



A MAC TRAVIS NOVEL

WOOD'S WALL

STEVEN BECKER

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By
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Chapter 1

Pete looked over his shoulder at the spread. The fishing lines glistened in the sun as they trailed behind the 24-foot boat trolling southwest through the light chop of the Gulf Stream. The wind was light, the water glassy with a gentle swell. Satisfied the lines were running true, he returned his focus to the water. He looked over at his friends, lulled into a state of semi-consciousness by the motion of the boat and the beers they'd drank. They'd been hammering beers all day. He wondered how it had taken this long for them to pass out. It'd been a good day with plenty of Mahi Mahi in the fish box. He was thinking about calling it a day and heading back in.

"Birds at one o'clock!" he yelled. He had been scanning the water for any sign of life; birds and debris were the ticket for bait which led to bigger fish. Dan and Jeff popped awake. "C'mon guys - one more - let's go." Pete steered toward the birds while Jeff checked the lines. The three friends had fished together long enough that they had the smoothness of a well-oiled machine, each knowing their jobs. The boat moved closer to the birds, clearly working some bait on the surface. The three men watched as the birds crashed and soared, intent on the bait below, as the boat pulled through the bait pod.

The clicker buzzed as one of the reels gave line. "Fish on!" Pete continued the course and speed to set the hook and see if they could get another fish to hit one of the four remaining baits. "It's pretty good size. Let's pull in the other lines."

Dan grabbed the rod with the fish and held it high to keep it clear of the other lines. He left the drag loose, letting the fish take some line off as Jeff brought in the rods. Pete circled the boat around as Dan reeled. The fish jumped, revealing itself, then crashed and sounded. Dan continued to bring in line. The fish was close now but was startled when it saw the boat and pulled harder, the drag whizzing as line came off the reel. Dan let it run, sweat dripping from his brow, waiting for the inevitable as the fish jumped and crashed sideways into the water, irritated by the hook and the pull of the line. This was the crux of the fight. The fish would soon lose energy.

They went back and forth, the fish jumping, Dan patiently bringing it closer. "He's ready!" he finally yelled.

At that, Jeff grabbed the gaff and stood by Dan at the side of the boat as Pete drove, watching the water; keeping the fish parallel with the boat. The boat moved slowly through the water, the exhausted fish, its electric blue color now half-green with fatigue, slid next to the boat. Jeff lowered the gaff into the water and, with a swift pull, set the point into the fish. He hefted it quickly onto the boat, and then into the waiting fish box, and the struggle was over.

"Damn boys! Must go a little over 30 pounds," Dan said as he closed the box and offered up a round of beers. High fives and cans tabs popping marked the end of the bout.

They were stowing gear and spraying off the deck, removing the fish blood before the tropical sun baked it on the deck. "Give it another pass?" Pete asked.

"Something in the water over there!" Jeff called out, pointing to the starboard side of the boat. Pete scanned the water, following Jeff's gaze. He changed course and directed the boat toward the object bobbing in the waves. Debris was common in the Gulf Stream, and a great fish attractant. In their experience, anything in the water could hold fish, even something as small as a crab trap buoy with a piece of line attached might hold fish.

The object took shape as they got closer, the sun reflecting off the brown plastic, shining in the sun, wrapped tight around a square object.

"That's not trash," Dan said from the bow. They were fifty feet from it, but it was already obvious that they were looking at something more than a crab trap or piece of flotsam. "Looks fresh in the water, too. Let's grab it and see what it is."

Pete slowed the engine and coasted up to the package. Maybe two feet square, it hadn't been in the water long. Dan leaned over the gunwale and gaffed the package. He struggled with the weight to get it over the side. Finally it landed on the deck and sat there, undisturbed. The three fishermen stared at it.

"That's a square grouper. Let's open it and see what we've got." Jeff said.

