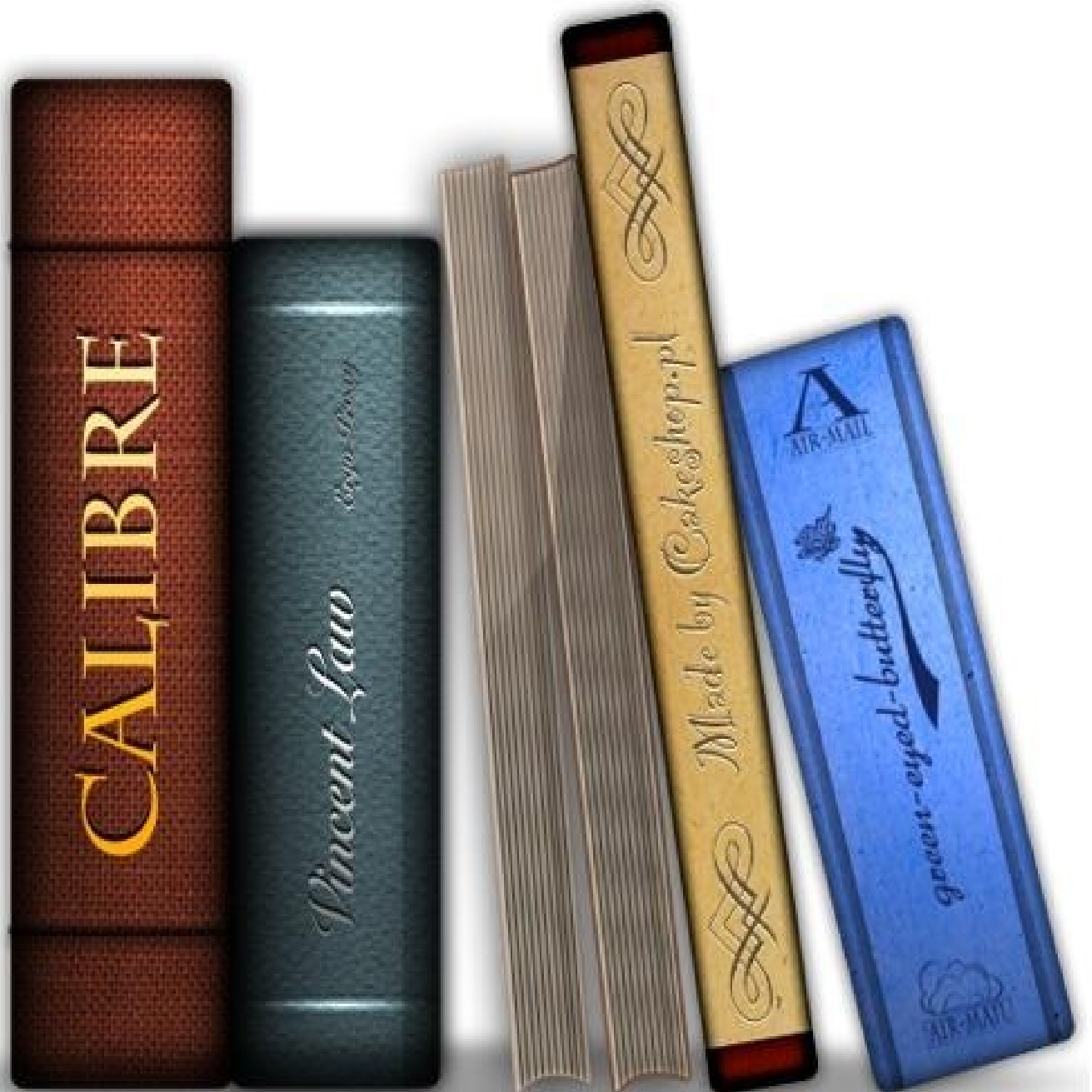


Empty Copper Sea

John D. MacDonald

Book XVII of Travis McGee



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John D. MacDonald
The Empty Copper Sea

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

One

VAN HARDER came aboard the Busted Flush on a hot bright May morning. My houseboat was at 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 gasps. 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 set 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 Rance 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 mile 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 out 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 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 then, McGee."

