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JOHN D. MACDONALD

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

THE EMPTY COPPER SEA



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John D. MacDonald

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Praise for the Travis McGee series

“There’s only one thing as good as reading a John D. MacDonald novel: reading it again. As a writer way ahead of his time, his Travis McGee books are as entertaining, insightful, and suspenseful today as the moment I first read them. He is the all-time master of the American mystery novel.”

—JOHN SA

“One of the great sagas in American fiction.”

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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 EMPTY COPPER SEA

A *Travis McGee* NOVEL

John D. MacDonald



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NEW YORK

The Empty Copper Sea is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Introduction

by 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 on each Sunday ... to keep a record of your expenditures as a training for your college days."

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

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

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

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

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

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

And we know from what he wrote that he felt he had something to say to the world. His early stuff was whatever put food on that battered table—detective stories, western adventure stories, sports stories, and even some science fiction—but soon enough his long-form fiction began to develop some enduring and intertwined themes. From *A Deadly Shade*

Gold, a Travis McGee title: “The only thing in the world worth a damn is the strangest, touching, pathetic, awesome nobility of the individual human spirit.” From the stand-alone thriller *Where Is Janice Gantry?*: “Somebody has to be tireless, or the fast-buck operators would asphalt the entire coast, fill every bay, and slay every living thing incapable of carrying a wallet.”

These two angles show up everywhere in his novels: the need to—maybe reluctantly, possibly even grumpily—stand up and be counted on behalf of the weak, helpless, and downtrodden, which included people, animals, and what we now call *the environment*—which was in itself a very early and very prescient concern: *Janice Gantry*, for instance, 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.

LEE CHILD

New York

2012

~~—Dedicated to all the shining memories of those last two passenger ships which flew the United States Flag, the Monterey and the Mariposa, and to the mariners who sailed aboard them.~~

A man needs only to be turned around once with his eyes shut in this world
to be lost.

—THOREAU

Van Harder came aboard the *Busted Flush* on a hot bright May morning. My houseboat was her home mooring, Slip F-18 at Bahia Mar, Fort Lauderdale. I was in the midst of one of my periodic spasms of energy born of guilt. You go along thinking you are properly maintaining your houseboat and your runabout, going by the book, keeping a watchful eye on the lines, the bilge, the brightwork, and all. But the book was written for more merciful climates than Florida, once described to the King of Spain by DeSoto, as “an uninhabitable sandspit,” even though at the time it was inhabited by quite a lot of Indians.

Suddenly everything starts to snap, rip, and fall out, to leak and squeal and give final gasp. Then you bend to it, or you go live ashore like a sane person.

Crabbing along, inch by inch, I was replacing the rail posts around the whole three sides of the sun deck, port, starboard, and stern, using a power drill and a power screwdriver to screw the four big screws down through the stainless flange at the foot of each post. I had sore knees, a lame wrist, and a constant drip of sweat from nose and chin. I wore an old pair of tennis shorts, and the sun was eating into my tired brown back.

It had been six, maybe seven years since I'd seen Van Harder. He had owned the *Queen Bee III* in charter-boat row. He had been steady and he could find fish, and so had less trouble finding customers than a lot of the others. I knew he wasn't going to overwhelm me with a lot of conversation. I knew he'd had some bad luck, but that was a long time ago. A frugal man, he had saved his money and finally sold the *Queen Bee III* to Rane Fazzo, had acquired a shrimp boat and a large debt, and had moved around to the other coast.

I finished the post, walked over, and mopped my face on the towel. We sat on the two pilot chairs, swiveled away from the instrument panel to face astern, toward all the shops and towers of Bahia Mar, both of us shaded by the folding navy top.

Van Harder was a lean, sallow man. Tall, silent, and expressionless. I had never seen him without a greasy khaki cap with a bill. Florida born for generations back, from that tough, tireless, malnourished, merciless stock which had scared the living hell out of the troops they had faced during the War Between the States. His eyes were a pale watery blue. He was about fifty, I guessed.

“They tell me Fazzo is fishing out of Marathon now,” he said.

“Doing okay, from what I hear.”

Silence.

“Meyer still around?”

“Still around. He had some errands over in town today.”

Silence.

“Guess you heard I lost the *Queen Bee Number Four*. Shrimp boat. Sixty-five foot.”

“Yes, I remember now. Wasn't that four years or so ago?”

“Two month shy of five year. Run down by a phosphate ship headed for Tampa. Forty miles west of Naples. Three in the morning. Lost two men. One of them had the helm. No way to tell what happened.”