"Make it quick," Pete said, scanning the horizon. The level-headed one of the group, he wasn't seeing this as treasure, but as danger. If it was out here, someone was looking for it. Waterproofed packages didn't just appear in the Gulf Stream.

Jeff slid the knife through the outer wrapping, opening it to reveal white paper known as house wrap in the home building industry. As the waterproof fabric opened, small bundles individually wrapped in brown plastic revealed themselves. The size of bricks, neatly stacked, they spilt onto the deck.

"Open one up," Dan said, excited at the prospect. "It's either drugs or money." He reached for a brick.

"We ought to throw them back. This looks like trouble to me." Pete continued to scan the horizon.

"Oh calm down, you freakin' pussy. Figures you're an insurance guy. This has been in the water overnight at least. There's no one here." Dan slit one open, ignoring his friend. "Yes." He held up the opened package for Jeff and Dan to see. Cocaine sparkled in the sunlight. He brought it down to examine it. The white powder, caked into a brick had the initials DV pressed into it.

Pete leaned over Dan's shoulder, staring intently at the item. "Well whoever DV is, he's gonna want this back," he said. Before he could say anything else, he was interrupted by the radio.

"*Coastguard Station Key West to ...*" Pete jumped and scooped several bricks into his arms. He was about to start tossing bricks back in.

But Jeff stopped him. "There's no one here. The radio call was *not* about us. Calm down and let's figure out what to do here."

"Party is what we do here," Dan said. He took a knife and carved a corner of the brick. Powder fell off onto the blade, and he raised it to his nose and snorted. He laid his head back waiting for the drug to take effect. "Whoa, that's amazing." He passed the knife to Jeff.

Several long minutes passed as they sat on the deck, staring at the bundles. Dan had counted and stacked them into ten piles of five bricks, each about a pound. Jeff, the

numbers guy, tried to do the math in his head, breaking the pounds to ounces, then to grams, multiplying by one hundred - the street price for a gram. In the end, though, the calculation was too much for the number of beers he'd consumed. He just shrugged, saying that whatever it was, that much cocaine was worth a lot of money.

"We gotta move." Pete said as he scanned the horizon.

Four boats were coming at them. Not that it was any surprise; any boat sitting still in the Gulf Stream was like a magnet. Other boats thought they were hooked up and headed toward them, hoping to draw the school of fish away ... or at least pick up a straggler. The boats were getting closer, some running at full speed. Two of the boats were clearly fishing charters, their fly bridges visible from a distance. Another smaller fishing boat's outriggers dipped, almost hitting the waves, as it cruised towards them. The last boat was different. A custom paint job, yellow hull with red highlights, its shape that of a cigarette boat.

All three men were staring at the racing boat now. "Get some baits out. Start trolling," Pete said as he set the boat in gear and steered a course away from the yellow boat. "They all think we're on fish and that cigarette boat doesn't look like he's got a rod on it."

The fishing boats turned away as soon as they saw the boat deploy lines and resume trolling. Whatever they thought might be there was probably gone. The yellow boat maintained its collision course.

"Cover that thing." Pete yelled.

Dan and Jeff grabbed the bricks and tossed them into the fish cooler. They had just stuffed the packaging into the trash bin when the boats passed, only feet separating them. A tall dark skinned man eyed each of them individually, then scanned the boat. He made a pistol with his fingers and fired an imaginary shot at them. Satisfied he pressed down on the throttle and moved on. A collective sigh came from the men.

"That's one scary dude - and you know what he was looking for." Pete said.

"Well he's gone now." Dan said as he went for the cooler and grabbed the open brick. He huddled with Jeff again each snorting off the knife.

"He knows what we look like. I say we toss all this and call it a good fishing day. Nothing but trouble's going to come out of keeping it." Pete said hoping the others would agree.

"No, don't think so." Dan said as he looked at Jeff who was nodding in agreement.

The two men repacked the bricks in the fish box, below the ice, and covered it with fish.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTER

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