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JOHN D. MACDONALD

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

THE QUICK RED FOX



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Praise for the Travis McGee series

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“In McGee mysteries and other novels as well, MacDonald’s voice was one of a social historian.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

THE QUICK RED FOX

A Travis McGee NOVEL

John D. MacDonald



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Introduction

Lee Child

Suspense fiction trades on surprising and unexpected twists. Like this one: A boy named John D. 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 metalworking, 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 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, western adventure stories, sports stories, and even some science fiction—but soon enough his lon-

form fiction began to develop some enduring and intertwined themes. From *A Deadly Shade 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 operator 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, predates 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 two poles are the theme of the sensationally good Travis McGee series, which is a canon equalled 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.

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A big noisy wind out of the northeast, full of a February chill, herded the tourists off the afternoon beach, driving them to cover, complaining bitterly. It picked up gray slabs of the Atlantic and smacked them down on the public beach across the highway from Bahia Mar. It rattled loose sand across the windshields of the traffic, came into the cramped acres of docks and boat basin, snapped the burgees and went *hoooo* in the spider-webs of rigging and turn towers. Fort Lauderdale was a dead loss for the tourists that Saturday afternoon. They would have been more comfortable back in Scranton.

I was cozied up in the big lounge of the *Busted Flush*, my houseboat moored at Slip F-1. My electric heat was turned to high-high. I was stretched out on the big yellow couch and clad in ratty old wool slacks and an old Norm Thompson flannel shirt, faded to a sky blue over the treasured years.

A few days earlier I had junked my old speakers in favor of a pair of AR-3's, and had bracket-mounted them on the far wall. The Scott tuner was locked into WAEZ in Miami, and the Fisher amplifier was driving the new speakers very handsomely. They were broadcasting that Columbia recording of Bernstein conducting the Shostakovich *Fifth*, one hell of a big bold heroic piece of music, and I had the gain high enough to do it justice. You could shut your eyes and float on it.

Skeeter was across the room, hunched over her drawing board. She was wearing gray corduroy coveralls, too big for her. All her clothes always seem too big for her. She is thirty, I think, and looks eighteen. She has cobweb blonde hair, constantly adrift, a Raggedy Ann face, and a narrow graceful immature figure. She is not very well organized, but she makes a pretty fair living doing illustrations for children's books under the pseudonym of Annamar. My friend Meyer found her on the beach a year or so ago. That hairy, ugly, charming fellow can walk down a beach and collect a rare people the way anyone else might pick up a left-handed whelk.

She worked with the top of her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth. She was doing line drawings of a dissolute field mouse named Quimby. She was working at my place because they had repainted her apartment three blocks away, and the smell made her nauseous, and she had a deadline to meet. Once upon a time, when I had been feeling shattered by the loss of someone very dear to me, we had drifted sideways into a brief affair. We had found we weren't very good for each other on that kind of basis. We seemed to bring out a talent in each other for chipping away at the weak points. The infighting got a bit bloody, and though we felt obligated to pretend otherwise, it was a relief to both of us to call it off and find our way into a casual and off-handedly affectionate friendship.

At the big parts of the music she would use her drawing pen to help Bernstein conduct, and then go back to mouse work. She had uncovered an unexpected talent for making Navy grooves, and I had a mild and pleasant glow from the ones she had fixed me. She had made her own weaker. Quimby demanded her sober attentions.

Into the resonant blare of the music came the frail little overpowered bing-bong of my bell. I have a button board affixed to a dock post, and a chain across the dock end of my sma

gangplank.

I got up and went and took a look. It was a tall girl out there, a tall girl in a severe dark suit, with a purse that managed to give the same impression as a brief case. She stood erect pretending there was no wind at all. She looked as if she might be going around enrolling people in a business school. As I peered out at her, she punched the button again. There was no hesitancy about her.

I went out onto the rear deck and up the broad short slant of gangplank to face her across the chain. Her survey of me looked inclusive, and I couldn't tell if she registered approval or disapproval. I get both kinds. I am extra-big. I have been out in the weather. I look lazy and am. In the words of a Texas chick one time, I look as if I had been there and back.

She had black hair. Male musicians often wear theirs longer. She had vivid dark eyes, heavy black brows, a rather long face, high flat cheekbones and a ski-jump nose. The mouth saved the face from austerity. It was full and broad and nicely modeled. She looked fashionable, competent and humorless.

"Mr. Travis McGee?" she asked. She had a furry contralto.

"Himself."

"I am Dana Holtzer. I couldn't reach you by phone."

"It's turned off, Miss Holtzer."

"I would like to talk to you about a very personal matter."

Sometimes it does happen that way. She had a money look. No jewelry. Earned money. She looked handsomely employed, and she didn't look as if she was in any kind of a jam. A emissary for somebody who was. Had she come along a couple of months sooner, I could not have cared less. But the kitty was dwindling. I was soon going to have to cast about for some profitable little problem. It is nice when they come walking up and save you the trouble of looking.

But caution is always essential. "Are you sure you're talking to the right guy?"

"Walter Lowery in San Francisco mentioned your name."

"What do you know? How is old Walt?"

"All right, I expect." She frowned. "He said to say he misses playing chess with you."

So it was all right. Walt and I never played chess in our lives. Not against each other, at least. But that was the identification tag, if he ever sent anybody along. There are the nosy ones, and the troublemakers, and the cuties, and the official investigators. It is good to have a way to weed the doubtful ones out.