"But this time you looked me up." Not quite a question, but at least a leading remark. It 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 twentyeight years old. Clawed my suffering way up out of the black depths of sin to walk 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 news paper 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 I 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 if somebody lost something important to them, you'd try to get it back, and if you did, you'd 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 owner 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 twentysecond, 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 big 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 partnerships, but he always seemed to be around, laughing, making jokes, making sure of air reservations, 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 bars 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 got 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 waves 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. I 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 had 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 year. 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 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. That 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'll bunk aboard his boat tonight. It's that thirty-eight-foot Merritt with the-

"Dawn 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.

Two

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 had 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 if my hairy amiable friend had been unable to find a familiar face in down town Lauderdale, 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 fellows. 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 Van 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 broken-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 in Yucatan, fifty miles down the coast from Cozumel. She said they were there at Easter and I 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 senioritas?"

"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 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 tuna 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 had, 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 stateroom, 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 that pinpointed the city halfwa'y 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. As 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 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 electric 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 build 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 main 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 snake.

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 him, 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 toy at Pier Sixty-six. Back when he was CEO of his corporation, I saved him from stepping in 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 knowhow. 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 on around to Timber Bay, but couldn't he be more help to us in Timber Bay, telling us who everybody was?

While I fumbled the question Meyer said that maybe it was best if we went in cold; then 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 hidey-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 to 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 Munequtta, tarped and tied off, bobbing whenever the power squadron 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 at 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.

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 a 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 wrecks, 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 hand made 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 big 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 in pale salmon, had a lovely style, drifting with dance steps to the right place, setting, stroking, following through. The one on the, right, in pale aqua, was shorter and stockier, with cropped dark curly hair. She was a scrambler. She was

often out of position. She made improbable saves. She went to the net when she shouldn't have, and managed to guess right a lot of times about where the passing shot should be. When she hit it on the wood, it tended to drop in. She tried for shots that were beyond her abilities-long-range drop shots, top-spin lobs-and made them pay off just often enough. She was sweaty and grim. She fell and bounded up. They had a gallery of about a dozen people. One point went on and on and on. Had it been a faster surface, the little dark-haired one couldn't have beaten the blonde. Finally she went racing to the net after an angled return of second serve. The blonde whipped it right at her, apparently trying to drive it right through her. But in desperate reflex she got the racket in the way. The ball turned the racket and rebounded, touched the tape, and fell in for the point, and the people clapped and whistled. The winner held her hand out, and the blonde looked at it and turned and strolled away. The winner went and got her big towel and mopped her face, wobbled over to the grass, and spread the towel and fell on it, gulping for air but smiling all the while. The winners smile. The losers holler "Deal!"

We went out and explored the city in the fading light of evening, drifting the gray Dodge back and forth through the social and commercial strata, snuffling the flavors of change, the plastic aromas of the new Florida superimposed on the Spanish moss, the rain-sounds of the night peepers in the marsh, the sea smell of low tides, creak of bamboo in light winds, fright cry of the cruising night birds, tiny sirens of the mosquitoes, faraway flicker of lightning silhouetting the circus parade of thunderheads on the Gulf horizon-superimposed on all these old enduring things, known when only Caloosas made their shell mounds and slipped through the sawgrass in their dugouts. Here now was the faint petrochemical stinkings, a perpetual farting of the great god Progress. And a wang-dang thudding of bubblegum rock from the speakers on the poles in the shopping-plaza parking lot. And screech wheeling vans painted with western desert sunsets.

And the lighted banks and the savings-and-loan buildings, looking like Bauhaus wedding cakes. We found a place called the Captain's Galley, with a parking lot full of local cars. There was no table for two, sir, not for fifteen or twenty minutes. The smell of fried grease was so heavy we hesitated, but I looked into the dark bar and saw captains' chairs for the customers facing the pit where the barkeeps worked. And when I asked for the brand of gin we wanted the iced martinis made from, there was no confusion or hesitation. The young man in the sailor suit whipped the blue-labeled square bottle of Boodles out of the rack, poured generously, made us the driest of the dry, glacial and delicious.

