

WITH A FOREWORD BY LEE CHILD

JOHN D.
MACDONALD

A TRAVIS MCGEE NOVEL

A TAN AND
SANDY
SILENCE



About the Book

Travis McGee isn't your typical knight in shining armour. He only works when his cash runs out, and his rule is simple: He'll help you find whatever was taken from you, as long as he can keep half.

Travis McGee receives an unexpected guest, Harry Broll, who is convinced that he's hiding his missing wife. The desperate man gets off a shot before Travis can wrestle his gun away. Worried that he's losing his touch, Travis decides to get Harry off his case and prove he's still in top form in one fell swoop.

Travis's search for the missing woman takes him to Grenada, where he's soon tangling with con artists and killers. No longer wallowing in self-pity, Travis has more pressing concerns – like saving his own skin.

First published in 1971, *A Tan and Sandy Silence* features an introduction by Lee Child.

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The Travis McGee Series

The Scarlet Ruse

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John D. MacDonald

A TAN AND SANDY SILENCE

Introduction

Lee Child

Suspense fiction trades on surprising and unexpected twists. Like this one: A boy named John Dann MacDonald was born in 1916 in Sharon, Pennsylvania, into the kind of quiet and comfortable middle-class prosperity that became common in America forty or fifty years later but which was still relatively rare early in the century. Sharon was a satellite town near Pittsburgh, dominated by precision metal-working, and John's father was a mild-mannered and upstanding citizen with secure and prestigious salaried employment as a senior financial executive with a local manufacturer. Young John was called Jack as a child, and wore sailor suits, and grew up in a substantial suburban house on a tree-lined block. He read books, played with his dog, and teased his little sister and his cousin. When he was eighteen, his father funded a long European grand tour for him, advising him by letter "to make the best of it ... to eat and function regularly ... to be sure and attend a religious service at least once on each Sunday ... to keep a record of your expenditures as a training for your college days."

Safely returned, young Jack went on to two decent East Coast schools, and married a fellow student, and went to Harvard for an MBA, and volunteered for the army in 1940, and finished World War II as a lieutenant colonel, after thoroughly satisfactory service as a serious, earnest, bespectacled, rear-echelon staff officer.

So what does such a fellow do next? Does he join General Motors? IBM? Work for the Pentagon?

In John D. MacDonald's case, he becomes an impoverished writer of pulp fiction.

During his first four postwar months, he lost twenty pounds by sitting at a table and hammering out 800,000 unsold words. Then in his fifth month he sold a story for twenty-five bucks. Then another for forty bucks, and eventually more than five hundred. Sometimes entire issues of pulp magazines were all his own work, disguised under dozens of different pen names. Then in 1950 he watched the contemporary boom in paperback novels and jumped in with his first full-length work, which was followed by sixty-six more, including some really seminal crime fiction and one of history's greatest suspense series.

Why? Why did a middle-class Harvard MBA with extensive corporate connections and a gold-plated recommendation from the army turn his back on everything apparently predestined, to sit at a battered table and type, with an anxious wife at his side? No one knows. He never explained. It's a mystery.

But we can speculate. Perhaps he never wanted a quiet and comfortable middle-class life. Perhaps, after finding himself amid the chaos of war, he felt able to liberate himself from the crushing filial expectations he had previously followed so obediently. As an eighteen-year-old, it's hard to say no to the father who just paid for a trip to Europe. Eleven years later, as a lieutenant colonel, it's easier.

And we know from what he wrote that he felt he had something to say to the world. His early stuff was whatever put food on that battered table—detective stories, westerns, adventure stories, sports stories, and even some science fiction—but soon enough his long-form fiction began to develop some enduring and intertwined themes. From *A Deadly Shade of Gold*, a Travis McGee title: “The only thing in the world worth a damn is the strange, touching, pathetic, awesome nobility of the individual human spirit.” From the stand-alone thriller *Where Is Janice Gantry?*: “Somebody has to be tireless, or the fast-buck operators would asphalt the entire coast, fill every bay, and slay every living thing incapable of carrying a wallet.”

These two angles show up everywhere in his novels: the need to—maybe reluctantly, possibly even grumpily—stand up and be

counted on behalf of the weak, helpless, and downtrodden, which included people, animals, and what we now call *the environment*—which was in itself a very early and very prescient concern: *Janice Gantry*, for instance, predated Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking *Silent Spring* by a whole year.

