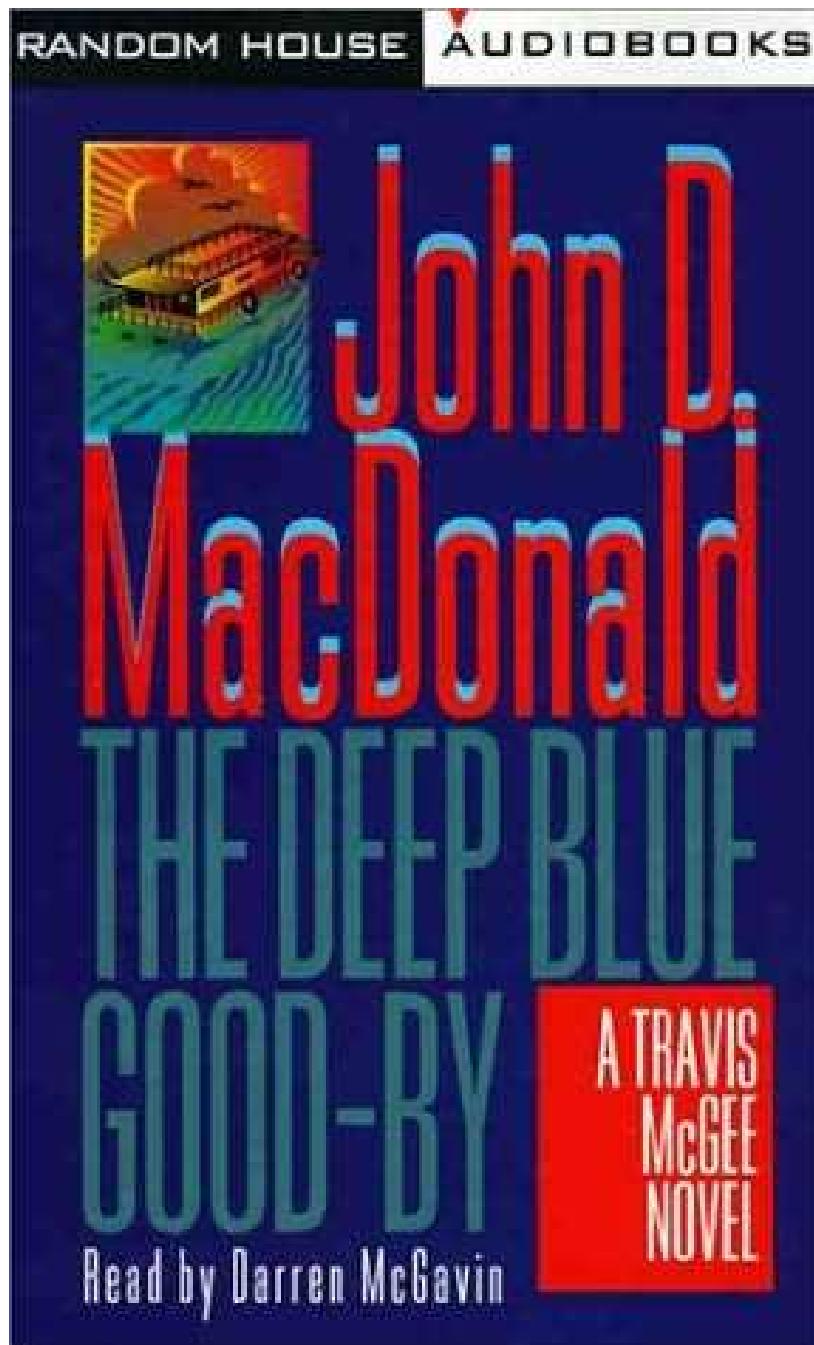


# THE DEEP BLUE GOOD-BY



Travis McGee 01

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## Uno

It was to have been a quiet evening at home. Home is the *\_Busted Flush\_*, 52-foot barge-type houseboat, Slip F-18, Bahia Mar, Lauderdale. Home is where the privacy is. Draw all the opaque curtains, button the hatches, and with the whispering drone of the air conditioning masking all the sounds of the outside world, you are no longer cheek to jowl with the random activities aboard the neighbor craft. You could be in a rocket beyond Venus, or under the icecap.

