dropped the shutter and trained the floodlight on the boat. The driver glanced their way momentarily, then swung the speeding boat into a hard left turn.

Yes! "Go, Shelley!" Ben shouted.

Lee slammed the throttle forward, and the RHIB seemed to leap ahead after the speeding target. Bondurant struggled to keep the floodlight on target as the RHIB thumped across the target boat's wake. Lee pulled the RHIB into a parallel track

about fifty yards away on the target's port quarter as briefed. The RHIB had the speed to overtake the target, but Lee knew her job tonight was herding.

A minute into the pursuit, Ben heard three bangs in quick succession from *Kauai*. The three Squid canisters arced invisibly over the speeding target vessel in the darkness, with small fins spinning them at fifteen revolutions per second to provide stability and help spread out the nets when their internal charges detonated at the end of their flight. Sam's voice came over Ben's headset. "*Kauai* One, Squid fired, break left in three, two, one, NOW!" Twenty-five feet above the water, all three capsules fired within a second, dropping an unavoidable Kevlar trap forty yards ahead of the target boat as the RHIB and *Kauai* sheared off to the left and right.

The boat narrowly missed the right-hand net but ran straight through the center one. When its propellers contacted the netting, two engines sheared their driveshafts and oversped, triggering the automatic shutoff. The third engine ground to a stop with its propeller wrapped up in the net. The boat lurched to a quick halt, throwing all occupants but the driver onto the deck. As the RHIB swung around through the turn, Ben watched the driver hang his head and beat on the steering wheel with his fist in frustration as his crew and passengers began standing up in dazed confusion.

"All right, Shelley, let's heave to until *Kauai* gets into position," Ben said. He didn't want the RHIB to overrun a net in the dark—it had a propeller too and was just as vulnerable as the target boat. As Lee closed the throttle and brought the RHIB to a halt, Bondurant shut off and secured the floodlight.

Kauai took five minutes to complete her turn and edge into position—she also had propellers plus stabilizing fins on her bilge turns, which could suffer severe damage if fouled on a net. Sam's voice came over the headset again as the cutter stopped about fifty yards west of the disabled boat with her searchlight locked on. "*Kauai* One, *Kauai* Actual, start a slow approach. Nets one and three are behind us. Net two is fouled on the target."

"*Kauai*, *Kauai* One, roger, sir, starting approach," Lee replied as she moved the throttle off idle.

"LE-One, *Kauai* Actual, believe the HVT is the individual conversing with the helmsman. No weapons are visible, but the threat level is still red. Overwatch is in position and ready. We will make initial contact now." Ben had his own callsign, LE-One, on the comms net since he would act independently of the RHIB during the boarding.

"Roger, sir. Continuing," Ben replied. This was the hard part. Somehow, Ben had to talk down a dangerously excited murderer and convince him to surrender. He saw two men arguing in the boat's cockpit, one black and the other white. The black man had to be the boat's Bahamian master, and the other, the HVT, undoubtedly pushing for a more satisfactory outcome than his arrest. At least no guns were out. *Overwatch is in position*. Overwatch was Gunner's Mate Second Class Deke Guerrero, positioned with a fifty-caliber sniper rifle on the Flying Bridge above *Kauai's* main Bridge. Guerrero could deliver a kill shot reliably from a mile away—fifty yards on a calm night was point-blank for him. If Sam, Ben, or Bondurant uttered the word "Yankee" on the radio, Guerrero would fire that kill shot as soon as he had a clear target.

As the RHIB edged toward the target boat, Williams's voice came from the loudhailer on *Kauai*. "Master of the disabled vessel, this is the United States Coast Guard. Your vessel is forfeit under Title Eight of the United States Code, Section 1324. All persons on board will be placed under arrest. You will muster all persons on board aft of the cockpit, where they will be seated with their hands on top of their heads. All persons on board are to discard any weapons in their possession. Any person on board observed holding a weapon after this announcement will be subject to lethal force. To repeat..." The announcement was repeated and ended with: "You will comply at once. Start mustering all persons now."

The master lowered his head, then gave an order. As the other six people started moving aft, the HVT began an argument. When the RHIB pulled within earshot, Ben could hear the final statement of the master: "It's broken, man! We are done."

The HVT started looking back and forth, then reached for something in the cockpit. He rose, placed a pistol against the master's head, and pulled the man between himself and *Kauai*.

Shit! "Gun!" Ben shouted as he and Bondurant crouched and pulled their pistols. Lee brought the RHIB to a halt and crouched behind the helm console. One woman screamed on the disabled boat, and all but the HVT and his human shield immediately laid down. "*Kauai*, LE-One," Ben said into his headset. "HVT has a handgun and has taken the master hostage. We are stopped with sidearms ready. Recommend I try to negotiate surrender from our present position, over."

After a brief pause, Sam's voice came over the headset. "LE-One, *Kauai* Actual, approved. Do not continue the approach without confirmed surrender and disarming of the suspect. Go on hot mike, and keep it open during negotiations."