"So come in out of the wind," I said, unhooking the chain, rehooking it after she had eased by me. She was long-waisted, with sturdy shapely calves, moving with the grace many women with that kind of build have. Her back was flat and erect, her carriage good.

I opened the door and ushered her into the blast of music. Skeeter gave her an absent-minded glance, a vague smile, and continued her work. I left the music on and took Miss Holtzer on through the lounge and past the galley to the little dining booth. I closed the door from the lounge to the galley corridor.

"Coffee? Drink?"

"Nothing, thank you," she said, sliding into the booth.

I poured a mug of coffee for myself and sat opposite her. "I'm not interested in every little thing that comes along," I said.

“We’re aware of that, Mr. McGee.”

“You do know how I operate.”

“I think so. At least, I know what Mr. Lowery said about it. If something has been taken from someone, and there is no way to get it back legally, you will make an effort to get it back—for half its value. Is that correct?”

“I have to know the circumstances.”

“Of course. But I would rather have ... the other party explain it all to you.”

“So would I. Send him around.”

“It’s a woman. I work for her.”

“Send her around.”

“That’s impossible, Mr. McGee. I have to take you to her.”

“Sorry. If she’s in enough trouble to need me, she’s in enough trouble to come ask me herself, Miss Holtzer.”

“But you don’t understand. Really. She just *couldn’t* come here. She would have talked to you if I could have gotten you on the phone. I work for ... Lysa Dean.”

I knew what she meant. That face was too distinctive, even in the darkest sunglasses in town. She wouldn’t want to come on such a private mission with a police escort. And if she came alone, the boobs would recognize her at a hundred paces and come clotting around her, pressing in as close as they could, standing and staring at her with that curious fixed, damn-silly smile, America’s accolade to the celebrity. Ten big movies, four fairly messy marriages, one television series fiasco, and a few high-paid guest spots had made her a household face. Liz Taylor, Kim Novak and Doris Day would take the same stomping among the star-dazed common folk. The public is an untrustworthy animal.

“I can’t imagine Lysa Dean in a situation where she thinks she’d need me.”

I thought I saw a little glimmer of distaste on the rather somber face of Miss Efficiency. “She’d like to talk to you about it.”

“Let me see. Walter did a script for her once upon a time.”

“They’ve been friends ever since.”

“Would you say her problem fits into the way I operate?”

She frowned. “I think so. I don’t know all the details.”

“Aren’t you in her confidence?”

“On most things. But as I said, I don’t know *all* the details of this. It’s been a personal kind of thing. But it is ... something she wants to get back. And it’s valuable to her.”

“I can’t promise anything. But I’ll listen to her. When?”

“Now, if you could manage it, Mr. McGee.” The symphony ended. I got up and went around and turned the set off. When I came back Miss Holtzer said, “We’d rather you didn’t mention this to anyone. Even her name.”

“I was just going to run out and tell a few friends.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve gotten so used to trying to protect her. She’s beginning a promo for *Winning of Chance*, starting Monday. The world premiere will be next Saturday night in eight Miami theaters. We came early hoping for a chance to see you. She’s staying at the house of a friend now. She’ll move over to the hotel penthouse on the beach tomorrow evening. She’ll have a full schedule, starting Monday.”

“Have you worked for her very long?”

“Two years. A little over two years. Why?”

“I wondered what you call yourself.”

“Personal secretary.”

“She tote a big staff around?”

“Not really. On the road like this there’s just me and her personal maid, her hairdresser and the man from the agency. Really, I would rather you asked her the questions. Could you ... get ready to go see her?”

“In Miami?”

“Yes. I have a car waiting, Mr. McGee. If ... I could make a call?”

I took her into the master stateroom. The phone extension is in a compartment in the headboard. She looked up the number in a black leather note book from her big purse. She dialed the operator and made it a credit-card call. “Mary Catherine?” she said. “Please tell her that our friend is coming back with me. No, that’s all. Pretty soon now. Thank you, dear.”

She stood up and looked around the room. I could not tell if the huge bed repelled her or amused her. I was tempted to explain it. It startled me that I should want to tell her that had been part of the furnishings when I had won the craft in a long poker siege in Palm Beach. The man wanted another advance to stay in the game, this last time putting up his Brazilian mistress as collateral, under the plausible assumption that she too went with the boat, but his friends saved me the delicate problem of refusal by leading him gently away from the game.

Miss Holtzer did not look particularly austere. She just looked as if she might put people in handy categories.

She decided she would pour herself some coffee while I changed, if that was permitted. I put on the very infrequent necktie, and a fairly heavy suit. When we went back into the lounge, Skeeter said, “Hey, both of you look at this lousy mouse a minute.”

She showed us the drawing just completed. “This is when Quimby finds out for sure he’s really a mouse. That cat just told him. He’s crushed. He thought he was a real small pedigree dog. But I think maybe he looks more scared than crushed. When you look at it, is it as if he’s scared of the cat?”

“It’s absolutely charming!” Dana Holtzer said. “What a horrid thing, really, to find out that all along you’ve been a mouse.”

“Quimby can’t adjust,” Skeeter said.

They smiled nicely at each other. “Dana Holtzer, Mary Keith—known as Skeeter. We have to run. Skeet, make sure you lock up if I don’t get back before you go.”

“Sure. What’s bugging him is all that trouble learning to bark.”

“Forage if you get hungry.”

But she was back at work, insulated and intent. Miss Holtzer and I headed into the win toward the parking areas. She said, “That’s a dear strange girl, and very talented. Is she your special friend?”