But the good knight’s armor was always tarnished and rusted. The fight was never easy and, one feels, never actually winnable. But it had to be waged. This strange, weary blend of nobility and cynicism is MacDonald’s signature emotion. Where did it come from? Not, presumably, the leafy block where he was raised in quiet and comfort. The war must have changed him, like it changed a generation and the world.

Probably the best of his nonseries novels is *The Executioners*, which became *Cape Fear* as a movie (twice). It’s an acute psychological study of base instinct, terror, mistakes, and raw emotion. It’s about a man—possibly a man like MacDonald’s father, or like MacDonald himself—who moves out of his quiet and comfort into more primeval terrain. And those twin poles are the theme of the sensationally good Travis McGee series, which is a canon equaled for enduring quality and maturity by very little else. McGee is a quiet man, internally bewildered by and raging at what passes for modern progress, externally happy merely to be varnishing the decks of his houseboat and polishing its brass, but always ready to saddle up and ride off in the service of those who need and deserve his help. Again, not the product of the privileged youth enjoyed by the salaried executive’s son.

So where did McGee and MacDonald’s other heroes come from? Why Florida? Why the jaundiced concerns? We will never know. But maybe we can work it out, by mining the millions of words written with such haste and urgency and passion between 1945 and 1986.

LEE CHILD
New York
2012

In northern Manitoba
a man saw a great bald eagle—
hanging from its neck,
teeth locked in skin and feathers,
the bleached skull of a weasel.

BY JIM HARRISON

(From "A Year's Changes")

One

On the most beautiful day any April could be asked to come up with, I was kneeling in eight inches of oily water in the cramped bilge of Meyer's squatty little cabin cruiser, the *John Maynard Keynes*, taking his automatic bilge pump apart for the third time in an hour.

The socket wrench slipped, and I skinned yet another knuckle. Meyer stood blocking out a sizable piece of the deep blue sky. He stared down into the bilge and said, "Very inventive and very fluent. Nice mental images, Travis. Imagine one frail little bilge pump performing such an extraordinary act upon itself! But you began to repeat yourself toward the end."

"Would you like to crawl down in here and—"

He backed up a hasty half step. "I couldn't deprive you of the pleasure. You said you could fix it. Go ahead."

I got it apart again. I spun the little impeller blade and suddenly realized that maybe it turned too freely. Found the set screw would take a full turn. Tightened it back down onto the shaft. Reassembled the crummy little monster, bolted it down underwater, heaved myself up out of the water, sat on the edge of the hatch, and had Meyer flip the switch. It started to make a nice steady wheeeeeeng, gouting dirty bilge water into the Bahia Mar yacht basin.

Meyer started to applaud, and I told him to save it until we found out if the adorable thing would turn itself the hell off like it says in the fine print. It took a good ten minutes to pump the water out. Then it went weeeeeeng-guggle-chud. Silence.

“Now cheer,” I said.

“Hooray,” he said mildly. “Thank you very much and hooray.” I looked at him with exasperation and affection. My mild and bulky friend with the wise little blue eyes, bright and bemused, and with the bear hair, thatch black, curling out of the throat of his blue knit shirt.

“Another half inch of rain last night,” I told him, “and you could have gone down like a stone.”

He had stepped out of his bunk in the dark after the rain stopped and into ankle deep water. He had sloshed over to my houseboat, the *Busted Flush*, and told me he had a small problem. At three in the morning we had toted my auxiliary pump over and set it on the dock and dropped the intake hose into his bilge. His home and refuge was very low in the water, the mooring lines taut enough to hum when plucked. By first light the *Keynes* was floating high again, and we could turn the pump off and carry it back. Now the repaired automatic bilge pump had taken out the last of the water, but he was going to live in dampness for quite a while.

“Perils of the sea,” he said.

I stepped up onto the dock and squatted and began to rinse the grease and bilge water off my hands under the hose faucet. Meyer shaded his eyes and looked toward the *Flush*. “You’ve got a visitor, Travis. Isn’t that what’s-his-name?”

I stood up and stared. “It sure is. Good old what’s-his-name. Harry Broll. Do you think that son of a bitch has come to try me again?”

