

Three single mothers of three bastard children from three generations claim a ghost-town on Santa Cruz County's northern coast as their rightful home. In letters, phone calls, journals, a memoir, and their conversations, we hear the distinct voices of these strong-willed women-each tough on the outside, yet sensitive within.

The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport: Volume II

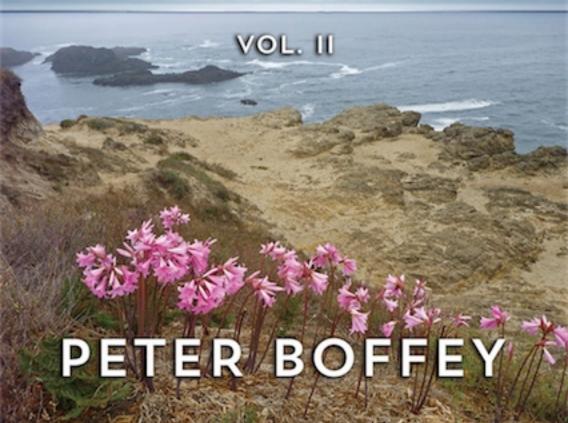
by Peter Boffey

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THE THREE NAKED LADIES OF CLIFFPORT

A Novel



The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport A Novel in Four Books Vol. II

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An earlier version of BOOKENDS was previously published in *The Redwood Coast Review*.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2018900005

ISBN: 978-1-63263-726-0

BOOK THREE

January–May 1965

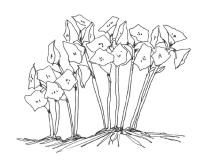
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Chapter 2

Katie's First Visit to '999'

Katie parked on Zelkova Street and surveyed the uniformly nondescript facades of the boxy, shoulder-to-shoulder buildings up and down the block. With minimal ornamental details, the bay windows were centrally located between the slightly recessed, multipaned rectangular ones. Avoiding the fractures in the shallow marble steps of the entrance at '999', she pushed the button next to Mrs. J. McLoughlin's name then pressed her face to the central rosette etched in the frosted glass door, peering into the obscurity. After ringing a second time, the lock unlatched and she pushed down the handle's thumb piece.

Katie reeled back as the lobby's odor rose up from the soiled carpet underfoot and reeked from the wallpaper, the pattern of which was indecipherable in the faint light provided by the chandelier's dim electric candles. A heavy wooden table ran along the right wall below a cloudy, oblong mirror blackened with spots. An assortment of unclaimed periodicals and rejected circulars had piled up below the table. At the far end of the tabletop, a half-dozen issues of the Sunday *Chronicle* were stacked beside an amphora-shaped, plum-purple vase; the dusty petals of the plastic peonies suggested that the residential apartment building and its long-term inhabitants had seen better times.

A staircase ran flush to the wall on the left. On the spiked underside of a jaundiced, once-transparent runner—now melded with the no-shag carpeting—the front edges of the first several treads had been worn through to the wood. The chipped patina of the handrail in her palm signaled that it was past due for another coat of paint. Katie held her breath and headed up to the second-floor, where the transoms transmitted diffuse light into the hall. Above the first doorbell on the right, a tarnished brass plate bore her landlady's name; there was no need to knock, the door had been left ajar.

Upon entering Jan's apartment, the corridor's stale air was replaced by an artificial fragrance and, underneath it, barroom stench. Immediately to Katie's left, a free-standing coat rack blocked a closed closet door; shoved up against a second closed door to her right, a wooden umbrella stand was crammed with canes, umbrellas, a long pole window opener, and an outsize weathered feather duster. Through the framed archway of floor-to-ceiling latticework, Katie saw a pair of sash windows to either side of a sealed fireplace on the far wall of the adjoining room

"Is that you, Katie? Come on in here."

She recognized Jan's crackling voice and stepped into the main room. Seated in a winged armchair with matching antimacassars on its arms, Jan adjusted her thick-lens eyeglasses and looked her visitor up and down. "Well, there you are, right on time. I like that in a person."

"Hi yuh, Jan."