“Insurance?”

He spat over the rail, downwind, with excellent accuracy and velocity. "Enough to pay off what I owed on her. Got a job hired captain on another shrimper. Bigger. New. Hula Marine Enterprises."

"Hula?"

"That's the *h* and *u* off the front of Hubbard and the *l* and *a* off the front of Lawless. Hubbard Lawless. Hula run six shrimp boats at the time, and seven by the time they sold off a couple of years ago. What happened was Hub seen the handwriting on the wall, and he sold out to Weldron, which is a part of Associated Foods, own markets and all. I could have stayed on with Weldron, like most of the others did, except the ones so old they would have been in retirement too quick, and Weldron wouldn't take them. But Hub Lawless, he offered me a job as skipper of the *Julie*. Real nice cruiser."

"I've seen her over at Pier Sixty-six, way out at the end. Nice."

"Dutch built. Big twin diesels. Fast. Good range. White with blue trim. How'd you know it was the same *Julie*?"

"I remember that name. Lawless. I asked who the owner was."

"If it was a year ago, I was captaining her. Year ago April. Had some time to come over here and see who was around, how things were going. Didn't happen to run into you the other day, McGee."

"But this time you looked me up." Not quite a question, but at least a leading remark. He sailed right by him. No response. I slumped in the chair, chin on my chest, ankles crossed, staring patiently at my big brown bare feet, at some paler cleat marks on the outside of the left ankle, and at the deep curving ugly scar down the outside of my right thigh.

"Funny thing about it all," he said, "was that Hub took me on because he knowed I was steady. The captain he had before, I won't mention no names, he got into the whiskey and he took a cut for himself when he ordered supplies, and he had brought women aboard when Hub was off on business trips."

"Why do you say that's funny?"

"Funny meaning strange how it came out, is all. I become a born-again Christian when I was twenty-eight years old. Clawed my suffering way up out of the black depths of sin and walked in love and brotherhood with our good Lord Jesus. Now Hub knew that. And he respected that. Until that night he never had no women aboard except his wife and his daughter."

"What night?"

He turned and gave me a long, watery blue stare. "The night Hub Lawless got drowned. What night you think I was talking about? There wasn't a newspaper in Florida didn't have the whole thing in it."

"When did it happen?"

"March twenty-two. Fell off the *Julie* somehow."

"I've been gone since early March, Van. I got back a week ago. Duke Davis had a party down in the Grenadines on that big ketch of his, the *Antsie*, and he had a bad fall and tore up his back, and he cabled me to come down and help him bring the *Antsie* all the way home. I didn't have any time to read the papers or listen to the news."

"Thought you look darker than I remembered."

"What's this all about, Van?"

He gave it about thirty seconds of thought before answering. "I know maybe more than should about the time you he'ped out Arthur Wilkinson when he was way down, and it was right after you he'ped him, he married Chookie McCall. What I heard that time was that somebody lost something important to them, you'd try to get it back, and if you did, you keep half what it's worth."

"That's close enough. So?"

He leaned toward me, just a little. I sensed that this was something he had thought about very carefully, turning it this way and that, not certain whether he was being a fool. His wisdom was the sea. So he took onto himself more dignity.

"They is stolen from me my good name, McGee."

"I don't see how or what—"

"Now you wait a minute. I got marked down as a drunken man, a fool who lost the own overboard and nearly lost his vessel. They had an inquiry and held I was negligent. I haven't got my papers and I can't work at my trade. I have talked it over with Eleanor Ann, who has got a nursing job there in Timber Bay, and she says if it is what I want to do, she'll help out. I would say that by and large, my good name is worth twenty thousand dollars anyway, so what I'll do, I'll give you a piece of paper. You can word it any way you want, and I'll sign it. It will say that if you can find some way to show it wasn't my fault at all, I will pay you ten thousand dollars, not all at once, but over whatever time it takes me to make it and pay it."

Everything he had was wrapped up in that request: his pride, his dignity, his seafaring career, his worth as a man. And I sensed that this was the very last thing he had been able to think of. Travis McGee, the last chance he had.

"You better tell me exactly what happened."

"You'll make the deal?"

"After you tell me what happened, I will sit around and think about it, and I will probably talk to Meyer about it. And then I will tell you if I think I can help at all. If I can't, I'm wasting your time and mine."

He thought that over slowly, pursed his lips, and gave a little nod of acceptance. And told his story.