“After the showing last time ... Was it two years ago?”

“At least.”

“I think he’s at least bright enough not to try again.”

“Not the same way. But he did catch me with one very nice left. True, he broke his hand, but it was one to remember.”

“Want company?”

“No thanks.”

Harry turned and saw me when I was about fifty feet away. He was big, and he had gotten bigger since I’d seen him last. More gut and more jowls. Not becoming. He wore a pale beige suit, a yellow

shirt, and he had a chocolate-colored neckerchief with an ornate, gold slip ring.

He raised his hands in the most primitive gesture of reassurance. Palms out. Sickly smile to go with it. As I came up to him he said, "Hi, McGee." He put his hand out. I looked at it until he pulled it back. He tried to laugh. "Jesus, are you still sore?"

"I'm not sore, Harry. Why should we shake hands?"

"Look. I want to talk to you. Are you busy or anything?"

"What about?"

"About Mary. I know you've got no reason in the world to do me any favors. But this concerns ... Mary's well-being."

"Is something wrong with her?"

"I don't know. I don't really know."

I studied him. He seemed concerned and upset. He had the pallor of desk work. His black hair had receded since I had seen him last. He said, "I couldn't think of anybody else to come to. I can say please if it'll help. Please?"

"Come on aboard."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

We went into the lounge. I had on an old pair of denim shorts and nothing else. The air-conditioning cooled the sweat on my shoulders and chest. He looked around, nodding and beaming, and said, "Nice. Real nice. A nice way to live, huh?"

"Want a drink?"

"Bourbon, if you've got it."

"Got it."

"On the rocks."

I put out the bottle and the glass and said, glancing down at my soiled hands, "Ice is in the bin there. Help yourself while I clean up, Broll."

"Thanks. You sure keep yourself in shape, McGee. Wish I had the time. I guess I better make sure I have the time one of these days."

I shrugged and went forward, dropped the shorts into the hamper and stepped into the oversized shower, thinking about Mary and wondering about her as I sudsed and scrubbed away the rest of the grime from the repair job. Miss Mary Dillon when I had known her.

Then abruptly—maybe too abruptly—Mrs. Harry Broll. When I put my watch back on I saw that it was nearly four o'clock. Meyer and I were invited for drinks at six aboard the *Jilly III*. I put on fresh slacks, an oyster-white sailcloth sports shirt, my ancient Mexican sandals. On the way back to the lounge I stopped in the galley and put some Plymouth on the rocks.

He was sitting on the yellow couch, and he had lit a small cigar with a white plastic mouthpiece. "It must really be something, being able to just take off any time you feel like it."

I slouched into a chair facing him, took a swallow of my drink, and put it on the coffee table. "You've got a problem, Harry?"

"About that time I made such a damn fool of myself ..."

"Forget it."

"No. Please. Let me say something about that. Like they say, the first year of marriage is the hardest, right?"

"So they say."

"Well, I knew you and Mary were old friends. I couldn't help knowing that, right? I mean, you and Meyer came to the wedding and all. I wondered how good friends you had been. I couldn't help wondering, but I didn't want to really know. Do you understand?"

"Sure."

"The way it happened, we got into a hassle. It was the first real one we'd had. People shouldn't drink and fight when they're married. They say things they don't want to say. I started saying some pretty ugly things about her and you. You know Mary. She's got a lot of spirit. She took it and took it, and finally she let me have it right between the eyes. I deserved it. She blazed right up at me. She said she'd been cruising with you alone aboard this houseboat, down through the Keys and up the west coast to Tampa Bay, and she'd lived aboard for a month and cooked your food and washed your clothes and slept in your bed, and you were kind and decent and gentle and twice the man I am. So that Sunday afternoon I slammed out of the house and got in the car and came over here to beat on you. I could always handle myself pretty good. I wasn't drunk enough for that to be any excuse. Jesus, I never hit so many arms and elbows and shoulders in my life."

“And the top of my head.”

“That’s what popped the knuckles. Look. This knuckle is still sort of sunk in. How many times did you hit me? Do you know?”

“Sure I know. Twice.”

“Twice,” he said dolefully. “Oh, shit.”

“I waited until you ran out of steam, Harry. I waited until you got arm weary.”