I overtopped at the bar, a device useful in all such circumstances because it caused some secret signal to pass between the bartender and the fellow with the sheaf of menus. With more warmth than he had shown when we arrived, he led us to a corner booth set up for four, whipped away the extra setups, and said it would be his pleasure to go personally and come back with our second drinks if we were now ready, and we were. It is all a kind of bullshit, of course, to pry special treatment out of busy service people, but it improves taste and appetite. If you feel valued, it makes a better evening. And to busy service people everyone falls into a known category. It is enough merely to imitate the habits and

mannerisms of that category which expects and gets the very best service. Hub Lawless would have expected it, gotten it, and probably tipped well, in the familiar style of the sun-belt businessman.

A pretty waitress with frosted hair told us the flounder was exceptional tonight, and yes, she would see that they picked two very nice ones to broil for us. And they were indeed splendid, as was the salad with herb dressing, hot fresh rolls with sweet butter, the carafe of house Chablis, and the espresso.

The throng had thinned out by the time we left. Meyer went out of his way to tell the manager how pleasant the evening had been. He asked if we were passing through, and Meyer said we were in town on business, looking at property, and staying at the North Bay Resort. I went on out to the car. Meyer came out in five minutes, humming happily to himself.

As I drove off he said, "That manager's name is Bellamy. Moved down here from Atlanta three years ago. He owns a piece of that place, so he works lunch and dinner seven nights a week. If we want a quiet table any time, we can phone him. Just ask for Dave Bellamy."

"And he is one of your dearest friends."

"Is that supposed to be some form of humor? Dave is a nice man. He said the best real-estate broker for commercial properties is George Glenn. Glennmore Realty. First United Plaza. I wrote it down."

He had been writing lots of things down. While I had been provisioning my houseboat and explaining her eccentricities to Van Harder, Meyer had been going through microfilm copies of the two-months-old newspapers at the library, writing down the facts he had related to me on our flight across the state.

We found a more detailed map of Timber Bay and all the rest of Dixie County in the newsstand area of a big drugstore in the Baygate Plaza Mall.

We found a phone book and wrote down addresses in Meyer's pocket notebook. We went poking around, looking. We found

**HULA MARINE ENTERPRISES
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(the sign read), down at the south end of the bay, with hurricane fencing closing off access to the big dock, warehouses, and processing plant. Bright lights shone down on the whole area from high poles, discouraging intrusion. We cruised slowly by the Hubbard Lawless residence at 215 South Oak Lane, a winding mile of asphalt in the northeast sector, off Dixie Boulevard, bordering the Timber Bay Country Club. It was a very long low white structure set well back behind a low concrete wall. There were dim lights on in the house. In the glow of a streetlight some distance away, the wide yard looked unkempt. The three overhead garage doors were all closed.

We found some of the other identities left behind by Mr. Lawless, like so many cocoons shed in some startling metamorphosis. Lawless Groves. Double L Ranches. Hula Construction. Hub-Law Development Corporation. At Hula Construction the hurricanewire gate was chained shut. A single guard light shone down on the empty area where equipment had once been parked. Grass was beginning to poke up through the thin skin of asphalt.

"How old was he in March?" I asked Meyer.

"Not quite forty-one."

I aimed us back toward the North Bay Yacht and Tennis Resort. Those birthday years that end in a zero are loaded. A time of reevaluation. Where the hell have I been and what have I been doing and how much is left for me, and what will I do with the rest of my short turn around the track? I had one of those zero years coming up, not too many birthdays from now. Maybe Hub Lawless had felt trapped in his own treadmill, hemmed in by his juggling act, tied fast to success. The most probable catalyst was the random female who had come along at the wrong time in his life.

"Can you remember the names of those two girls?" I asked Meyer.

"Felicia Ambar and Michele Burns."

"They still around this town?"

"They were both employed here in Timber Bay. Maybe they moved on. Probably you could find out about that better than me, Travis."