At about four in the afternoon of March twenty-second, Hubbard Lawless had phoned the *Julie* from his country office out at the grove and asked if the cruiser was okay to take a night run on down to Clearwater. It was a pointless question because Van Harder always kept the *Julie* ready to go. Van reminded Mr. Lawless that the mate, DeeGee Walloway, had been given time off to go up to Waycross, Georgia, where his father was close to death with cancer of the throat. Lawless said there was no need for the mate. There would be four in the party, and one of them would be available to handle the lines, if necessary, and they could certainly serve their own booze and peanuts.

Harder thought it would be four businessmen; he had often made short trips up and down the Florida coast when Lawless wanted to meet with people without attracting too much attention. The boat made a good place to hold a conference. It couldn't easily be bugged, a fact that politicians seemed to appreciate.

They came aboard at nine. They came down to the marina dock in John Tuckerman's blue Chrysler Imperial. John Tuckerman was a sort of unofficial assistant to Hub Lawless. He didn't seem to hold any particular office in any of Hub's many corporations and partnership

but he always seemed to be around, laughing, making jokes, making sure of air reservation hotel reservations, dockage space, hangar space, and so on. They brought two young women aboard. Half the ages of Hub and John Tuckerman. Tight pants and airline carry-ons. Perfume and giggles.

Van Harder didn't like it one bit. The *Julie* was a family boat, named after Mr. Hub's wife. Women like those two didn't belong aboard. Harder knew from what people said that Hub Lawless was very probably a womanizer, but until that moment, when the two came aboard the *Julie*, it had been just talk as far as Harder was concerned. When he had been doing charter fishing, he had been known to turn back and come roaring to the dock and refund the unused part of the charter if people started messing around aboard the *Queen Bee III*. He couldn't exactly refuse to make the run to Clearwater, but he did not want to stay on as captain of a floating whorehouse.

Still puzzling over what to do. Harder took the *Julie* on out of South Cedar Pass. It was an unseasonably chilly night, with a northwest wind and the sea foaming white across the bar that bracketed the tricky channel inshore of the sea buoy. Once he was in good water, he set the course for a point offshore of Clearwater, put the steering on automatic pilot, and watched the compass carefully to see if, in the following sea shoving against the stern starboard quarter, she would hold at that speed without too much yawing and swinging and searching.

As was their custom, when Hubbard Lawless felt the *Julie* settle into cruising speed, he built Harder's single drink, a tall bourbon and water, and brought it up to him. Harder decided it was a poor time to speak to Mr. Lawless about the women. He did not feel that the single drink was in conflict with his religious convictions. It never led to another.

"Not long after I drank it down, I remember I had a buzzy feeling in my head, and then it was like the *Julie* climbed a big black wave that curled over at the top. I woke up sick and confused. I didn't know where I was, even, but we were tied up back at the regular dock. Hack Ames, he's the Sheriff, he was kicking me awake and yelling at me. He didn't want to try to pick me up, I stank so from having throwed up on my clothes. I reached up and grabbed hold of the rail and pulled myself up, but I was so dizzy I couldn't dare let go. I couldn't make out what all the yelling was about."

"What had happened?"

"John Tuckerman testified at the inquest. He said one of the girls felt a little sick and went topside to get some air and went hurrying below again to tell them. I was unconscious on the deck. Hub and Tuckerman came up and they checked me and thought I looked pretty bad. They thought maybe I had a stroke or some damn thing, so the best thing to do would be get me to shore. They had both run the boat, but neither one of them had come back in South Cedar Pass at night with a sea running. The way they worked it out, Hub Lawless went way up on the bow while Tuckerman eased it in. They steered at first by the city lights, and then by the sea buoy, and slowed way down to hunt the next marker. The girls stayed below, out of the cold wind. The boat was rocking and pitching in the chop. Hub was hanging on and trying to spot the sandbars. Tuckerman said that all of a sudden Hub pointed to the right. Tuckerman thought he meant turn hard right, and that's what he did. The instant he hit the hard sandbar, he knew Hub Lawless had been pointing out the problem, not pointing out where to steer. The jolt tore Hub's grip loose and he went overboard off the bow. The wave

were picking the bow up and dropping it back onto the bar so hard Tuckerman knew he had to back off or start to break up. He put it in hard reverse and yanked it back off, and he couldn't find the switch to turn on the overheard searchlight so he could hunt for Hub. He threw a life ring over, slinging it toward the bar, hoping Hub could find it. He didn't know how to work the ship-to-shore, and even if he did, he didn't dare leave go of the wheel and the throttles. He yelled for the women and they finally heard him and came up to help look for Hub. It was a wild dark night and the only thing he could think of to do was try to find the markers and find his way in and get help. I stayed passed out through all of it and didn't come out of it even partway until, like I said, Hack Ames was aboard trying to kick me awake."