He looked at me in an appraising way. “I wish I’d done more good.”

“I had a pair of sore arms. You bruised me up, Harry. And a three-day headache.”

“I guess I had to get it out of my system. Do you understand it’s still pretty hard for me to come to you to ask for anything?”

“I suppose it might be.”

“Mary kept telling me to grow up. Okay. I’m trying to grow up. I’m trying to be a mature, rational human being. Like they say, I’ve been examining my priorities and my options.”

“Good for you. But where do I fit in?”

“Here’s what I want you to tell Mary.”

“But I—”

“Give me a chance. Okay? Tell her that as soon as the SeaGate project is all set up, I think we ought to get away, just the two of us. A cruise or fly over to Spain, whatever. And tell her that the Canadian girl didn’t mean a damn thing to me, that I didn’t bring her back down here or ask her down, that she came on her own. And tell her to please get in touch with me so we can talk.”

“Hold it! I don’t know where Mary is.”

His face turned red. “Don’t give me such crap. You willing to let me search this houseboat?”

“She isn’t here, you damn fool.”

“I’ll find something of hers. Clothes, lipstick, something.”

“Harry. Jesus. Look around all you want.”

He settled back in the chair. “Okay. You and Mary knew I’d come here sooner or later. So you haven’t been having your fun aboard this boat.”

“That’s called paranoia, old buddy. When did she leave you?”

“January fifth.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “This is the fourteenth day of April. You have a slow reaction time.”

“I’ve been hoping she’d come back or get in touch. Tell her how much I’ve been hoping. She caught me dead to rights. She went around the house with a face like a stone for nearly two weeks, then when I got home that Tuesday, she’d packed and left. No note, even. I went down the list of her friends and called them. It was humiliating for me.”

“I bet.”

“Now just one damn minute—”

“What makes you think she’d come to me?”

“I thought about it. I mean, back in January. It seemed like the most likely thing for her to do. I spent a whole weekend hanging around here. You had ... another friend. So I decided if Mary had come here, she’d found you were busy, gone someplace else.”

“She didn’t come here, Harry.”

“Not right away.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

He leaned forward. “Okay. Where were you at ten o’clock on Friday morning, April second?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“You and Mary came off this houseboat at ten that morning, and you went out to the parking lot and got into a white Ford LTD convertible with rental plates. A friend of mine happened to be here and happened to see the two of you get in and drive off. This friend followed you. You went over to the Parkway and turned south toward Miami, and he came back, and he phoned me about it.”

“Are you willing to listen a minute? Are you willing to try to listen?”

“All I know is my wife left me and she’s sleeping with you, McGee, and I’d like to see you dead.”

“The woman I was with is about Mary’s height, and her figure is just as good, at least as good as Mary’s used to be. Her hair is dark like Mary’s. The woman is an old friend. That’s her rental convertible, and it’s still out there on the lot. With her hair in a scarf

and dark glasses, she was all prepared for a trip in an open car. She's here aboard her boat. Her name is Jillian Brent-Archer. I haven't seen Mary since the wedding. Not once, Broll. And that was better than three years ago."

He looked at me. "You're real cute, McGee. Jesus, you're cute. Most of the damn fools in this world would believe you. Are you going to tell Mary what I told you to tell her, what I've begged you to tell her?"

"How can I, when I don't even know ..."

And the dumb little weapon came out from under his clothes somewhere, maybe from the waist area, wedged between the belt and the flab. A dumb little automatic pistol in blued steel, half-swallowed in his big, pale, meaty fist. His staring eyes were wet with tears, and his mouth was twisted downward at the corners. The muzzle was making a ragged little circle, and a remote part of my mind identified it as .25 or .32 caliber, there not being all that much difference between a quarter of an inch diameter and a third of an inch. There was a sour laugh back in another compartment of my skull. This could very possibly be the end of it, a long-odds chance of a mortal wound at the hand of a jealous husband wielding something just a little bit better than a cap gun. The ragged circle took in my heart, brain, and certain essential viscera. And I was slouched deep in a chair facing him, just a little too far away to try to kick his wrist. He was going to talk or shoot. I saw his finger getting whiter, so I knew it was shoot.