Because it is a room aboard, I call it the lounge, and because that is one of the primary activities.

I was sprawled on a deep curve of the corner couch, studying charts of the keys, trying to work up enough enthusiasm and energy to plan moving the *\_Busted Flush\_* to a new mooring for a while. She has a pair of Hercules diesels, 58 HP each, that will chug her along at a stately six knots. I didn't want to move her. I like Lauderdale. But it had been so long I was wondering if I should.

Chookie McCall was choreographing some fool thing. She had come over because I had the privacy and enough room. She had shoved the furniture out of the way, set up a couple of mirrors from the master stateroom, and set up her rickety little metronome. She wore a faded old rust-red leotard, mended with black thread in a couple of places. She had her black hair tied into a scarf.

She was working hard. She would go over a sequence time and time again, changing it a little each time, and when she was satisfied, she would hurry over to the table and make the proper notations on her clip board.

Dancers work as hard as coal miners used to work. She stomped and huffed and contorted her splendid and perfectly proportioned body. In spite of the air conditioning, she had filled the lounge with a faint sharp-sweet odor of large overheated girl. She was a pleasant distraction. In the lounge lights there was a highlighted gleam of perspiration on the long round legs and arms.

"Damn!" she said, scowling at her notations.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing I can't fix. I have to figure exactly where everybody is going to be, or I'll have them kicking each other in the face. I get mixed up sometimes."

She scratched out some notes. I went back to checking the low tide depths on the flats northeast of the Content Keys. She worked hard for another ten minutes, made her notes, then leaned against the edge of the table, breathing hard.

"Trav, honey."

"Mmm?"

"Were you kidding me that time we talked about...about what you do for a living?"

"What did I say?"

"It sounded sort of strange, but I guess I believed you. You said if X has something valuable and Y comes along and takes it away from him, and there is absolutely no way in the world X can ever get it back, then you come along and make a deal with X to get it back, and keep half. Then you just...live on that until it starts to run out. Is that the way it is, really?"

"It's a simplification, Chook, but reasonably accurate."

"Don't you get into a lot of trouble?"

"Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Y is usually in no position to make much of a fuss. Because I am sort of a last resort, the fee is fifty percent. For X, half is a lot better than nothing at all."

"And you keep it all sort of quiet."

"Chook I don't exactly have business cards printed. What would I say on them? Travis McGee, Retriever?"

"But for goodness' sake, Trav, how much work like that can you find laying around when you start to get so broke you need it?"

"So much that I can pick and choose. This is a complex culture, dear. The more intricate our society gets, the more semi-legal ways to steal. I get leads from old clients sometimes. And if you take a batch of newspapers and read with great care, and read between the lines, you can come up with a fat happy Y and a poor X wringing his hands. I like to mark on pretty good-sized ones. Expenses are heavy. And then I can take another piece of my retirement. Instead of retiring at sixty I'm taking it in chunks as I go along."

"What if something came along right now?"

"Let's change the subject, Miss McCall. Why don't you take some time off, and make Frank highly nervous, and we'll assemble a little group and cruise a little houseboat party on down to Marathon. Let's say, four gentlemen and six ladies. No drunks, no whiners, nobody paired off, no dubious gender, no camera addicts, nobody who sunburns, nobody who can't swim, nobody who..."

"Please, McGee. I'm really serious."

"So am I."

"There's a girl I want you to talk to. I hired her for the group a couple of months ago. She's a little older than the rest of us. She used to dance, and she's working back into it very nicely, really. But...I really think she needs help. And I don't think there's anyone else she can go to. Her name is Cathy Kerr."

"I'm sorry, Chook. I've got enough right now to last for months. I work best after I begin to get nervous."

"But she thinks there is really an awful lot involved."

I stared at her. "She thinks?"

"She never got to see it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"She got a little drunk the other night and very weepy, and I've been nice to her, so she blurted it all out to me. But she should tell you herself."

"How could she lose something she never saw?"

Chookie wore that little fisherman smile which means the hook has been set. "It's really too complicated for me to try to explain. I might mess it up. Would you just do this, Travis? Would you talk to her?"

I sighed. "Bring her around sometime."