"Funny thing for him to do if he thought you were sick."

"He testified he thought I was drunk. He said I looked drunk, talked drunk, walked drunk and smelled drunk. There was other testimony at the hearing, about how small boats had gone out hunting for Hub Lawless, and one of them found the life ring and nothing else. He testified I had that one drink that Mr. Lawless brought me like always. They asked me why I'd refused to go to a doctor, and I explained that once I started to come out of it, I felt groggy but I didn't feel sick, not in any particular place or particular way. They decided that Hub Lawless was missing and believed to be dead by ... I can't recall the word."

"Misadventure?"

"That's the one. His body never has showed up."

"What is it you think I could do anyway?"

"There's a lot of talk around Timber Bay. People say Hubbard Lawless is alive. They say he's in Yucatan, living like a king."

"There's always talk like that when the body isn't recovered, and when the person has some money."

"But what if he *is* alive? You see what I mean?"

"Then he and Tuckerman had to plan the whole thing, and they had to knock you out."

"What I didn't tell you, I was drunk a lot when I was a sinner. I was jailed for drunk, time and again. I gave it up all the way for twenty years. Took it up again, just the one drink when Lawless would fix me one, showing myself there was no holt on me any more. They asked about that at the hearing and I told them. I told them I'd been passed-out drunk and I remembered it clear, and this wasn't like it."

"Why would the man fake his own death?"

"Money trouble. Woman trouble. Insurance. That's what they're saying. I got to have some help. I don't know what to do with myself. I don't know which way to turn any more. This was in March, and here it is May, and I haven't had one real good night's sleep since."

"Van, I don't want to say yes or no this minute."

"I can understand that."

"I want to walk it around a little."

"Want I should come back about evening?"

"Where can I reach you?"

"I got one day of work, crewing for Billy Maxwell tomorrow, for walk-around money. I'm bunk aboard his boat tonight. It's that thirty-eight-foot Merritt with the—"

"Down at the far end. I know the boat."

“Remember, I’ll sign a paper for the money, and I’m good for it.”

“I know you are. I’ll be in touch tomorrow. Or why don’t you come here after you get through with the charter?”

After he left I sat there and watched him walk along the pier, a big sad sallow man, with a little bit more than his share of pride and rigidity. The world had tried to hammer him into the ground a few times, but he had endured and survived. Maybe this time he could not. Maybe it was too much.

As I drove into town with Meyer that bright evening, we got onto a familiar complaint. Back not long ago when all the action in town was located in the rectangle bounded by the Beach, Sunrise Boulevard, Andrews Avenue, and New River, you could not go into the city without seeing a few dozen people you knew. Meyer had spent a whole day doing errands without running into a single person he knew. And it depressed him. He is the sort of man who manages to know people. He knows at least six people for every person I know. His little bright blue eyes sparkle with pleasure when he meets anyone he has ever met before, and the splendid computer between his ears immediately furnishes a printout of everything they have ever confessed to him. Meyer can suffer bores without pain. He finds them interesting. He says the knack of being able to bore almost anybody is a great art. He says he studies it. So my hairy amiable friend had been unable to find a familiar face in downtown Lauderdale, though the world was in deep trouble. He is seldom depressed.

At least the tourist influx had died down to about 15 percent of peak, and we did not have to hunt for one of those places where locals go to avoid the crush. We settled for Dorsey Brannigan's pub atmosphere and Irish stew, and a couple of bottles of stout.

I knew that Van Harder's story would get Meyer over his identity crisis, and so it did.

He had followed the news story of Hubbard Lawless's untidy end in local papers and could fill me in a little on the man.

"About forty, as I remember. An achiever, Travis. One of those twenty-hours-a-day fellow. Wife and teenage daughters. A florid life-style, I believe. Lots of small corporations and partnerships. Housing, fishing, citrus, ranchland, and construction. The follow-up stories hinted that he was in very serious financial difficulties at the time of his death. And there was an enormous life insurance policy. Two million or more. I can't remember the exact amount.

"Anything about how maybe he took off, faked it all?"

"Nothing direct. Mystery surrounds the disappearance of Timber Bay tycoon. The body has not been recovered. I think it safe to assume that if the papers were hinting, then the public was talking more directly about that possibility. Then it died down, I'd guess about mid-April."