So I began to find out about it as soon as we got back. Meyer went on up to bed at my suggestion, and not at all reluctantly. Billy Jean Bailey was having a slow night in the lounge. It was called the Western Sky Lounge because, I suppose, of the hunk of glass the size of a basketball court standing on end, facing west. She looked no bigger than a half a minute sitting at her little pink sequined piano at the foot of that giant window. One spot shone down on her from the ceiling fifty feet overhead. She had a platinum natural, a pink sleeveless blouse which matched the piano, and silver slacks which matched the sequins. I sat at the bar, turning to watch her and listen to her. There were a few couples whispering together and groping each other in the shadowed privacy of banquettes. There were some noisy salesmen at the bar, at the far end. Billy Jean had a deep expensive-looking tan, a round and pretty face, a button mouth, an amplified piano, and a baritone voice.

She played a medley of old standards. She did a lot of flowery, tinkly improvisations, moving far away from the melody and then sneaking up on it again. I like a firmer structure, a more emphatic rhythm. Then the improvisation is supported, as with Joe Pass on that incredible guitar of his. But she did well enough. And looked good while doing it. And seemed to sigh at one point, looking around, seeming to grimace.

I got up and walked over to her. It was a long walk. She watched me arriving, her smile polite. She kept the music going with a little bit of right hand and hardly any left at all.

"Maybe 'Lush Life'?" I asked.

"My God, a thousand years ago I used to do that. I'll have to fool around with it and work into it. Sure. And?"

"And a drink with me on your break?"

"If you can hum it, I can fake it."

I went back to the bar. She found her way into "Lush Life" and, with but one stumble, got the words out of the music box of memory, did it very straight, and then moved into it with enough class to silence the salesmen for all of thirty seconds. She closed it off with her theme and came over, standing small at my

elbow.

"As always, Mitch," she said to the barman. "Over there," she said to me and headed for a narrow booth for two. I paid the tab and carried her drink and mine to the booth.

"Thanks, friend," she said, "for bringing that old one up. I don't know how it fell out of the repertoire. It goes back in. I am Billy Jean Bailey and you are...?"

"McGee. Travis McGee. Been working this lounge long?"

"Practically forever. Hell, it's all right. Good people own and operate this place. I used to do the resort-tour thing when I was first down here. I started in Youngstown. I used to do the Maine coast thing, and the Catskills and Poconos in the summer, and down the other coast here in the winter. Lauderdale, Hollywood, Miami, and so forth. But that can kill you off before your time. Then Danny died. He was my agent and kind of boyfriend. And they wanted me back here. That was three years ago. And here I am. Still. McGee, you drive one of those shrimpers for Hula? No? I thought you looked sort of the type. Like around boats and so forth. Jesus, this is one dead night here. Been in town long?"

"Checked in here this evening. I don't know anything about the town."

"There's no action, if that's what you mean. Oh, there's a couple of discos like everywhere, mostly all kids."

"No games?"

"You've got to be kidding. Oh, they probably play for lots of money over at the Elks or maybe the Legion. But you don't mean that."

"No, I don't mean that."

"So you can look at it this way, McGee. We're right at the heart of all the Thursday-night action there is in Dixie County."

"You're all the action I need Billy Jean Bailey."

Her mouth hardened. "If you mean what that sounds like, you are in for one hell of a sudden disappointment!"

"Whoa. I meant it is nice to sit and talk and have a few drinks and listen to the piano lady."

She studied me, head cocked. "Okay. Maybe I keep my guard up too high. But you know how things are. I don't even sit with guys much. I don't know why I did this time. You dint come on strong, and I liked what you requested, I guess."

"Friends?" I asked.

"Sure."

"I'll be around for a while. I'm over here from Lauderdale with a man named Meyer. He's my best friend. He's gone to bed in the suite, but I didn't feel like folding yet. What he's here for, he's looking into property that some bank might be liquidating that belonged to a man named Lawless."

"Oh, Jesus, another one."

"What do you mean?"

"McGee, dear, you have no idea the people who have come to town because of that Hub Lawless thing. My God, there is the IRS and people from the Department of Agriculture, and bank examiners, and investigators from the Justice Department, and FBI people, and insurance people. It is a real mess. You have no idea what a shock it was to this town. And still is. It has really sort of put