She padded lithely over to me and took my wrist and looked at my watch. Her breathing had slowed. Her leotard was sweat-dark and fitted her almost as closely as her healthy hide. She beamed down at me. "I knew you'd be nice about it, Trav. She'll be here in twenty minutes."

I stared up at her. "You are a con artist, McCall."

She patted my head. "Cathy is really nice. You'll like her." She went back to the middle of the lounge and started her metronome again, studied her notations, and went back to work, leaping, thumping, making small grunts of effort. Never sit in the first row at the ballet.

I tried to get back to channel markers and tide levels, but all concentration was gone. I had to talk to the woman. But I was certainly not going to be shilled into some nonsense project. I had the neat one all lined up, waiting until I was ready. I had enough diversions. I didn't need more. I was sourly amused that Chook had wondered where the projects came from. She was living proof they popped up all the time.

Promptly at nine there was a bing-bong sound from the bell I had wired to a push button on the pier piling. If anybody should ignore the bell, step over my chain and come down my gangplank, the instant they step on the big rope mat on the transom deck there is an ominous and significant bong which starts many abrupt protective measures. I have no stomach for surprises. I have endured too many of them. They upset me. The elimination of all removable risk is the most plausible way of staying alive.

I flicked on my rear deck lights and went out the aft doorway of the lounge, Chookie McCall gasping behind me.

I went up and unsnapped the chain for her. She was a sandy blonde with one of those English schoolboy haircuts, where the big eyes look out at you from under a ragged thatch of bangs. She had overdressed for the occasion, the basic black and the pearl clip and the sparkly little envelope purse.

In explosive gasps Chook introduced us and we went inside. I could see that she was elderly by Chook's standards. Perhaps twenty-six or -seven. A brown-eyed blonde, with the helpless mournful eyes of a basset hound. She was a little weathered around the eyes. In the lounge lights I saw that the basic black had given her a lot of good use. Her hands looked a little rough. Under the slightly bouffant skirt of the black dress were those unmistakable dancer's legs, curved and trim and sinewy.

Chookie said, "Cathy, you can go ahead and tell Travis McGee the whole bit, like you told me. I've finished up, so I'll leave you alone and go back and take that bath, if it's okay Trav?"

"Please do take a bath."

She gave me a pretty good rap behind the ear and went off and closed the master stateroom door behind her.

I could see that Catherine Kerr was very tense. I offered her a drink. She gratefully accepted bourbon on ice.

"I don't know what you can do," she said. "Maybe this is silly. I don't know what anybody can do."

"Maybe there isn't a thing anybody can do, Cathy. Let's just start by assuming it's hopeless and go on from there."

"I drank too much one night after the last show and told her and I guess I shouldn't have been telling anybody."

In her light, nasal voice I could detect some of that conch accent, that slightly sing-song way the key people talk.

"I'm married, sort of," she said defiantly. "He took off three years ago and I haven't heard a thing from him. I've got a boy age of five, and my sister keeps him, down at the home place on Candle Key. That's why it's stinking, not so much for me as the boy Davie. You want a lot for a kid. Maybe I dreamed too much. I don't know, rightly."

You have to let them get to it their own way. She sipped her drink and sighed and shrugged. "The way it happened, I was nine years old. That was in nineteen forty-five. That was when my daddy came home from the war. Sergeant David Berry. That's my maiden name, Catherine Berry. I named my boy after him, even though my daddy had been in prison a long long time when the boy was born. What I think happened, my daddy got onto some way of making money when he was overseas in World War Two. A lot of money, I think. And he found some way of bringing it back. I don't know how.

"He was over there in India and Burma. He was gone over two years. He was a drinking man, Mr. McGee, and a strong man and he had a temper. He came back on a ship and got off it in San Francisco. They were going to send him to some place in Florida to get discharged, and he was coming home.

"But in San Francisco he got drunk and killed another army man, and because he thought they would keep him and he wouldn't see us at all, he cut and ran. And he got all the way home. Running like that didn't do him any good at the trial. It was a military trial, like they have. He came home in the middle of the night, and when we got up he was out there on the dock just looking at the water. It was a foggy day. He told my mother what happened. He said they were going to come and get him. I have never seen a woman cry like that, before or since. They came and got him like he said, and they put him in prison for life in Leavenworth, Kansas. It was an officer he killed.