"Well, come on in and sit down." She waved her right hand in the direction of a green velour sofa with threadbare patches visible on both its armrests. "I'm not getting up and there's no use standing on ceremony, not on my account. Turn off that TV and have a seat."

In the time it took Katie to navigate around the TV cart located at the far end of the coffee table, she took in the layout of the flat. One set of sliding wooden doors concealed what was likely Jan's bedroom; in the opposite direction, another set of partially opened doors with glass panes gave onto a dining room and beyond that a

single swinging door leading into the kitchen. Katie had to make an effort not to sink all the way back into the spineless couch and shifted her position until she could stay seated forward by leaning her elbows on her knees. Set on a round doily, atop a long, rectilinear lace runner which had once been white, the purple amethyst quartz crystals inside a cut and polished geode served as the centerpiece. At Jan's end of the table, a double-wall insulated plastic tumbler, half-full, rested on one of two wood-framed cork coasters. A clear glass ashtray and a crystal-cut glass cigarette lighter sat beside copies of *TV Guide* and *Reader's Digest*, all well within the resident's reach. A slew of tabloids was stashed in a leather magazine rack on the floor beside her chair.

"My lan', Katie Lowrie right here in San Francisco. Well I'll be damned!" she exclaimed, slapping her armrests simultaneously and stifling a cough. "So now you'll get to see me in all my glory! That's a fine specimen of amethyst, isn't it?"

"Is that what it is? Wow, it's so beautiful."

"Oriental amethyst.

"Oh, here, before I forget." Katie pulled some bills from her back pocket. "June rent."

"Just put it there, would you? How's Elisabeth?"

"My mom?"

"Yes, your 'mom,' unless she's gone and changed her name. How's your mother, Katie?"

"She's OK I guess. Her back's better since they closed the Potters' Guild."

"Oh?"

"They had to, after the storm. They went broke."

"Went broke, did they? Even without paying rent."

"Yup."

"So now they're out of the building, are they?"

"Yup. The gallery and the pottery studio are boarded up just like the hotel."

Jan took a long, deep drag on her unfiltered cigarette and exhaled. "About time." She took a nip from her glass and dabbed her

lips with a crinkled cotton hanky—Scottish thistles embroidered in its corners—then tucked it back up her sleeve cuff. "How the hell are you, Katie? It's sure good to see you again!"

"Good to see you too. We haven't heard from you."

"I've been wanting to call you, Katie, but I didn't know how."

"I'm glad you were home just now."

"Where else would I be after I got your note?"

Jan took another sip of her drink and, leaning back, turned her head to cough, then used one hand to shield her eyes from the bright light; Katie recognized the nicotine stains between the index and pointer fingers of the woman's raised hand.

"You did your nails."

"You bet I did! And what about those twinkle toes? I asked those youngsters to match the color of my liver spots but the silly things didn't get the joke. You don't either, or do you?"

"Is that light bothering you?"

"It is, as a matter of fact." Jan raised her second hand to her face. "It's all over in a minute but this time of the year, just before the sun goes down across the street, it shoots right at me."

"I'll pull the shade."

"Halfway down does it."

Katie took in a gulp of outside air then turned back around, noticing the brick-patterned contact paper curling off the tin shield that sealed off the decommissioned firebox.

"That's better now. Well then, Katie, you can see for yourself how the evil old landlady's been reduced to bare essentials, with the emphasis on 'bare.' Oh, don't look so glum. I'm the one's got to live here not you. Genteel poverty they call it!" She guffawed. "Say, go get yourself a glass of something to drink. This is an occasion. The kitchen's that away," she said, loosening the tie-belt of her gray wool fleck dress to get at a pack of cigarettes in one of its deep pockets. "There should be a bottle of some sweet white bubbly on ice that Mister Hudson left here on his last visit. I don't know if it still has any bubbles but you can open it and find out. Come on, drink up," she continued,

lifting her glass to her guest and tilting her forehead in a shallow bow before taking a swallow. Katie discerned that the woman's sparse gray hair had been shaped into shallow waves progressing from front to back.