I shoved with my heels and went over backward in the chair. The weapon made a noise like somebody slapping shingles together. My left heel went numb. I rolled to my right, knocked over a small table, fielded the chunky glass ashtray on the first bounce, rolled up onto my knees, and slung it underhand at his head as he came up out of the depths of the yellow couch. I missed him shamefully, and was caught there too close to him as he aimed at the middle of my face from five feet away and tried to pull the trigger. But the slide was all the way back, the clip empty.

I got slowly up onto very wobbly knees as Harry Broll lowered the gun to his side, relaxed his hand, let it fall. My heel tingled. A slug

had grooved the hard leather on the bottom of the heel. The lounge smelled like the Fourth of July.

Harry's big face wrinkled like a slapped baby, and he took a half step toward me, arms half reaching out for comfort and forgiveness, and then he plumped back down on the couch and bellowed once, a walrus on a lonely strand.

My drink was gone, spilling when the table went over. I moved cautiously, checking myself for any area that might feel dead and damp. That is the bullet feel, dead, damp, and strange, before the torn nerves and muscles catch up and begin screaming. No such areas. I made tall careful steps into the galley, made a new drink. I went back in. Harry Broll sat with face in hands, snuffling drearily. The paper had kept me aware of him over the years. Broll plans new condominium complex. Broll given zoning board exception. Broll unveils shopping plaza concept. Chamber lauds Broll.

I sat opposite him again after putting the chair back on its legs. Looking around, I could count five ejected cartridge cases.

"How old are you, Harry?"

He sighed and mumbled it into his hands. "Thirty-five."

"You look fifty."

"Get off my back."

"You're too soft and too heavy. You sweat a lot, and you're short of breath, and your teeth need cleaning."

He lifted his mottled face and stared at me. "Why are you saying these things?"

"Maybe if you hadn't gotten so sloppy, Mary could have given you a second chance. Or maybe it was already a second chance."

"Oh, no. I don't play around. Jesus, I haven't had the time or the energy. This was the first time, I swear."

"You don't play around, and you don't go around killing people."

"You pushed me too far and—"

"You always carry that thing?"

"No, I—"

"You brought it along in case you felt like killing me?"

"Thank God, I missed you. I'm not thinking right lately. Everything would have gone down the drain. Everything."

“It would sort of spoil my day, too.”

“You know, when a man takes a good look at himself, he begins to wonder why. You know? I’ve been pushing myself hard. Drinking too much, smoking too much. Late nights. Conferences. For what? Damned if I know. For the sake of winning? How did that get to seem so important? But you shouldn’t have tried to lie to me, McGee.”

“Your friend is an idiot. Mary never came near me. She hasn’t phoned me or written me. I didn’t know she’d left you. Look, I knew her a long time ago. She was at one of those crisis points in her life. She’d never met you, Harry. Never seen you, never heard your name, never knew she’d marry you. We were friends. We took a cruise down through the Keys and up the west coast, and she got things sorted out. We made love. Not for the first two weeks of the cruise. That wasn’t the purpose of it. Once all the knots and springs began to loosen up, then it seemed like a natural thing to have happen. It made pleasure. It was a way of saying hello. Nobody was a victim. She was a very sweet lady, and what I remember best is that we laughed a lot.”

“I ... I have to talk to her before the thirtieth.”

“Why the deadline?”

“It’s a business thing. Some things to sign. To protect my interest in SeaGate. Of course, if I’d shot you, what difference would it make whether I kept my share of SeaGate or not?”

“Will it make a lot of difference when I sign the complaint against you?”

“Complaint?”

“Assault with a deadly weapon. Attempted homicide?”

“You wouldn’t!”

“What’s to stop me? My undying affection for you?”

He pulled himself together visibly. He wrapped up the emotions and put them on a high shelf. I could almost see the nimble brain of the entrepreneur take over. “We’ll both have versions of what happened here, McGee. I’m essentially a salesman. I think I can sell my version far easier than you can sell yours.”

“What’s your version?”

“I’ll let that come as a surprise to you.”

I could think of several variations that could leave him looking pretty good. And, of course, there was the usual problem of believability. Does one believe Harry Broll, pillar of the business community, or a certain Travis McGee, who seems to have no visible means of support, gentlemen?

“A man as shrewd as you, Harry, should realize that the guy who gave you the bad information made an honest mistake.”