"My mother took a bus out there to see him that Christmas, and every Christmas from then on until he died two years ago. When there was enough money, she'd take along me or my sister. I got to go twice. My sister went out there three times."

She went off into dreaming and memories. In a little while she gave a start and looked at me and said, "I'm sorry. The way it was, he thought he would get out sooner or later. I guess they would have let him out, but there was always some kind of trouble coming up. He wasn't a man to settle down to prison like some can. He was a very proud man, Mr. McGee.

"But here is the thing I have to tell you. Before they came and got him. I was nine. My sister was seven. He sat on the porch with his arms around us, and he told us all the wonderful things that would happen when they turned him loose. We'd have our own boats and our own horses. We would travel all over the world. We would have pretty dresses for every day in the year. I always remembered that.

"When I was older, I remembered it to my mother. I thought she might make fun. But she was serious enough. She told me I was never to talk about it to anybody. She said my father would work things out in his own way, and some day everything would be fine for all of us. But of course it never was. Last year a man came to us, name of Junior Allen. A smiling man. He said he spent five long years in that place and knew my daddy well. And he knew things about us he could only know if my daddy told him. So we were glad to see him.

"He said he had no family of his own. A freckled smiling man, quick to talk and good with his hands at fixing things. He came in with us, and he got work over at the Esso station, and the money helped. My mother was started sick then, but not so sick she couldn't care for the kids by day, when Christine-that's my sister-and I were working. Her two, and my boy Davie, three little kids. It would have neatened out better if Junior Allen had took up with Christine, her husband being killed by the hurricane of sixty-one, when the cinderblock wall of the Candle Key Suprex blew over onto him. Jaimie Hasson his name was. We've had all this bad luck with our men." She tried to smile.

"Sometimes it comes in bunches."

"Lord knows we've had a bunch. It was me Junior Allen liked best. By the time we took up together, my mother was too sick to care too much. As she got sicker she seemed to turn inward like some people do, not noticing much. Christine knew what was going on between us, and she told me it was wrong. But Junior said the way Wally Kerr took off and left me, I was as good as divorced. He said I couldn't even ask for a divorce until seven years went by without hearing from Wally. I since found out he lied.

"I lived like man and wife with Junior Allen, Mr. McGee, and I loved that man. When Mother died, it was good to have him close. It was near Christmas. She was washing greens, and she just bent over the sink and made a little kitten sound and slid down dying and she was gone. Christine stopped her job because somebody had to be with the kids, but with me and Junior Allen working, there was just enough to get by.

"There was one thing strange in all that time he was with us. I thought it was because he had gotten so close to my daddy in prison. He liked to talk about Daddy. He never stopped asking questions about him, about what things he liked to do and what places he liked to go, almost as if he was trying to live the same life my daddy had lived way before the war, when I was as little as Davie is now.

"Now I remember other things that didn't seem as strange then as they do now. I remembered about the fish shack my daddy built on a little no-name island, and I told Junior Allen, and the next day he was off he was gone all day in the skiff, and he came back bone tired and grouchy. Little things like that.

"I know now that he was hunting, Mr. McGee. He was hunting whatever my daddy hid, whatever it was he brought back that was going to give us those dresses and horses and around the world. Using one excuse and another, he managed to dig up just about every part of the yard. One day we awoke and Junior Allen was gone. That was near the end of this last February, and both the markers by our old driveway were tumbled down.

"My daddy built them long ago of coquina rock too big and grand for such a little driveway, but built rough. Junior Allen tumbled them down and away he went, and in the ruin of the one on the left was something I don't know what it was to start. Scabs of rust and some rotten cloth that was maybe once army color, and some wire like a big clip, and some rust still in the length of a little chain, and something that could have once been some kind of a top to something.

"He took along his personal things, so I knew it was just like Wally Kerr all over again. No good looking for him. But he showed up again three weeks later, on Candle Key. Not to see me. He came back to see Mrs. Atkinson. She's a beautiful woman. She has one of the big new houses there, and I guess he met her when he was working at the Esso and putting gas in her Thunderbird car.

"People told me he was staying in her house, and that he'd come down in expensive clothes and a big boat of his own and moved right in with her. They would tell me and then look at me to see what I'd say or do. The fourth day he was there I came upon him in the town. I tried to speak and he turned around and hurried the other way, and I shamed myself, running after him. He got into her car and she wasn't there and he was pawing his pockets and cursing because he couldn't find the key, his face ugly.