"Not right now," Katie replied, returning to the sofa's sunken pillows where, by interlacing her fingers and cupping one knee, she could remain seated upright.

"Suit yourself. Say, how much time do you have? I'm afraid I can't get up supper for you...." Jan twisted far enough to reach the neck of a bottle which she had lodged against one of the chair's rear legs in what appeared to have been a halfhearted attempt to hide it from her visitor. She now set the whisky in plain view atop the second coaster and took hold of the cigarette lighter.

"You don't have to serve me anything."

"Good, because I can't stay up on my feet for very long before the pain starts in."

"I'm meeting an old friend for pizza or something before the show."

"So you're going to hear some music, is that it?"

"Yup."

"Well, it must be pretty good if it brought you all the way up from Santa Cruz."

"It's not that far. I had an easy drive in our new pickup truck."

"A new truck, did you just say?"

"Well, new-used. It's a '61 Ford F-100 series. Runs like a charm."

"Like a Ford, you mean."

"It is a Ford. It's a red Styleside."

"No, I meant it runs like a Ford. People used to say that about things besides cars, you know. 'Runs like a Ford."

"Oh I get it." KT released one knee and cupped the other. "Do you know what time it is?"

"You tell me." Jan turned her face towards the mantel above the fireplace. "I can't see the hands of that little clock from here." "Five after five. I've got plenty of time."

Jan rested the back of her head on the soiled crochet and blew smoke towards the ceiling. "Well, what's on your mind, Miss Lowrie? I'm glad to see you, by the way."

The moment the flat-roof building across the way blocked the descending sun, the living room grew darker. Jan yanked at the floor lamp's dangling switch then asked her guest to turn on the two wall lights located to either side of the fireplace. Katie crossed to the first; illuminated, the sconce glowed with a brown tone that, along with the lampshade beside Jan's chair, seemed to complement the nicotine-stained surfaces throughout the room. The shadows cast by flakes of peeling paint were visible on the ceiling and walls. After turning on the second light, Katie took advantage of her proximity to the window to stand there with her arms crossed, inhaling fresh air. "What's this neighborhood called anyway?"

"Depends on how you look at it. If you're looking up this way from the Tenderloin, it might look like Lower Nob Hill. If you're looking down from Nob Hill you'd probably call it the Tenderloin. I know which way I'd be looking, if I had the choice."

Katie stepped over to a shallow, glass-fronted box—approximately four feet across by three feet high by four inches deep—attached to the wall; an electrical cord with an in-line switch dangled from the wooden frame, its prongs hanging near a socket at the baseboard. "Shall I plug this in too?"

"Don't bother. The light's blown out."

Katie discerned the slim fluorescent tube inside the bottom of the box in which were mounted a porcelain plate commemorating the Highland Games and a platter with a painting of a castle. Against the box's black velvet backing, commemorative spoons were displayed in arcs above each plate. "Mister Luen made that for me from scratch. Isn't it something? He's the manager here at 999."

"I remember."

"You do?"

"I mean, I remember that name."

"Oh. Yes, he built that box in the basement and fetched his tools and hung the whole shebang right there on the wall several years ago."

"That's cool," Katie replied, stepping around a folding card table, which displayed a jigsaw puzzle far from being solved, before retreating to her perch on the edge of the collapsed couch.

"So you want to know about the status of the sale, don't you?"

Jan volunteered.

"Yeah, I do."

"I figured that much."

"What's going on? We're curious."

"Of course you are. So am I."

"What'd you mean? You mean you'd be curious if you were in our place?"

"No, I meant what I said. I'm curious too."

"I don't get it."

When Jan leaned forward and flicked her cigarette's longish ash, the bulk of it landed inside the wide ashtray. "Listen, Katie, the long and short of it is, it's not going well between Mister Greenbrier and me. Not well at all."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because every time I turn around there's another goddamned reason not to work with his Town and Country or Country and Town or whatever he calls that outfit of his."

"Did something happen?"