“I know Mary. She’d get in touch with you.”

“Would that she had.”

“What?”

“A troubled friend is a friend in trouble. I’m right here. She could have come around, but she didn’t.”

“She made you promise not to tell where she is.”

I shook my head. “Broll, come with me. I will show you that rental convertible, and I will show you the lady who rented it and who went to Miami with me and came back with me.”

“It’s a nice try. You’ve got a lot of friends. They’d all lie for you. Every one. Think it over. Tell her what I said. She has to get in touch with me.”

We stood up. I picked up his little automatic, released the catch and eased the slide forward and handed it to him. He took it and looked at it, bounced it on his big hand, and slipped it into his side pocket. “I better get rid of it,” he said.

“If you think you might get any more quaint ideas, you better.”

“I was going to scare you. That’s all.”

I looked him over. “Harry. You did.”

“Tell her to call the office. I’m not living at home. It was too empty there.”

“If after all these years I should happen to see your wife, I’ll tell her.”

Two

Meyer came aboard the *Busted Flush* at twenty minutes to six, five minutes after Harry Broll left. He was dressed for the small festival at six o'clock aboard Jillian's great big motor-sailer trimaran. He wore pants in a carnival awning pattern and a pink shirt that matched one of the myriad stripes in the awning.

"Goodness gracious," I said.

He put a hand on a bulky hip and made a slow 360-degree turn. "Plumage," he said. "And have you noticed it's spring?"

"If you'd carry a camera around your neck and walk fifty feet ahead of me, nobody would know we were together."

"Faw," he said. "And tush." He went toward the bottle department, saying, "About Mr. Harry Broll ...?"

"Who? Oh, yes. Of course. Mr. Broll."

"McGee, don't try me, please."

"You are supposed to walk in here, and instead of giving me a fashion show, you are supposed to snuff the air, look about with darting glances. Then you are supposed to find those six cartridge cases in that ashtray and snuff at them. Then you prowl around and find where all six hit, including the one that's hard to find. It hit right smack in the middle of my model 18 Marantz and killed it as dead as Harry tried to kill me."

Meyer backed to the nearest chair and lowered himself into it. "Six shots?"

"Six."

"With serious intent?"

“Damn well told.”

I explained the situation. Meyer listened, looking very troubled.

“Don’t sit there looking like an old beagle,” I told him. “Harry won’t be back.”

“Maybe somebody else will.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Travis, are you just a littler slower than you were a few years ago? Half a step, maybe?”

“I don’t know. Probably.”

“Why should you get slower and get careless at the same time?”

“Careless?”

“Don’t try to kid yourself. You would have stumbled against him or spilled something on him and brushed it off. You would have checked him out and located the gun and taken it away from him.”

“This was just old Harry Broll.”

“And you are just old T. McGee, trying to pretend you don’t know what I’m saying. You could be on the floor with a leaking hole in your skull.”

“I can’t go around acting as if everybody was going to—”

“You used to. And you are alive. What has given you this illusion of immortality of late?”

“Lay off, Meyer.”

“Staleness? People are very good at things they are very interested in. If you lose interest, you are dead. If a Harry Broll can damn near kill you, Travis, what about somebody with a more professional attitude and background?”

“Wouldn’t I be more alert?”

“Don’t some of them look and act as innocuous as Harry Broll?”

“What are you getting at?”

“If you just go through the motions, Travis, maybe it’s time to give the whole thing up. What good is a way of life if it turns out to be fatal?”

“Are you going to support me?”

“Not a chance. Anyway, isn’t Jillian first in line?”

“Come *on!*”

“There are worse ways to live.”

“Several hundred thousand worse ways, Meyer, but just because Harry Broll.... Consider this. Six shots in a very confined space. What’s the matter with my reaction time?”

“The trouble is that they were fired at all. He came here once to try to beat your face flat. So two years later he comes around again, and you invite him in to try his luck with a gun. What are you going to dodge next time? A satchel charge?”

“I have to depend on instinct. I did not sense any kind of murderous intent on his—”

“Then your instincts are stale. Listen. I don’t want to lose a friend. Go where I can visit once in a while. Exchange Christmas cards. Better than putting a pebble on your gravestone.”