"I was crying and trying to ask him what he was doing to me. He called me a busted-down little slut and told me to go back and hide in the swamp where I came from, and he roared away. Enough people saw it and enough

heard it, so it gave them a lot to talk about. His boat was right there, a big cruiser, registered to him and owned by him, right at Mrs. Atkinson's dock, and she closed the house and they went off in it.

"Now I know she lived careful, and couldn't buy him a boat like that. And I know that living with us, Junior Allen didn't have one dollar extra. But he looked and looked and looked and found something and went away and came back with money. But I can't see there's a thing in the world anybody can do about it.

"Chookie said tell you, so I've told you. I don't know where he is now. I don't know if Mrs. Atkinson knows, if she isn't still with him someplace. And if anybody could find him, what could they do?"

"Was there a name and port of registry on the boat?"

"Called it the Play Pen, out of Miami. Not a new boat, but the name new. He showed a couple of people the papers to prove it his. I'd say it was a custom boat, maybe thirty-eight foot, white topsides, gray hull and a blue stripe."

"Then you left Candle Key?"

"Not long after. There just wasn't enough money with just one of us working. When I was little a tourist lady saw me dancing alone and gave me free dancing lessons every winter she came down. Before I was married I danced two years for pay up in Miami. So I came back into it and it's enough money so I can send Christine enough and she can get along. I didn't want to be in Candle Key any more any."

She looked at me with soft apologetic brown eyes, all dressed in her best to come talk to me. The world had done its best to subdue and humble her, but the edge of her good tough spirit showed through. I found I had taken an irrational dislike to Junior Allen, that smiling man. And I do not function too well on emotional motivations. I am wary of them. And I am wary of a lot of other things, such as plastic credit cards, payroll deductions, insurance programs, retirement benefits, savings accounts, Green Stamps, time clocks, newspapers, mortgages, sermons, miracle fabrics, deodorants, check lists, time payments, political parties, lending libraries, television, actresses, junior chambers of commerce, pageants, progress, and manifest destiny.

I am wary of the whole dreary deadening structured mess we have built into such a glittering top-heavy structure that there is nothing left to see but the glitter, and the brute routines of maintaining it.

Reality is in the enduring eyes, the unspoken dreadful accusation in the enduring eyes of a worn young woman who looks at you, and hopes for nothing.

But these things can never form lecture materials for blithe Travis McGee. I am also wary of all earnestness.

"Let me do some thinking about all this, Cal."

"Sure," she said, and put her empty glass down.

"Another drink."

"I'll be getting along, thank you kindly--"

"I can get in touch through Chook."

"Sure."

I let her out. I noticed a small and touching thing. Despite all wounds and dejections, her dancer's step was so firm and light and quick as to give a curious imitation of joy.

## Dos

I wandered through the lounge and tapped at the door and went into the master stateroom. Chook's fresh clothing was laid out on my bed, and her sodden stomp-suit was in a heap on the floor. I heard her in the tub, wallowing and sloshing and humming.

"Yo," I said toward the half-open door.

"Come in, darling. I'm indecent."

The bathroom was humid with steam and soap. The elderly Palm Beach sybarite who had ordered the pleasure barge for his declining years had added many nice touches. One was the tub, a semi-sunken, pale blue creation a

full seven feet long and four feet wide. Chook was stretched out full length in it, her black hair afloat, bobbing around in there, creamy with suds, utterly luxuriant. She beckoned me over and I sat on the wide rim near the foot of the tub.

I guess Chook is about twenty-three or -four. Her face is a little older than that. It has that stern look you see in old pictures of the Plains Indians. At her best, it is a forceful and striking face, redolent of strength and dignity. At worst it sometimes would seem to be the face of a Dartmouth boy dressed for the farcical chorus line. But that body, seen more intimately than ever before, was incomparably, mercilessly female, deep and glossy, rounded under the tidy little fatty layer of girl pneumatics with useful muscle.

This was a special challenge, and I didn't know the terms, knew only that most of the time they are terms one cannot ultimately afford, not with the ones who, like Chook, have their own special force and substance and requirements. She had created the challenge, and was less bold with it than she wanted to believe.