“They’ve just painted her apartment so I told her she could work on the boat. She has a deadline.”

Within another three steps, Miss Holtzer had tucked the escaping loose ends of personality back into her executive secretary shell. I had a memory of how pleasure in the mouse had brought her alive, younger and surprisingly more vivid. But it was not in her manner or habit

to give anything away. She would do her job, reserved, armored, efficient. She was not being paid to react to people, nor to show her own reactions, if any.

A glittering black Chrysler limousine was waiting, tended by a middle-aged man in dove gray uniform with silver buttons. He touched his cap and opened the door for us. He looked like a television U. S. Senator. And he had that uncanny ability of the skilled chauffeur to drift a big car through traffic with such rhythm that the bunglings of other drivers seemed like an untidy and unimportant mirage.

“Miss Dean’s car?” I asked.

“Oh, no. It belongs to the people where we’re staying.”

“When did you get in?”

“Yesterday.”

“Incognito?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a good trick.”

“Chartered airplane,” she said.

There was glass between us and the barbered neck of the skilled driver. Her face was turned away from me, looking placidly out at the gray day.

“Miss Holtzer.”

“Yes?” she said, turning with polite query.

“I’d like to know if I am right or wrong. I get this impression of quiet disapproval.”

I thought I saw a flicker of bleak amusement. “Is that sort of thing so important to you, Mr. McGee?”

“I’ve never thought so.”

“Mr. McGee, in the past two years I’ve been sent on so many curious errands, I would have become quite worn out if I’d tried to make value judgments about them.”

“Then you avoid having opinions?”

“Except where it is expected of me. She pays for opinions, Mr. McGee. Legal opinions, technical opinions, artistic opinions. She listens and makes up her own mind. She doesn’t particularly care for volunteer opinions.”

“And the job pays well?”

“It compensates me for what I do.”

“I guess I better give up.”

With an almost imperceptible shrug, she turned again to look out her window, presenting me with the nice modeling of the strong line of her throat, the neatness of an ear set into her hair, the casualness of cropped black curls, a fringe of black lashes visible beyond the smooth line of her cheek, a faint and unobtrusive and understated fragrance of mild perfume.

The house was on a private island, over a small causeway from one of the main causeways between Miami and Miami Beach. A gardener swung the ornate gate open for us. We turned into a winding crunch of gravel between lush and carefully tailored jungle, rounded a butte of pink and white stucco, parked in a small walled area by a garden.

It seemed to be a back stairway. Miss Dana Holtzer led me up half a flight and into a shadowed hallway. I sat on a Babylonian throne under a black gleam of hanging armor. There was no sound in the house. None. She came back, hatless and purseless, and beckoned to me with all the gravity of a head nurse. I followed her down a paneled and carpeted corridor. She rapped on a fortress door, pushed it open for me and stood aside, saying, "She'll be with you in a moment."

She closed the door and left me alone in what seemed to be a guest suite. I was in a large room with a high ceiling. Plum carpet. Paneling. Seven arched windows along one wall, high narrow windows with leaded panes, deep sills. Black Spanish furniture. The center portion of the room was sunken. At one elevated end was a canopied bed. At the other end was an elevated portion with a conversational grouping of furniture around a small slate fireplace. The sunken portion was furnished in rather formal fashion. On the bed level there were two doorways. One, ajar, opened into a dressing room area. I could see pieces of matched luggage in there. The other door was closed, and I could hear an almost inaudible whisper of running water.

Though the draperies of all the windows were pulled aside, the room was not particularly bright. I went to a window. Tropical trees shaded it. Looking down I could see patches of shaded green lawn. Off to the left, through foliage, I could see one bright corner of a white swimming pool.

The bathroom door opened suddenly and Lysa Dean came out. She was not smaller than I had expected because I was prepared for a woman smaller than she had looked to me on the VistaVision Screen, in living color, in close-up, each slanty gray-green eye as large as a Volkswagen sedan. She came across the bedroom elevation and down the three steps toward me. She made the absolute most of those three steps. She wore flat sandals with gold straps. She wore faun-colored pants in a fine weave. They fitted as tightly as pants, or paint, or tattoo, could fit. She wore a strange furry blouse, with a big scooped neck and three-quarter sleeves. It looked as if Skeeter's Quimby and a couple of hundred of his relatives had contributed their pale belly-fur to this creation. Around her slender throat was knotted a narrow loose kerchief of green silk precisely matching the single jewel she wore, an emerald as big as a sugar cube on the little finger of her left hand.

She came swiftly toward me, hand outstretched, her smile full of the warm delight of a woman welcoming the returning lover. "So good of you to come!" she said in her light-breathy, personal voice. As I took her hand she turned slightly so as to face the bright and shadowed daylight. It is the most cruel light a woman can accept. Her hand was small and dry and warm, a trusting little animal as intimate as her voice.

They have the distinctive occupational tricks. A lot of expressive business with mouth and

eyebrows, animation with gestures.

I could remember, quite vividly, a long conversation with a stunt man named Fedde. Arthritis had forced him out of the business.