"What do you think about Van Harder's story?"

"He's a reliable man. So let's say it was a heart attack, a stroke, a savage bout of food poisoning, or somebody put something in the drink. In any event I think we can say that Lawless left the boat before it returned. He left on purpose or by accident. And in either case he died or left town."

"I don't know what I'd do without your help."

"It's simple mathematics, Travis. Permutations and combinations. You have three sequences—of four choices, two choices, and two choices. So there are sixteen possibilities."

I stared blankly at him. "Such as?"

"It was a heart attack. Lawless fell overboard by accident. He made shore and realized what a good chance it was for him to try to disappear forever. Or—Lawless put something in the drink, went overboard on purpose, miscalculated the risk, and drowned. Do you see why

I say there are—”

“I see, I see. You don’t know what a help that is.”

“Break it down and you can’t find one of the sixteen where Harder is at fault.”

“Should I try to help him, dammit?”

“Would you like to know why I am saying yes, you should?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Because as you told me this heart-stirring tale, you kept loading all the dice in Va Harder’s favor, so that when you came to the point of asking me, I’d say yes. Okay. Yes.”

“I’ll be *damned* if I will. I am not in the business of salvaging the reputations of broke down fishermen. I visited the city of Timber Bay once upon a time. It was closed. I am sick of red-hots, of overachievers, of jolly-boy Chamber of Commerce types. I’ve stashed enough money to last until Christmas week, and I’ve got work to do on the *Flush*, and when the work is done I want to ask about eight good friends and you to go on a nice little lazy cruise down to—”

“Will we need some sort of a cover story for Timber Bay?”

“We?”

“You don’t think I’d let Harder down, do you?”

I stared at my friend with fond exasperation. I said, “You have a small piece of boiled onion on your underlip.”

“Sorry,” he said, and removed it.

“How about a bottle of Harp?”

“Splendid!”

“No, we won’t need a cover story. People will want to talk about Hubbard Lawless. All we have to do is get them talking and then sort it all out.”

“I’m glad you talked me into going,” Meyer said. “Life has been too restful lately. And here comes somebody I *do* know. Life is improving.” I looked where he was looking and saw Cindy Thorner and her husband, Bob, just leaving. They saw us at the same time and came over and sat with us for a while in one of Brannigan’s big oak booths. They are South Miami people, and we had met them during a couple of skin-diving fiestas down in the Keys. Cindy is a perky soul, looking far too young to have grown kids, a blue-eyed blonde with enough energy for three ladies.

They had been in Lauderdale for some sort of bridge thing, some determined pursuit of master points about which I know less than nothing, and were about to head back. Meyer got off into his diatribe about not meeting anyone he knew all day, and how depressing it was and how everything is changing so fast.

Then he told us all his new insight into the problem. Florida can never really come to grips with saving the environment because a very large percentage of the population at any given time just got here. So why should they fight to turn the clock back? It looks great to them the way it is. Two years later, as they are beginning to feel uneasy, a few thousand more people are just discovering it all for the first time and wouldn’t change a thing. And meanwhile the people who knew what it was like twenty years ago are an ever-dwindling minority, a voice too faint to be heard.

They had to go. As Cindy got up she said, “Meyer, a Florida conservationist is a fellow who bought his waterfront property last week.”

“And wants us to make room for two or three of his friends, and then shut the door forever,” Meyer said.

Then she told me that the best reef for snorkeling she had ever seen was at Akumal Yucatan, fifty miles down the coast from Cozumel. She said they were there at Easter and should promise myself not to miss it.

After the Thorners left, Meyer said, “A person can go for months without hearing anybody say Yucatan, and now I have heard it twice in the same evening. A more primitive soul would take it as a sign.”

“A sign that Hub Lawless is down there snorkeling away, drinking booze out of green coconuts, and finessing the señoritas?”

“We could go look there first, maybe?” said Meyer.

I drove back through the thinning traffic a little past ten. My ancient electric-blue Rolls-Royce pickup whispered along, silent and smooth as one of the great cats a-hunting. We decided there was no need to keep Van Harder in suspense once the decision was made, so, once I had stowed Miss Agnes in her parking slot, we walked down charter-boat row, past *Windsong* and *Dream Girl*, *Amigo* and *Eagle*, *Playtime* and *Uzelle*, *Pronto* and *Caliban*, all the way down to where Billy Maxwell’s *Honcho* was moored and dark, the dockside lights slanting down into the dark cockpit.