"How about that Cathy?" she said, her voice elaborately casual.

"A little worn around the edges."

"How not? But how about helping her?"

"There's a lot to find out first. Maybe too much. Maybe it would be too long and too expensive finding out what I'd have to find out."

"But you couldn't tell about that until you looked into it."

"I could just make a guess."

"And not do anything."

"What's it to you, Chook?"

"I like her. And it's been rough."

"The wide world is full of likable people who get kicked in the stomach regularly. They're disaster-prone. Something goes wrong. The sky starts falling on their head. And you can't reverse the process."

She sloshed a little and scowled. My left hand was braced on the edge of the tub. Suddenly she lifted a long steaming gleaming leg and put the soaking sole of her bare foot firmly on the back of my hand. She curled her toes around the edge of my wrist in a strange little clasp and said, her voice husky and her eyes a little alarmed at her own daring, "The water's fine."

It was just a little too contrived. "Who are you trying to be?"

She was startled. "That's a funny thing to say."

"You are Chookie McCall, very resolute and ambitious and not exactly subject to fits of abandon. And we have been friends for a couple of months. I made my pass, way back when, and you straightened me out very pleasantly and firmly. So who are you trying to be? Fair question?"

She took her foot away. "Do you have to be such a bastard, Trav? Maybe I was having a fit of abandon. Why do you have to question things?"

"Because I know you, and maybe there are enough people getting hurt."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Chook, dear girl, you are just not trivial enough for purely recreational sex. You are more complex than that. So this very pleasant and unexpected invitation has to be part of some kind of a program or plan of action or design for the future."

Her eyes shifted just enough to let me know I had struck home. "Whatever it was, darling, you've bitched it good."

I smiled at her. "If it's pure recreation, dear; without claims or agreements or deathless vows, I'm at your service. I like you. I like you enough to keep from trying to fake you into anything, even though, at the moment, it's one hell of a temptation. But I think you would have to get too deeply involved in your own justifications because, as

I said, you are a complex woman. And a strong woman. And I am no part of your future, not in any emotional way." I stood up and looked down at her. "Now you know the rules, it's still your decision. Just holler."

I went back to the lounge. I examined my sterling character and wondered if it would be functional and entertaining to thud my head against the wall. My fingernails made interesting little grooves in the palms of my hands. My ears grew, extending to tall hairy points, and as I did a little pacing, they kept turning in her direction, listening for a shy summons.

When at last she came out, she wore white slacks and a black blouse, with her dark damp hair bound in a red scarf. She carried her dancing gear in a little canvas case. She looked tired and shy and rueful, and came slowly to me, meeting my glance with a multitude of little quick glances of her own. Clothing leans her, disguising ripeness.

I cupped my hand on her chin and kissed a soft, warm and humble Indian mouth. "What was it all about?" I asked her.

"A fight with Frank. Kind of a nasty one. So I guess I was trying to prove something. Now I feel like a fool."

"Don't."

She sighed. "But I would have felt worse the other way. I guess. Eventually. So thanks for being smarter about me than I am."

"My friend, it wasn't easy."

She scowled at me. "What's the matter with me? Why can't I be in love with you instead of him? He's really a terrible man. He makes me feel degraded, Trav. But when he walks into the room, sometimes I feel as if I'll faint with love. I think that's why...I feel so sympathetic toward Cathy. Frank is my Junior Allen. Please help her."

I told her I would think about it. I walked her to her little car, out in the sweet hot night, and watched her go sputtering off, carrying the ripeness, unimpaired, back to surly Frank. I listened for the roar of applause, fanfare of trumpets, for the speech and the medal. I heard the lipping flap of water against the hull, the soft mutter of the traffic on the smooth asphalt that divides the big marina from the public beach, bits of music blending into nonsense, boat laughter, the slurred harmony of alcohol, and a mosquito song vectoring in on my neck.

I kicked a concrete pier and hurt my toes. These are the playmate years, and they are demonstrably fraudulent. The scene is reputed to be acrawl with adorably amoral bunnies to whom sex is a pleasant social favor. The new culture. And they are indeed present and available, in exhausting quantity, but there is a curious tastelessness about them. A woman who does not guard and treasure herself cannot be of very much value to anyone else.