“Don’t let anybody tell you they’re not worth the effort,” he had said. “A lot of them aren’t. You got to look close to see which type. They all have to be damned good-looking and well-built. So suppose you get a chance at one who’s a pretty good little actress. Let it go. The thing there, they sublimate. That’s a word I learned once. They take all that steam and they shove it into their work and there isn’t enough left over for bed. Now suppose you got one who *thinks* she’s a hell of an actress, but she’s a ham. You skip her too. She’ll take all that ham and bed with you and be so damn busy watching herself her heart won’t be in it. The ones to watch for, and go a long way out of your way to get, they’re the ones that plain started off with such damn good glands they don’t have to do any acting. The camera picks up how good they’d be. Man, they can’t rest from tracking it down and trying it out. The next one is always going to be the biggest and best yet. They’ve got what you call a real strong interest.

I had the feeling Fedder would approve of this one. I had not expected her to have such a genuine flavor of youthfulness. By every way I could measure it, she had to be about thirty-three. Yet she was a young girl, and not in any forced way. She had the slimness, the clear-eyed look of enormous vitality, the fine-grained and flawless skin, the heavy swing of her burnished hair. Her impact, so carefully measured it seemed unaffected, was of a kind of innocence aware. A gamin sparkle, hinting at a delicious capacity for naughtiness.

But I had known enough of them to know that this was but one role. The enticing woman who is not in the industry will have five or six faces to wear. One like this would have dozens, and this was the one she had momentarily selected for me.

She had the showbiz trick of close-range conversation. Normal people keep their faces a yard apart. Eight inches is the focal distance on the Coast. Eight inches keeps you aware of the girl-breath heat against your chin, and the up-thrust breast-bud an inch and a half from your chest.

“Any friend of Walt’s ...” I said inanely.

“I treasure that man.” She backed away a quarter step to give me a cock of the head and a urchin appraisal. “He said you were big, but he didn’t say how huge, Travis. Trav? He called you Trav, I think. I’m Lee to my friends. Dear Trav, he told me you were big and rough-looking and sour and sometimes dangerous, but he did not tell me you are so terribly attractive.”

“A veritable doll,” I said.

“It’s so wonderful of you to agree to help me.”

“I haven’t.”

She was quite motionless for a thoughtful second, her smile in place. The capped teeth gleamed, between moistness. Green of iris speckled amber near the pupil. Delicate geometry of the hairs of red-gold brows. Fantasy length of the darker lashes. Faintest of fuzz on her upper lip. It was an unusual and grotesquely familiar face, the features slightly sharp, extremely sensuous, unmistakable. With her head slightly bowed, looking up at me through her lashes, the gold-red weight of hair at the right side of her face had swung slightly forward. Suddenly I knew what she reminded me of. A vixen. A quick red fox. I had seen one in heat long ago on an Adirondack morning in spring, pacing along well in front of the do-

fox with a very alert and springy movement, tail curled high, turning to see if he str
followed, tongue lolling from between her doggy grin.

She turned abruptly away, walking toward the elevated part of the room where the chair
and fireplace were. "But you will help me," she said in a small voice.

I followed her. She sat on a small couch and pulled her legs up. She took a cigarette from
table box. I held the light for her. She huffed smoke from the delicate oval nostrils of th
slightly pointed nose, and as I sat in a big chair half facing the couch she smiled across at m
"You are refreshing, Trav McGee."

"How am I managing that, Lee?"

Her shrug and laugh were self-deprecatory. "You don't say what I always hear. I loved yo
in this. I adored you in that. I see every picture you make. You look better off the scree
than on, actually. You know what I mean."

"I'll go through all that when I ask for the autograph."

"You know, you are sour, aren't you? Or are you afraid of seeming to be impressed. C
don't you give a damn? It's a little unsettling, dear."

"Your Miss Holtzer unsettled me the same way."

"Dana is a gem. When she reacts, she lets you know it."

I shrugged. "I loved you in this. I adored you in that. You look just fine in person."

Again she was motionless. It was an odd feeling to be so close to her. It made me aware o
the uncounted millions of men all over the world who had stared at her image, coveted he
lusted after her, mentally stripped her and plundered those silky little loins. I wondered ho
many secret, solitary orgasms had been engineered with her in mind. The unmeasurab
scope and intensity of all that vast and anonymous wanting gave her a curious physic
impact. True, she had spent years being starved, pummelled, flexed, rubbed, plucked
burnished, perfumed and trained into the absolute peak of lovely physical condition. Witho
a chromium ego and a savage will she could not have endured it so long. But one could als
believe that, as sex symbol, she also carried sex to an ultimate otherwise unknown-
providing ecstasies unimaginable, greater heats, deeper spasms, longer agonies than mort
woman could know. And this, of course, was the nonsense a man must guard himself agains
Her physical confidence, approaching arrogance, would lead the unwary to believe it.

"Excuse me, please," she said politely, and hurried the length of the room, toward th
dressing room. A girlish graceful haste, forever eighteen. She came back with a large mani
envelope and put it on the table beside the cigarette box.

"That big chest down there is a bar. If you want to fix yourself anything, I would like som
of the sherry. Just half a glass, please."

As I walked to the bar, she raised her voice and said, "It is so terribly difficult to kno
where to start, dear. You don't seem to make it any easier for me."

"Just tell me the problem. You told Walt, didn't you?"

"Just some of it. But I would guess you want to ... know all of it."

"If I'm to help you."

As I carried the drinks toward her, she said, "Celebrity! If all the ones who'd like to be or
only could know what it means. You become such a target, actually. Slimy schemes to faste
themselves onto you for the free ride. You cannot make a single careless move."

This was the new pose. She sipped her wine. I sat down. The suffering celebrity. Publ

responsibility.