“Just because—”

“Don’t talk. Think a little. And we should be going.”

I shrugged and sighed. When he gets into one of those moods, there is nothing one can do with him. He smells doom. I buttoned up the *Flush*, making certain my little security devices were in operation. The sun was low enough to make a yellow-orange glow across all the white gleam and brightwork of a vulgar multimillion dollars’ worth of seagoing toys. Hundreds of millions, in truth. As we walked over I saw the sixty-plus feet of a big new Bertram, grumbling, bubbling, sliding elegantly into a slip. Six thousand dollars a foot. It doesn’t take too many of those, too many Matthews, Burgers, Trumpys, Huckins, Rybovitches, and Strikers, to make a row of zeros to stun the mind.

I stopped and leaned my crossed arms atop a cement piling and looked down at a rainbow sheen of oil on twilight waters.

“What’s the matter now?” asked Meyer.

“Harry is right, you know.”

“To try to kill you?”

“Very funny. He’s right about Mary getting in touch. I get the feeling she would. Emotional logic. The last time her world ruptured, I helped her walk it off, talk it off, think it off.”

“So maybe she had enough and said the hell with it.”

“She is one stubborn lady. Harry is no prize. She married him a little too fast. But she would really bust a gut to make the marriage

work. She wouldn't quit. She wouldn't run."

"Unless he did something that she just couldn't take. Maybe it got to her gag reflex. Wouldn't she run then?"

"Yes. I guess so. And maybe she's a stronger person than she was back when I knew her. All Harry said was that he had gotten mixed up with some Canadian girl, a first offense. I know that wouldn't make Mary give any ringing cheers. But I think she's human enough to know it wouldn't be the end of the world or the marriage. Well, he has to locate her before the end of April, or he has big business problems."

"Hmm?"

"Something about signing something so he can keep his interest in SeaGate, whatever the hell that is."

"It's a planned community up in the northeast corner of Martin County, above Hobe Sound where there's no A-1-A running along the beach. It's a syndicate thing, way too big for anybody like Broll to swing by himself."

"How do you know all that stuff?"

"There was a feature story about planned communities in the *Wall Street Journal* a month ago. The local papers have had articles about it for over a year. I believe *Newsweek* had a—"

"Truce. Could a guy like Broll do well in a deal like that?"

"Depends. The ownership structure would be the important consideration."

"Could you find out where he fits and how, and why Mary would have to sign something?"

"I imagine I could. But why?"

"Harry's nerves are bad. He looks bad. He has a money orientation. If he misses out on large money because Mary runs and hides and won't sign, it somehow doesn't sound like Mary. It would be a cheap shot and a dumb shot. She isn't dumb. Whether she stays with him or leaves him, it would be better for him to have money. She's been gone for two months. If he was so certain she'd run to me, where has he been for two months? Time is running out in two weeks. So he comes around with shaking hands and a sweaty shirt

and a couple of places he missed while shaving. Time is running out not on the marriage, on the money. It makes me wonder.”

“I’ll look into it,” he said as we walked.

End of discussion. We had arrived at the area where they park the showboats, the ones too big to bring around inside, and thus have to leave them on the river, not far from the fuel pumps, where two out of every three Power Squadron types who cruise by can whap them against the cement with their curling wash. The *Jilly III* is a custom motor-sailer trimaran out of St. Kitts, owned by Jillian, the widow of Sir Henry Brent-Archer. It is seventy feet long with a beam that has to be close to fifty feet. It rides a bad sea with all the stability of a brick church. Minimal superstructure to emphasize an expanse of teak deck as big as a tennis court, with more than half of it shaded by the big colorful awning tarp her crew of three always strings up as soon as they are at dockside.

The bar table was positioned, draped in white damask. A piano tape was playing show tunes with muted discretion over the stereo system I’d helped her buy the last time she was in Lauderdale. There were a dozen guests assembled, three conversational groups of elegant folk sipping the very best booze from the most expensive glasses. Jilly saw us approaching the little gangplank and came a-striding, beaming, to welcome us aboard.