They become a pretty little convenience, like a guest towel. And the cute little things they say, and their dainty little squeals of pleasure and release are as contrived as the embroidered initials on the guest towels. Only a woman of pride, complexity and emotional tension is genuinely worth the act of love, and there are only two ways to get yourself one of them. Either you lie, and stain the relationship with your own sense of guile, or you accept the involvement, the emotional responsibility, the permanence she must by nature crave. I love you can be said only two ways.

But tension is also a fact of life, and I found myself strolling toward the big rich Wheeler where the Alabama Tiger maintains his permanent floating house party. I was welcomed with vague cheers. I nursed a drink, made myself excruciatingly amiable, suitably mysterious and witty in the proper key, and carefully observed the group relationships until I was able to identify two possibles.

I settled for a blooming redhead from Waco, Takes-us, name of Molly Bea Archer, carefully cut her out of the pack and trundled her, tipsy and willing, back to the Busted Flush. She thought it an adorable little old boat, and scampered about, oeing and cooing at the fixtures and appointments, kittenish as all get out until faced with the implacable reality of bedtime, then settled into her little social chore with acquired skill and natural diligence.

We rested and exchanged the necessary compliments, and she told me of her terrible problem whether to go back to Baylor for her senior year, or marry some adorable little old boy who was terribly in love with her, or take a wonderful job in Houston working for some adorable little old insurance company. She sighed and gave me a sisterly little kiss and a friendly little pat, and got up and went and fixed her face and crammed herself back into

her shorts and halter, and after I had built two fresh drinks into the glasses we had brought from the other craft, I walked her back to the Tiger's party and stayed fifteen more minutes as a small courtesy.

When I was alone in darkness in my bed, I felt sad, ancient, listless and cheated. Molly Bea had been as personally involved as one of those rubber dollies sailors buy in Japanese ports.

And in the darkness I began to remember the brown and humbled eyes of Cathy Kerr, under that guileless sandy thatch of hair. Molly Bea, she of the hard white breasts lightly dusted with golden freckles, would never be so humiliated by life because she could never become as deeply involved in the meaty toughness of life. She would never be victimized by her own illusions because they were not essential to her. She could always find new ones when the old ones wore out. But Cathy was stuck with hers. The illusion of love, magically changed to a memory of shame.

Maybe I was despising that part of myself that was labeled Junior Allen. What an astonishment these night thoughts would induce in the carefree companions of blithe Travis McGee, that big brown loose-jointed boat bum, that pale-eyed, wire-haired girl-seeker, that slayer of small savage fish, that beach-walker, gin-drinker, quip-maker, peace-seeker, iconoclast, disbeliever, arguifier, that knuckly, scar-tissued reject from a structured society.

But pity, indignation and guilt are the things best left hidden from all the gay companions. Take them out at night.

McGee, you really know how to live, old buddy.

Adorable little old buddy.

It was to have been a quiet evening at home. Until Cathy Kerr came into it, bringing unrest. At last I could admit to myself that the rubbery little adventure with the Takes-us redhead was not because I had denied myself a sudsy romp with Chook, but because I was trying to ignore the challenge Cathy had dropped in my lap. I could afford to drift along for many months. But now Cathy had created the restlessness, the indignation, the beginnings of that shameful need to clamber aboard my spavined white steed, knock the rust off the armor, tilt the crooked old lance and shout huzzah.

Sleep immediately followed decision.

## Tres

The next morning, after making laundry arrangements, I untethered my bike and pedaled to the garage where I keep Miss Agnes sheltered from brine and sun. She needs tender loving care in her declining years. I believe she is the only Rolls Royce in America which has been converted into a pickup truck. She is vintage 1936, and apparently some previous owner had some unlikely disaster happen to the upper half of her rear end and solved the problem in an implausible way.

She is one of the big ones, and in spite of her brutal surgery retains the family knack of going eighty miles an hour all day long in a kind of ghastly silence. Some other idiot had her repainted a horrid electric blue. When I found her squatting, shame-faced, in the back row of a gigantic car lot, I bought her at once and named her after a teacher I had in the fourth grade whose hair was that same shade of blue.

Miss Agnes took me down the pike to Miami, and I began making the rounds of the yacht brokers, asking my devious questions.