She gave me a sad smile. "It isn't worth it, you know. But you have to get into it as far as you can to realize it isn't worth it. And then it's too late. You can't get out. They still follow you. Garbo. How long since she made a picture? A thousand years, at least. Oh, there have been some satisfactions, of course. But the things I really treasure—contentment, friendship, peace of mind, marriage—none of those things could survive all the rest of it. There is a terrible loneliness, Trav. Like being on top of a mountain, alone."

"They pay you for it."

"And they pay very well indeed. I've had good advice. I have quite a lot of money. Of course, it is invested in a lot of things, but if I should take it all out, it would be quite a large sum. That's why I did try to ... buy my way out of trouble."

"Blackmail?"

She put her glass aside and got up quickly, pacing about in an agitated way. "Can you see how valuable it is to me ... how *essential* to have a little time when I can be myself? Like her with you now. We can talk like two people. I don't have to pose with you. I have to forgive myself sometimes that I am Lysa Dean, and just be plain Lee Schontz from Dayton, Ohio, the fireman's daughter. Sixteen-ten Madison Street." She whirled and stopped with a leg-warm against my knee. "You can understand that basic human need, can't you?"

"You can't live up to the public image at all times."

"*Thank* you for understanding!"

This was another role. I guessed it was a speech out of an old movie, edited to fit the present need.

"And when I do ... forget, that's when I'm most vulnerable."

"Sure."

"I so want you to try to understand me. I'm not really very complex, Trav. I am the same as everyone. I have times when I feel desperate and self-destructive. I have times when I do foolish things. There are times when I do not give a damn what happens to me."

"Sure."

She reached and drew her fingertips across my cheek and whirled away and sat on the couch again. "I know you're not a prude. I can sense that. This has to be as if I'm talking to my doctor or my lawyer. But I do feel so terribly shy about this."

"What happened?"

She sighed and made a rueful face. "A man happened to me. Of course. He was a very exciting chap. Exciting to me, at least. It happened a year ago last July, over eighteen months ago. We'd just finished shooting *Jack and the Game*. I was literally exhausted, but I went on with Carl. Carl Abelle. He had a ski school. We'd never had a chance to really be alone. He found a place for us. An absolutely fantastic little house. Do you know California? It was just below Point Sur, and clinging to the rock by its fingernails. Friends of his named Chipman own it. They were in Switzerland. They have another house there. It was just the two of us ..."

Her voice trailed off into uncertainty.

"Yes?"

"Trav, I am under the most terrible disciplines most of the time. I do work very hard."

"So when you let go, you let go?"

“More than most, I guess. Just a little time of not watching every ounce and every quart inch, every blemish and drink and calorie and bruise ... God damn it, to be a woman for change. Fry eggs, let my hair go, get stoned, have a ball. I’m naturally a very passionate woman. But I keep it all under control. Until a time like that a year and a half ago. With Carl. That’s what I try to do. Get away like that, with a certain kind of man. Then everything that’s been saved up ...”

“Birds and bees. I didn’t think you went into a convent when you had time off, Miss Dear. I don’t follow this routine.”

“It’s just to explain how things happened. It was such a very *private* place. Carl would drive off to buy food and liquor. There were steps cut into the stone, down to a little beach way down that you couldn’t use at high tide. There was a terrace on the ocean side, twenty feet square, about. It was a little offset so you could get morning sun too. A low broad wall around it. And a great stack of weatherproofed sun mattresses and pillows in all kinds of colors. We’d arranged it so we could have three weeks alone. Maybe that was too long. I guess it was. We were marvelously right for each other, in a purely physical way. We knew that before we went there, of course. Except on a ski slope or in bed, Carl isn’t very stimulating. It was very intense for about a week, I guess. Day and night all mixed up. Eat when you’re hungry, sleep when you’re sleepy. When the edge was gone, we both started drinking more. And we spent more and more time on the terrace in the sun. I knew I was getting too brown, but I was too lazy and relaxed to give a damn. I was drinking a lot of vodka. Hot sun and vodka kept me in a sort of permanent daze. We’d make love there in the sun, all slow and sweaty and, I don’t know, remote somehow. I had a tube pregnancy when I was just a kid and damned near died and I don’t have to worry about taking care of anything. The thing is, we felt so *private*. You’d see a boat way out, or an airplane far away, or hear a truck sometimes on the highway. The phone was cut off. I had a little radio. You have to understand that nothing seemed important, absolutely nothing at all. Do you understand that, Trav?”

“I’ve been there.”

“Anyway, it must have been just about at the end of two weeks, we needed things and Carl drove to town to get them. He left in the early afternoon sometime. And he was gone so long I began to get damned annoyed at him. I belted the vodka pretty good, so by the time he did come back, I was getting kind of sloppy and confused. He came skidding back into the driveway with two cars following him, and the whole drunken bunch came marching into the house bellowing some goddam German skiing song. Five fellows and three girls. He’d know one of the girls up at the Valley. He ran into them in town, and had drinks with them, and decided we should have a house party. They damned near fell over when they saw who his girl was. They’d brought tons of food and beer and liquor and cigarettes from town. I was sore at him, but I thought that as soon as they had recognized me the damage was done, anyway, and the hell with it. I guess I was getting bored with Carl and I lost any sense of caution. They were swingers, every one. The girls were darling. The fellows were fun. I guess there’s no good way to avoid telling you all, dear. It was a very scrambled evening, all things considered, and by late afternoon the next day the last holdout, the girl they called Whippy, she got tight enough to let Sonny peel her out of her swim suit and get her into the fun and games on the terrace. It just seemed to be a crazy time for everybody, and nobody seemed