"*Kauai*, LE-One, WILCO." Ben moved the transmit switch to Hot Mic. Both he and Bondurant brought up and aimed their pistols. "On the disabled boat, this is the Coast Guard! Put your weapon down immediately!"

The HVT turned his head in surprise and adjusted to make himself a smaller target for Ben and Bondurant while still shielding himself from *Kauai*. "Screw you! You are going to let me go, or this man dies!"

Ben lowered his voice to be inaudible on the target. "Overwatch, LE-One. Do you have a shot? Over."

Guerrero's voice responded at once. "Negative, LE-One, no clear shot."

"Roger." Ben resumed his interchange with the HVT. "Sir, that is not an option! Your vessel is disabled and cannot be repaired! It's over! Please, no one has to die today!"

"Fine! Then I take your boat!"

"Sorry, sir, we can't do that! Even if we could, you wouldn't have enough fuel to get anywhere!"

"Then get me a boat that can! I'm not fucking around! I will kill this man!"

The master's eyes, which had been flitting back and forth in terror, fixed on Ben. Ben took his support hand off the pistol and made a slow, down-waving motion until the master nodded slowly, then placed his hand back on the gun. He whispered into his microphone, "Yankee." Then more loudly. "That is not going to happen! There are

only two possible outcomes here—you drop that gun, and we arrest you, or you get killed!”

“Then I’ll see you in Hell!”

What followed happened in under one second. The HVT took the pistol’s muzzle off the master’s temple and started to draw on Ben. The master immediately twisted and bent over, disrupting the HVT’s aim. There was the loud “Crack” of a large-caliber rifle shot. Then the pistol dropped to the deck, followed by the HVT, who crumpled like a marionette with the strings cut. The former hostage kneeled and put his hands on top of his head.

“Suspect down, repeat suspect is down,” Ben said. “Hostage is safe and signaling surrender.” Then, he remembered to take his transmit switch off Hot Mic. And to breathe.

“LE-One, *Kauai* Actual, roger, approach with discretion, over.”

“WILCO, sir.” Holstering his pistol with a trembling hand, he turned to Lee. “Shelley, move in dead slow, please. If anyone else pops up with a gun, duck and haul ass.”

She flashed him a relieved smile as she moved the throttle out of idle. “Sir, I’m the *quintessence* of discretion.”

Ben smiled warmly in return, then turned to Bondurant. “Boats, how about I go on first with you covering, then I’ll cover you when you board?”

“Sounds right, sir. You want me to do the hook-ups?”

“Yes, let’s start with the skipper and move aft from there. Stay alert, although I’m pretty sure they’ve had enough excitement for tonight.”

“Let’s hope so.”

As they approached the boat, Ben called out, “On the boat, this is the US Coast Guard. Remain seated with your hands on top of your head. Do not stand or make any sudden movements. Comply with the boarding officer’s instructions completely and immediately.” Ben stepped aboard and drew his pistol as the RHIB contacted the boat with a soft nudge. *Kauai’s* searchlight lit the scene, and the only sounds were the low growl of the RHIB’s engine, the gentle lapping of small waves on the hull, and the soft sobs of a woman, presumably the one who screamed at the incident’s outset. After a quick visual sweep and count of seven people seated with hands visible, he felt for a pulse on the downed suspect. Nothing. The man was dead before he hit the deck, his spine severed just below his skull. Ben stood and nodded to Bondurant. “Now, Boats.” The big boatswain nodded, holstered his pistol, and stepped on board. Ben motioned him over and whispered, “Leave the woman for last. We’ll need to swap Shelley in for that pat-down.”

“Yes, sir.” Bondurant turned and went straight to the kneeling master and whispered, “Are you the Captain?” After getting a nod in return, he continued, “Please stand up, keeping your hands on top of your head, sir.” The man complied, and Ben was startled to see he was as tall as Bondurant.

Bondurant completed a pat-down for weapons and said, “Right hand, please.” He attached a zip cuff. “Left hand, please.” After securing the other cuff, he said, “Please,

sit down.” After helping the man to a sitting position, Bondurant moved on, and the man turned to Ben and mouthed, “thank you.” Ben returned a nod.

After servicing the remaining six male prisoners, Bondurant re-boarded the RHIB to relieve Lee, who completed the female prisoner’s pat-down and handcuffing. When she rejoined Ben near the cockpit, he called over to the cutter, “*Kauai*, LE-One, vessel and prisoners secure. Just the one fatality, over.”

“LE-One, *Kauai*, roger, well done. I’ll need you to send back the RHIB so we can retrieve those nets. Do any prisoners need immediate evacuation?”

“Negative, sir. They’re all OK for now.”

Lee looked up at Ben. “OK, sir. I’ll just be going then....”

“Sorry, Shelley.” Ben shook his head. “A female prisoner means you get to stick around.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.” She looked sadly on as Bondurant steered the RHIB back to *Kauai*.