After a sandwich lunch, I finally found the outfit that had sold it. Kimby-Meyer. An Ambrose A. Allen, according to their record sheet, had bought a forty-foot Stadel custom back in March. They had his address as the Bayway Hotel. The salesman was out. A man named Joe True.

While I waited for him to come back, I phoned the Bayway. They had no A. A. Allen registered. Joe True got back at two-thirty, scented with good bourbon. He was a jouncy, leathery little man who punctuated each comment with a wink and a snicker, as if he had just told a joke. It saddened him somewhat to learn I was not a potential customer, but he brightened up when I offered to buy him a drink. We went to a nearby place where he was extremely well known by all, and they had his drink in front of him before we were properly settled on the bar stools.

"Frankly I didn't know he was a live one," Joe True said. "You get to know the look of people buy boats like that one. That Mr. Allen, he looked and acted more like hired crew, like he was lining something up for his boss. Grease under his fingernails. A tattoo on his wrist. A very hard-looking character, very brown and wide and powerful-looking. And smiling all the time. I showed him a lot of listings, and he was so quick to talk price I began to take him serious. He settled on that Jessica III, that was the name the original owner registered her at."

"A good boat?"

"A fine boat, Mr. McGee. She's had a lot of use but she was maintained well. Twin 255's, and they'd been overhauled. A nice compromise between range and speed. Nicely appointed. Built in fifty-six if I remember right. Good hull performance in a rough sea. We took it out. He handled it and liked it. When we came back in, he scared hell out of me. I thought we were going to peel away about fifty feet of dock. But he hit the reverse just right, and I was up in the bow, and he put me right beside a piling as gentle as a little girl's kiss. And when he checked the boat over, he knew just what to look for. He didn't need any survey made. And he bought it right. Twenty-four thousand even."

"Cash?"

Joe True shoved his glass toward the bartender and looked at me and said, "You better tell me again what it is you're after."

"I'm just trying to locate him, Joe. As a favor for a mutual friend."

"I got a little nervous about that deal, and I told Mr. Kimby about being nervous and he checked it out with his lawyer. No matter where Allen got the money, nobody can come back on us."

"Why did the money make you nervous?"

"He didn't look or act the kind of a man to have that kind of money. That's all. But how can you tell? I didn't ask him where he got it. Maybe he's some kind of eccentric captain of finance. Maybe he's thrifty. What he had was five cashier's checks. They were all from different banks, all from New York banks. Four of them were five thousand each, and one was twenty-five hundred. He made up the difference in hundred dollar bills. The agreement was we'd change the name the way he wanted and handle the paper work for him and do some other little things for him, nothing major, get the dinghy painted, replace an anchor line, that sort of thing. While that was being done our bank said the checks were fine, so I met him at the dock and gave him the papers and he took delivery. That man never stopped smiling. Real pale curly hair burned white by the sun and little bright blue eyes, and smiling every minute. The way he handled the boat, I finally figured he was actually buying it for somebody else, even though it was registered to him. Maybe some kind of a tax deal or something like that. I mean it looked that way because of the way those cashier's checks were spread around. He was dressed in the best, but the clothes didn't look just right on him."

"And you haven't seen him since?"

"Haven't seen him or heard from him. I guess he was a satisfied customer."

"How old would you say he is?"

Joe True frowned. "It's hard to say. If I had to guess, I'd say about thirty-eight. And in great shape. Very tough and quick. He jumped off that thing like a cat and he had the stern line and the spring line all rigged while I was making the bow line fast."

I bought Joe his third drink and left him there with his dear friends. Junior Allen was beginning to take shape. And he was beginning to look a little more formidable.

He had left Candle Key in late February with something of value, and had gone to New York and managed to convert it into cash, all of it or some of it, whatever it was. Weeks later he had returned to Miami, bought himself a good hunk of marine hardware and gone back to Candle Key to visit the Atkinson woman. It had required considerable confidence to go back. Or recklessness.

A man with a criminal record shouldn't flaunt money, particularly in an area where an angry woman might be likely to turn him in. Yet, actually, the boat procedure was pretty good. It gave him a place to live. With papers in order and a craft capable of passing Coast Guard inspection, he wasn't likely to be asked too many embarrassing