care much, and you saw everything and did everything through a kind of sleepy crazy haze so that in my memory it's all jumbled up. It was the first and last time I was ever in a situation like that. It's sort of standard practice on the Riviera, with those car-light signals and honk signals to get recruits and all. It didn't offend me. In some ways it was very exciting. But it was just too dangerous for anybody in my position. And I hadn't *wanted* it to happen. Car brought them back to the house and it just went on from there, and lasted, oh, four days or so, I guess. When I got back to Brentwood it took me *weeks* to get back in shape. It all seemed like a dream. Then one day toward the end of August I got a big envelope in the mail. There were twelve photographs in it. Eight by ten glossies. There is a great deal of difference between remembering something and seeing it ... like that. Seeing yourself ... God! I flipped me out at lunch."

"It came by mail?"

"Yes. To my home. God only knows how Dana didn't get to it first. There was a note with it. I saved it. I put it in my wall safe. Here it is."

She took it out of the envelope and handed it to me. It was done with a carbon ribbon on an electric machine, with several strikeovers.

"Save the envelope?"

"Not that one. It was mailed at the main post office in Los Angeles. Not special or anything like that. Not even marked Personal on the outside. The address was typed with the same type as that note. No return address. Go on. Read it."

It read as follows: Lysa, dear: You are practical. You know how the industry makes books. So you have no choice, of course. I have ten complete sets of the enclosed and a good idea of how to distribute them. I recommend the investment. Installment plan, ducks. Ten thousand in used hundreds each time. Wrap in plain white paper. Tie securely. Each Sunday night starting a week from next Sunday, you or your dark secretarial type takes a drive. At midnight, precisely, pull into the Narana Kai Drive-in at Topanga Beach. Order something, then walk alone with the packet in plain view, over to the public pavilion. Walk to the far edge of the concrete, next to the public phone booths. A phone will begin to ring. Count the rings carefully. Wait and it will ring again the same number of times. Go back to your car. Leave the drive-in at exactly twelve-thirty. Take note of the exact mileage on your speedometer. If it says, for example, eight and six tenths and the phone rang seven times when the mileage ends in five and six tenths, (simple addition, dear) be ready. You will be heading west on 101. Be over in the right lane, your right window open, packet in your left hand, right hand. Look for a light ahead and off to the right. Slow to thirty-five and get just as far right as you can. When you see a little green light blink twice, toss the packet out onto the shoulder immediately. If it blinks red twice, take the money home and come back the following Sunday. Each time you will receive the negative of one picture and all the prints made from that negative. They will come in the mail. If all goes well, and if you have no clever and silly ideas, we should be through with this whole affair in twelve weeks.

"So damned complicated," she said.

"Actually pretty shrewd. Two people could manage it with very little risk. One at the drive-in and pavilion to check you or Miss Holtzer out, then after you've heard the ring on the phone up the road for his buddy to get into place at the designated spot. He gets a chance to see that nobody is hiding in your car. He follows you out of the lot, tails you until it looks

safe, then passes you and gets there first and gives a headlight signal to his buddy to use the green lens on the flashlight. Not bad at all. Very difficult to trap them. What went wrong?"

"Nothing. At least not then. I paid. One night there was a red light. I don't know why. It took thirteen weeks. I got the stuff in the mail. The worst ones came toward the last. Darlene made the deliveries. Her nerves are better than mine, I guess."

She jumped to her feet, flushing. "Don't be dull, McGee. Close to seven million went into *Winds of Chance*. Risk money. The character who wrote that note knows this industry. He knew how I had to jump. It isn't like the old days, where you could count on studio protection. Each picture is a separate packaging operation. There are just about ten men these days who can put the really big packages together. If each one of them got a set of those prints, why should they take any future chances on me? Those pictures are poisonous. What a hundred and twenty thousand compared to my potential? I liquidated some holdings that weren't doing so good, and took my tax loss, and paid off. Don't tell *me* what I should have done!"

It was a good act and I had to admire it. "How can I help you if all you give me is a smokescreen?"

"What the *hell* do you mean!" she shouted.

"All the industry cares about is money in the bank. Your name on a picture puts money in the bank. Just like Liz, Frankie, the Swede, Mitchum, Ava. They have not been dear little buttercups all the way. The days of the Arbuckle effect are long gone, dear. In our culture there is going to be no huge concerted public censure to drive you off the wide screens. If you get a little rancid, the PR people have you endow a dog shelter, and all America loves you. Drop the act."

The faked indignation was turned off in an instant. She sat again, looked at me with sullen speculation. "Smart ass," she said.

"What is it, then, that made you pay off?"

"A few little things. A while back I swung my weight around too much. It delayed the wrap-up and bumped the budget, and some people decided maybe they didn't want to work with me. But I smartened up and settled down. I could read what it said on the wall. You know, like Monroe and Brando. But it left them edgy. Also, there've been a couple of little things from time to time. Not as bad as those pictures, but ... along that line. It just didn't seem to be the right time to make them feel any more insecure."

"And?"

"Boy, you really want everything, don't you?"

"I've learned that it helps."

"I have a very dear friend. He's very devout and very conservative and he owns great big vulgar hunks of California and Hawaii. If he can get the right paper signed by the Vatican and get loose, I'll never have to take any crap from anybody again as long as I live. And one of those sets of prints would have gone to one man who would have felt obligated to give my friend a look at them. And that would have torn it."