I put one foot on the stern quarter of the *Honcho* and leaned my weight on it and let it rock back. Within seconds Van came up from below, silent and quick, a short gaff in his hand. Even though the *Honcho* was rocking a little in a fresh sea breeze that pushed against the turn tower, that subtle change of motion was enough to bring Harder up out of sleep, instantly alert to repel boarders.

“Oh, it’s you fellows,” he said in a sleep-rusty voice. “Come aboard and set?”

“No thanks, Van. I stopped by to tell you we’ll go over to Timber Bay and see what we can turn up.”

After a long five seconds he said, “I do surely appreciate it. You fix up that paper to sign?”

“No hurry on that.”

“They aren’t going to care for people nosing around there.”

“Who isn’t?”

“Reporters came around, and all. Government people and law people and bank people. They asking questions, handing out legal papers, and so on. So the family and the people that worked for him and the people tied into it all, one way or another, they’re sick of it now even though it slacked off a lot by the middle of last month. How you, Meyer?”

“I’ve been fine, Van. Sorry to hear about your bad luck.”

“It do seem to come at me in bunches lately.”

“Forgive me for asking, Van, but did you see a doctor and get checked over?”

“Hoped he could find some reason I passed out. Doc Stuart. He said he couldn’t find any evidence I’d had some kind of heart spasm or something go wrong in my head, but then again he said he couldn’t find any reason to say something like that hadn’t happened. But if it happens it might probably happen again, and that would help pin it down. Aside from kid stuff, I never had a sick day in my life. Not ever. How soon are you going on over there?”

“We can talk about that tomorrow,” I told him. We ambled back and sat for a time on the

transom of Meyer's chunky little old cruiser, *The John Maynard Keynes*, looking at the overhead stars, faint through the particulate matter which jams the air of the gold coast night and day, never dropping below twenty thousand particles per cubic centimeter, except when a hurricane sweeps it away briefly, blowing it all into somebody else's sky.

"A cover story will help. I was wrong," I said.

"I'm working on it," Meyer said. From his tone of voice I decided not to ask any more questions.

I went back alone to the *Flush*. My security system advised me I'd had no uninvited guests. I was still worn down by the weeks aboard the *Antsie*, working that ketch north into the teeth of a hard wind that never quite became a gale and never died out. Cold food and safety lines chafing and salt rash, constant motion and noise, and the deep fatigue, like a bone bruise all over. I wanted to drift the *Busted Flush* down through glassy bays, past mangroves and pelicans and the leaping of mullet. I wanted to take her down through Biscayne Bay and Florida Bay, and up by Flamingo through Whitewater, and out the mouth of the Shark River and up past Naples, Fort Myers, Boca Grande, Venice, Sarasota, Bradenton, Tampa Bay, Clearwater, all the way on up to Timber Bay.

Once I was in the big bed in the master state-room, I traced the route in the *Waterway Guide* all the way up to Cedar Key, which would be the last overnight before Timber Bay. I hadn't run any part of the lonesome leg from Egmont Channel a hundred and fifty or so nautical miles up to Lighthouse Point beyond St. Marks in quite a few years, and so was pleased to learn they'd put in a new chain of sea buoys nine to sixteen miles off the shoreline—nineteen-foot-high dolphins with slow flashers I'd be able to see six miles away in clear weather. Timber Bay lies twenty-seven nautical miles north of Cedar Key, and the Guide pinpointed the city halfway between the marker number 16 for Pepperfish Key and marker 18 for Deadman Bay.

I reached for scratch paper and made a rough estimate of four hundred and seventy-five statute miles from Bahia Mar to Timber Bay. Running a ten-hour day at my cruising speed of a dazzling seven knots, I could just do it in six days, if absolutely nothing went wrong. *Always* something always does go wrong, I always add a fudge factor of 50 percent. Nine days.

The *Flush* and I used to make nine knots. Then it was eight. Now we are down to seven, even when the bottom is clean and fresh. The problem seems to be in the efficiency of the two smallish Hercules diesels. They have many, many miles thereon. They are noisier than when I won the boat long ago. Some day they will have to be replaced. I have replaced almost everything else, a bit at a time.

I checked the accommodations at Timber Bay in the Guide and found a map of the waterfront and a description of the facilities. Cedar Pass Marina looked just fine. Ten feet of draft on the approach and ten feet alongside. They could accommodate up to seventy-foot craft, so my fifty-two feet was no problem. Everything I needed was available at the marina, from electricity to diesel fuel to repairs, showers, Laundromat, groceries, restaurant, and even a motel.