A lady of unguessable years, who made damned well certain she gave you no clues at all. If she turned up as a Jane Doe, DOA, traffic, a hasty coroner could not be blamed for penciling in the apparent age as plus or minus twenty-seven. Tall, slender brunette of such careful and elegant grooming, such exquisitely capped teeth, it seemed safe to assume she was in some area of entertainment. But she had such a much better tan and better physical condition than most show business people, one might safely guess her to be, perhaps, a model for beachwear? A lead in a commercial water ballet?

But a coroner less hasty, more sophisticated, who searched the scalp and elsewhere for the faintest of traces left by superb Swiss surgeons, who slipped the tinted plastic lenses off and studied the eyes closely as well as the backs of the hands, base of the throat,

ankles, wrists.... He might add a quotient of years in direct ratio to his quality of observation and his experience.

Jilly had a lively and animated face peering out from the careless spill of black hair, all bright questing eyes, black brows, big nose, broad and generous mouth. Ever since I had known Jilly, her voice had cracked like that of a boy in early adolescence, changing from the piercing, songbird clarity of the Irish upperclass countryside to a burring baritone honk and back again. It was so effective it seemed contrived. But a small sailboat had foundered one night in a bad sea, and she had clung to a channel buoy, permanently spraining her vocal cords shouting at the boat traffic until finally she was heard and she and her injured friend were rescued.

“Meyer!” she cried. “My *word*, darling! You’re of a surpassing radiance. Travis dear, what happened to him? Did he molt or something?” She linked her arms through ours and croaked, “Come on, dears. Meet the ones you don’t know and get smashed soon as you can because I am gallons ahead of you.”

The introductions were made. Jillian slipped away to greet more guests. We drank. The sun went down. The night breeze was gentle but cool, and ladies put their wraps back on. The party lights strung from the rigging were properly dim, flatteringly orange. The buffet materialized, as if the table had risen up out of the teak. The music tape was more lively, the volume louder than before.

I found myself inadvertently paired with a smallish, withered Englishwoman with a shrunken face the color of weak tea and hair dyed the color of raspberry ice. A Mrs. Ogleby. I had seen Meyer talking to her towering and cadaverous husband, pumping him about the latest Common Market difficulties. We carried our buffet plates forward where she could sit on a narrow shelflike bench built out from the bow where the rail was solid. I sat crosslegged on the deck with my plate atop the massive bow cleat.

“I understand that you are one of dear Jillian’s very favorite Americans, Mr. McGee.”

She managed to load the comment with sweetly venomous insinuation. I beamed up at her. “And she’s one of my favorite foreigners.”

“Really! How terribly nice for her. Actually, Geoffrey and I were old friends of poor Sir Henry long before he married Jillian.”

“Then Jillian isn’t one of your favorite people, eh?”

She clinked her fork against the plate and leaned forward and peered down at me. “Whatever gave you such an odd idea? She is *very* dear. Very dear to both of us.”

“I knew Sir Henry, too.”

“Really! I wouldn’t have thought you would have known him.”

“I was a houseguest at St. Kitts for a few weeks.”

“But that would have been after he was quite ill, I take it.” Her smile was thin and knowing in the light of the nearby party lantern. A truly poisonous little woman.

“No. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Ogleby, Henry and I swam our three miles every morning, went riding or sailing every afternoon, and played chess every evening.”

She paused and regrouped. “Before he became ill, Sir Henry had really fantastic energies. How strange we all thought it that he would marry someone that young, after being a widower so long. It seemed odd. But, of course, that was so awfully long ago it is rather difficult to think of Jillian as—”

“Just think of me, dears, no matter how difficult it may be,” said Jilly. “Hmmm. What is this you have, Lenore? I didn’t see it at all. May I? Mmmm. Shrimp, and what a deliciously fiery sauce! Difficult to think of me as what, Lenore darling?”

When Mrs. Ogleby hesitated, I said, “She was about to pinpoint the date when you and Sir Henry were married.”

“Were you, dear? It slips my mind, you know. Was it just before or just after that fuss with the Spanish Armada?”

“Don’t be absurd! I was only—”

“You were only being Lenore, which is part of the trouble, isn’t it? Travis, I was married to Henry long long ago. Matter of fact, I was but three years old at the time, and most of the people in the church thought it was some sort of delayed christening. There was talk that it was an unwholesome relationship, but by the time I was fourteen—eleven years later—I looked twenty, and everyone said that it had probably been all for the best. And it was, of course. Lenore, you