"So those are the real stakes?"

She moistened her lips. "Under community property, one half of about eighty million, honey. I am his dear faithful little darlin'. It made the whole thing a lot more ... chance. Otherwise I would have borrowed some muscle from an old buddy in Vegas and turned the

loose on this clown photographer. They'd be smart enough to handle that, but they're not smart enough to handle what I need now. Actually, if Mr. X had no knowledge of my friend and how long it takes to bull something through that Vatican crowd, he made a very stupid pitch. But with my friend in the background, there was just too much chance it might backfire. Before you bet, you count what's in the pot. All my potential plus my friend's heavy purse. So I paid off."

"And hoped that was the end of it. And it wasn't. Incidentally, can he clear you with his church?"

"I was never married in his faith, so nothing counts. I get a clean bill. By the way, McGee Dana doesn't know a thing about my plans for my friend."

I asked her how she thought the pictures had been taken. "It had to be a long lens," she said. "You can see the flattening and foreshortening effect. Off to the left, south of the house I remember a little rocky ridge higher than the house with some knotty little trees clinging to it. It had to be from there. The angles match. But he had to be part mountain goat, and it had to be a tremendous lens."

"Is there any clue at all in that letter itself, any hint that's made you think of a specific person?"

"No. I read it over and over. He's been around the industry in some connection, and I think he tried to sound as if he knew me, but he calls me Lysa instead of Lee. That could be a cover-up, of course. And it has a phoney kind of limey slant to it, calling me ducks."

"What size were the negatives?"

"Little. Like so." She indicated a 35mm frame size.

"You checked them against the prints each time?"

"Sure did. But in a lot of cases the prints were just an enlargement of part of the negative, even less than half sometimes."

"So you were all paid up well over a year ago. And you thought it was over. When was the next contact?"

"Two months ago. Less than that. Early in January. An old friend, trying to make a comeback, was opening at The Sands in Vegas, and a bunch of us were rallying around to give him a good sendoff. It was in the papers that we were all going to be there. Dana was with me. We had a suite at the Desert Inn. Somebody left this envelope for me at the desk at The Sands. I guess they thought I was staying there. They sent it over. Dana got it. I was just waking up from a nap. She came in with the damndest expression on her face and handed it to me. She had opened it. It was another set of the pictures. There wasn't any return address. The desk had no idea who had left it off. Dana wanted to quit right then and there. She is a strange gal. I had to explain the whole thing the way I explained it to you, Trav. She knew right away that it was the same thing that had cost me all the money. She still wanted to quit. I had to beg her to stay. Our relationship hasn't been the same since she saw the pictures. I don't blame her. I'd still hate to lose her. This is the envelope. You can see how it was addressed. Somebody just cut my name off the front of a fan magazine, something like that. Here is the note that was with it."

It was quite different. Individual words and letters had been cut from newsprint and newspaper stock and pasted to cheap yellow copy paper. It said: Shameless whore of Babylon you will be cut down by the sword of decency and money will not save your dirty life this time

but you better have money ready you whore of evil I will come to you and you will no the truth and I will set you free.

She hugged herself. "That one just scares the hell out of me, Trav. It's kind of sick and crazy and terrible. It just isn't the same person. It can't be."

"So you went and saw Walter?"

"No. I just got more and more jittery the more I thought of it. I'm still shook. I was at a party at the Springs and I got a little stoned and made a scene and dear Walt was there and he took me for a walk. I hung onto him and cried like a baby and told him my troubles. He said maybe you would help. I guess you can say something was stolen from me. My privacy or something. And somebody wants to steal my career or maybe my life. I don't know. I've been carrying cash around with me. In thousand-dollar bills. Fifty of them. I don't expect you to get back what I paid. But if you could, you could keep half. And if you can get that nut out of me, you can have the money I'm carrying around."

"Are the pictures in that envelope?"

"Yes. But do you have to see them?"

"Yes."

"I was afraid of that. I am not going to let you see them until you say you'll try to help me. Every time I think of that note I feel like a scared kid."

"It's a very cold trail, Lee."

"Walter said you are clever and tough and lucky, and he said being lucky is the most important." She gave me an odd look. "I have this feeling that my luck is running out, darling."

"How many people know about this?"

"The four of us, dear. You and Dana and me and Walter. But you know more than the other two. Not another soul. I swear."

"Wouldn't it be logical for you to tell Carl Abelle?"

"Sweetie, when one of those things is over, it is over all the way. Enough is enough forever."

"Could he have set you up for it?"

"Carl? Definitely no. He's a very sunny type. Very simple needs and very simple habits. Totally transparent, really."

"Usually I gamble expenses, then take them off the top before the fifty-fifty split. But that is a little too chancy for that."

"Expenses guaranteed up to five thousand," she said without hesitation, "and when that's gone we'll talk some more."

"Walt must have said I could be trusted."

"What other choice do I have? That's one thing about this. There hasn't been any trouble making decisions. There's been just one way to go. Will you try? Please? Pretty please?"

"Until it looks hopeless."

She scaled the envelope into my lap. "God knows I'm not the shy type, sweetie, but I don't think I could watch anybody look those over. I'll take a walk. Take your time."

She went to the heavy door and let herself out quietly.

Three

After a little time I put the twelve photographs back into the envelope. I took a slow turn around the room. I am too big a boy to be churned up by the explicit of other people's kicks.