I had a distant memory of its being a small and sleepy place. Like Cedar Key, it had been one of the towns supplying the timber which was barged south down the coast to building hunting and fishing lodges for gentlemen from the Midwest before the southwest Florida area was available by road and railroad. Again like Cedar Key, it had supplied the wood for a few billion lead pencils, until the wood finally ran out. Both of them were well off the market.

north-south tourist routes, with Timber Bay being about fifteen miles west of Route 19, down State Road 359, a long straight two-lane road through a tangle of dankness, smelling of snakes.

Now, apparently, as they had found Cedar Key, the tourist and the retired had finally found Timber Bay—just as, inevitably, every square foot of the state except the state parks is going to be found and asphalted and painted with yellow parking lines.

I woke up at two in the morning with the light still on and the Guide open and face down on my chest. I stayed awake just long enough to be sure I didn't sink back into the same dream that awoke me. I had been underwater, swimming behind Van Harder, following the steady stroke of his swim fins and wondering why I had to be burdened with tanks, weights, and mask while he swam free. Then he turned and I saw small silver fish swimming in and out of his empty eye sockets.

As I faded down toward sleep I realized the dream had told me something. I should give up my rationalized cruise. When the cavalry went riding to rescue the wagon train, they never took the scenic route.

Three

The next morning, Wednesday, the eighteenth day of May, after I finally gave up trying to find Meyer, he found me. He was beaming with pride and satisfaction. We went into the lounge of the *Flush* and he showed me the three identical envelopes, all addressed to his hand delivered, not mailed.

The stationery was uncommonly crisp, and it was a ribbed creamy forty-pound bond bearing at the top the corporate logo of one of America's most successful conglomerates.

Up at the top left was printed in very small letters, "Office of the Chairman of the Board of Directors."

My dear Meyer,

This letter confirms our conversations regarding our potential interest in various enterprises and holdings large and small, which are now available or may become available in the Timber Bay area.

Knowing our long-range plans for the area, you will be able to determine if there are properties or enterprises there which should require our further attention with a view to negotiation.

In the event we do acquire anything there, with such acquisition based upon your recommendation, we both understand that you will be due remuneration on a percentage basis, just as we have operated in the past.

You are, of course, authorized to use your best judgment in showing this letter on a confidential basis to those who might have a need to know, and you are authorized to instruct them to get in touch with me personally if they should have any doubts as to your credibility.

*Cordially yours,
Emmett Allbritton
Chairman of the Board*

"All three are alike," Meyer said.

"How the *hell* did you manage this?"

"I had breakfast with good old Emmett aboard his little hundred-and-twenty-foot play to at Pier Sixty-six. Back when he was CEO of his corporation, I saved him from stepping on something nasty. They were acquiring a company which had a patent infringement suit filed against it. Emmett's legal people didn't think the suit had much chance. I was doing a Eurodollar survey for them at that time, and I came across something that indicated the suit would be large and nasty and successful. I went directly to him. He delayed the closing until the suit went to trial. And was very glad. So he owed me one. He had stationery aboard, and I took it to a public stenographer I know and composed the letter and took the three originals back to him for signature."

"You *do* know what you've got here?" I said.

"Travis, what I have here is a con man's dream. Emmett knows I won't misuse it, and he

knows I'll destroy all three letters the instant there's no more need to use them."

"What about Van Harder? He can't lie worth a damn."

"Who says anything about lying? I am going to ask him if it meets with his approval if I kill two birds with one stone by checking into some property over there some friends might want to buy. Actually, if I do find something that looks very good, I think Emmett *would* be interested."

"Have you figured out my role in all this, pal?"

"If you are my friend, you are going to be accepted. Avarice is the longest lever in the world. Everybody is going to be very anxious to help me. Nobody will want to risk offending me. If they offend me, I won't make them independently wealthy. Of course, it would be easier if Van Harder wasn't there, giving them cause to wonder if we are what we say we are."

"Ha!" I said.

"Whyfor the Ha?"

"He could bring the *Flush* all the way around. As a favor. So we could come back home the slow way."

"Some likely people around here could fly over and help us come back the slow way," Meyer said, nodding and nodding, smiling and smiling. "How long will it take him?"

"Six to nine days."

"Do you trust his luck?"

"He's used up all the bad part."

"I stopped at Zzest Travel and had Peggy look up the best place to stay in Timber Bay. It's the North Bay Yacht and Tennis Resort. Suitable, apparently, for a man of my influence and know-how. They should have some humble accommodations for you as well."

When he came back from the charter, Van Harder said he'd be glad to take my houseboat out around to Timber Bay, but couldn't he be more help to us in Timber Bay, telling us where everybody was?

While I fumbled the question Meyer said that maybe it was best if we went in cold; that we could tell Van our impressions by the time he arrived at the Cedar Pass Marina.

It took until noon the next day to teach Van the little eccentricities of the engines, bilge pumps, generators, two banks of batteries, automatic pilot, air conditioning, water tanks, fuel tanks, engine gauges, RDF, SSB-VHF, tape deck, marine head, freezer, bottled gas, and so on—and to lay aboard provisions enough for the trip, get the needed new charts, estimate the cash he would need, and recommend the places to hole up. He marveled most at the giant bed, the enormous shower stall, and the huge bathtub, shaking his head and saying, "My, my, my."

I showed him the security system—the concealed switches for the Radar Sentry and the Audio Alarm and the fail-safe bulbs he would find lighted if the devices had been activated when he was ashore.

Meyer kept Harder busy while I removed my working capital from the double-hull hideout hole on the port side in the forward bilge area. After Harder left at noon—warping the *Flush* out with an offhand competence that would have erased any doubts if I'd harbored any—I put the better part of my funds into a safety-deposit box.

It was an odd feeling to be at Bahia Mar without the *Flush*—different from when I had put her up for bottom work. This was more of a betrayal. She was burbling happily along down toward Dania and Hollywood, and all I had left in the slip was the overpowered runabout, my T-Craft *Muñequita*, tarped and tied off, bobbing whenever the power squad boys went by.

By six thirty that same Thursday we were settling into a two-bedroom suite on the second floor of the North Bay Yacht and Tennis Resort. We'd flown from Lauderdale to Gainesville and then caught a little feeder-line Bonanza from Gainesville to Timber Bay, with one stop in Cross City. At the trim new little Timber Bay airport I rented a light gray Dodge Dart. The girl at the rental desk gave us a map of Timber Bay. The basic layout was simple. Imagine a capital H with a backward capital C jammed up close to it: CH

The interior of the C is all water. Some small islands and unusual outcroppings of limestone block the open mouth of the C, leaving South Cedar Pass at one end and North Pass at the other. The crossbar of the H is the urban continuation of State Road 359, which comes from the east and dead-ends right at the bay shore. There it intersects the western vertical line of the H—inevitably called Bay Street—where Bay follows the C curve of the bay shore for some time before straightening out. The south end of the bay is where the marinas, commercial docks, and fish houses are located. The north end of the bay is more elegant, and beyond the top of the C a lot of sand has been dredged up and imported and a lot of fill put down to make a beach development area north of North Pass. The other up-and-down line of the H is Dixie Boulevard, named after the county. When it gets out into the country, it changes to Road 351A, going north to Steinhatchee and south to Horseshoe Beach. The northern open end of the H is residential, getting more pleasant the farther you get north of the crossbar until you get too far north into an area of shacks and junk trailers, abandoned wrecked bedsprings, and refrigerators. South of the crossbar is mostly commercial. The crossbar itself is called Main Street. Between Dixie Boulevard and Bay Street, on Main, are the banks, office buildings, and better stores. Urban sprawl reaches out to the east, north, and south, with franchise food service, small shopping plazas, automobile dealerships, drive-ins, and housing developments.

The North Bay Yacht and Tennis Resort was just north of the top of the C, with boat basin and dredged channel, with a private slice of the handmade beach, with tennis courts, pool, children's playground, cocktail lounge (entertainment nightly—Billy Jean Bailey at the piano), Prime Western Beef, closed-circuit television movies, and a wealth of other irresistible advantages.

When I had stowed the few items of gear I had brought along, I went into our sitting room and found Meyer standing out on the shallow balcony, with the sliding doors open. I joined him and stood beside him, leaning on the concrete rail. Directly below us was a putting green, where a fat man labored mightily to improve his stroke. Off to the left was the boat pool, with a few swimmers. Off to the right was a slice of the boat basin, where the brightwork winked in the last of the sunlight of the May evening. Directly ahead, beyond the putting surface, were the tennis courts. In the nearest one, two girls in pastel tennis dresses engaged in deadly combat. They looked to be about fifteen. The one on the right, a blonde with pale salmon, had a lovely style, drifting with dance steps to the right place, setting, stroking

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