Nor did I feel any compulsion to make moral judgment. These were modern animals caught in black and white at their silly play. Such sport was not for me, and very probably not for anyone whose friendship I claimed. There seemed to be some kind of severe selection involved. An acceptance of that presupposed an inability to accept or believe in a lot of other things. Personal dignity for one.

But something still bothered me, something I could not quite define. So I took them out and shuffled through them again. The clue was there. It was the terrible loneliness on the faces. Each one of them, in all that lazy confusion of intimacies, in that lexicon of clinical descriptions, looked utterly, desperately alone.

And they were beautiful people. Lysa Dean was the featured player in every shot, and her body was as superb as its promise.

I felt as if I had glimpsed the edge of some great paradox. The grotesque ultimate of togetherness is the final loneliness of the human spirit. And once you had been that far out on that barren limb, there was no chance of ever coming all the way back.

I shrugged and looked at them again to see if they told me anything about time lapse. I put them away again.

From the varying lengths of shadow in the pictures, from the changing positions on the sunny terrace, I could tell that they had been taken over a matter of hours, perhaps on separate days.

Soon she returned, coming in with a look half challenge, half calculated demureness. "Well?" she said.

"It doesn't look as if it was a hell of a lot of fun."

That response startled her. She stared at me. "Oh, you are so *right*! You know, it seems to me as if it was all a thousand years ago. I guess I've been trying to fade it out of my mind. Christ, there's kind of a sickly excitement about it, I guess. But what I remember now is being constantly cross and irritable and impatient. And sleepy. Just terribly sleepy and never being allowed to sleep long enough, and having the feeling that all the rest of them were just one ... one *thing* somehow. Not like the pictures."

"Are these exactly like the other pictures you got?"

"They are the twelve exact same shots, but not exactly like the others. These are fuzziy and grayer, sort of. Not as sharp. But I didn't save any of the others to compare, of course."

"We have to look through these together so you can give me the names to go with the faces, Lee, and tell me what you know about each one."

"I suppose it has to be done."

"Like a trip to the dentist. I think there's at least one fair picture of every other person in the group."

She made a face. "Those pictures are such a big boost to my pride, Travis. It does something for a girl to look like a fifty-peso floozy in a back-room circus in Juarez."

I turned a light on and we sat at the desk in the sunken part of the room. I found a pen and paper. I pointed to the pictures and asked the questions. She answered in a thin smothered breathy voice, her face half turned away. I took the following notes.

1. Carl Abelle—about 27—six-footer—husky—blond—has left the Valley—try Mohawk Lodge near Speculator, New York
2. Nancy Abbott—about 22—tall, dark, slender, heavy drinker, good singing voice, believed to have been divorced perhaps daughter of an architect. Took ski lessons from Abelle at Sun Valley. Believed to be a house guest of ...
3. Vance and Patty M'Gruder, perhaps of Carmel, married couple in middle twenties, apparently well-off, Vance a sailboat buff, ocean racing etc., have house in Hawaii (?), husband very tanned, short, broad, muscular, going premature bald, wife lush & fair, very long blonde hair, quarrelsome, strong English accent.
4. Cass—could be first name, last name or nickname. Seemed to have known M'Gruders previously. About thirty. Dark hairy, handsome, very powerful. Amusing (?). A painter, perhaps. Friend of ...
5. Sonny, a little younger than Cass, slender, cold-eyed, flavor of violence, untalkative, occupation unknown, who he brought along ...
6. Whippy. About nineteen then. Copper curls, freckles, perhaps a waitress or clerk, scared of Sonny.
7. Two college boys from the east on a summer trip, apparently joined the group at the bar where Abelle ran into Nancy Abbott. Boys about 20 or 21, Harvey a big blond cheery one and Richie a smaller dark nutty one. Cornell.

On the clearest prints of each I had marked the corresponding number from my notes. I could sense Lee's relief when I put the photographs back into the envelope.

"Who got it all started?" I asked her.

She tightened up again. "Why? What do you mean?"

"I don't think a camera gets that lucky. Somebody had to set you up. Or maybe the real target was somebody else, and you turned out to be a bonus."

"It was a long time ago, and I was tight most of the time."

"Tell me what you can remember of how it got started."

She got up slowly and went over and rested her fists on a windowsill, staring out, the foxtail hair softly backlit. I leaned a shoulder against the wall by the window. She talked. Her voice was small. I could not see much of her profile because of the way the hair swung forward. Round of forehead, soft snub tip of nose. I did not press her. I let her find her own words in her own time. Her memory was more acute as regards textures than incident. Six men and four gals that first evening and night. Four places to go—two bedrooms, a long couch in the living room, the leathery sunpads on the night terrace. It was a prowling thing then, pursuits and tensions, Lysa Dean a primary target for all but Carl, low lights and ultimate arrangements, and some re-pairings when partners slept.

In phrases and fragments, theatrical sighs and beautifully timed hesitations, she painted the flavor of the hot bright terrace on that first full day of houseparty. Pitchers of Bloody Mary vodka haze, arrows of white sunlight through squinting eyes, compulsive beat of the music on the portable radio, oil and aromatics of sun lotion, jokes and tipsy laughter. A game of forfeits, with the rules rigged so that to play was to lose, and to lose was to soon be naked.

In half-sleep, mildly and amiably drunk, after the game had ended, she had fended off the increasing insistence of Cass, whining at him irritably when he became too bold. Finally propping herself up to drink again, she saw several sound asleep, and saw others who were accepting what she had refused. So, squeezing her eyes hard shut to achieve the illusion of

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