"Every time my lawyer opens his mail there's another goddamn condition laid down by Greenbrier Realty. Directions relayed from Cummings, they claim. Thank God, Mister Hudson is being gracious enough to defer invoicing me for his very modest retaining fee. They're a few decent attorneys left on earth." She took a gulp of whisky. "A few, I said."

"Like what demands are they making? You lower the price?"

"Well that's it of course. That's what it amounts to. But I'm beginning to think there's not going to be a sale, not to Cummings

at least and not through that Greenbrier." Jan winced while crossing her legs then made certain the hem of her dress covered the top of her knee-high, flesh-toned compression stockings.

"How's your hip?"

"My hips, don't you mean? They're both bad. I'm just about stuck living in this armchair. You want to know what Cummings Junior wants now?"

"What?"

"That cattleman insists he will not make a final offer on the place until the lodge is taken down to its foundation. Did you get that?"

"You're supposed to demolish the lodge?"

"Yes. And the boneyards have to be cleaned up too or else one helluvalot of my money goes into escrow so they can do it later. It's all at my expense even if they decide never to do it, the S.O.B's."

"Clean up the boneyards? I hope they don't mean 'Sofa City' too. That's not even on our ... on your property. That's on the other side of Grade Road."

"I know that."

"That's crazy," Katie exclaimed. "There's a tractor in there and a couple of dead engine blocks. There's a half-buried fishing boat and that rusted-out horse trailer. Everything's all tangled up in barbed wire. There's chunks of cement plus all sorts of Bamboo Bill's crazy shit. All the shingles from the old barn."

"It wouldn't surprise me to find out that whole mess started out as Bill McGrath's dump in the first place."

"His broken totem poles, an old cement mixer. Across the road there must be five TV sets all busted up."

"What's on the other side of Mackenzie's Road isn't my concern. That's just a public nuisance or something. No, they mean those ditches along the driveway," Jan retorted, glaring at the machine at the far end of her coffee table. "By the way, you can take that TV set right there back with you too, if you want. It's on the blink more often than not. Might as well add it to the junk pile. Listen, I know those ditches are a mess. Doesn't matter to me. But now the deal is, I clean

them up or match their price on having it all hauled out by somebody else. But you missed the big-ticket item. Those boneyards are beside the point. It's demolishing the lodge and what's left of the other outbuildings. The cost of that gets deducted from the sales price, see? Can you imagine that price tag?"

"The barn too?"

"I don't know. I don't think the barn ... oh I don't know! I told Hudson just write back NO, we're not goin' to do it. We're not even goin' to get a price on those jobs. It's just the same old crap from the Cummings clan. Hell with 'em."

"You mean you've decided you're not going to sell?"

"I guess that's what I've decided, not to them anyway. Cummings'll only move on the deal if he sees some documentation that the work's being done or the monies get written into escrow by the first of next month. July the First, deadline day. That cowboy's after a fee simple title. Doesn't he know things can get more complicated than that? You know what?"

"What?"

"I don't think he really cares. Not really. Tell you the truth, I think he just wants my property as another notch in his belt. For bragging rights or something. You can't raise much beef on that acreage, not the way I understand modern cattle ranching. They're all blowhards. Braggarts. Like father like son."

"What does 'fee simple' mean anyway?"

"Oh, you know, straight title to the property, no qualifications. If they'd take the place as is I'd let them have it but no more of their whittling me down to the bone. I know what they're up to. I've been in property negotiations before this one."

"So what about us?"

"What about who?"

"What about Mom and DD and me? Where do we fit in?"

Jan did not answer but cleared her throat, sipped from her glass, and re-crossed her legs before lapsing into silence while gazing in the direction of the TV screen.

Katie excused herself to use the small half bathroom off the compact entryway. A fresh hand towel in the ring and a new bar of seashell-shaped soap in the pedestal sink's concave dish suggested that Jan had made the half-bathroom presentable for her visitor. Clear glass shelves mounted on the wall exhibited dozens of small perfume bottles in different colors, shapes, and scents. Looking into the mirror above the sink, Katie recognized that she had not yet voiced the Lowries' own complaints regarding the sales process and that any mention of timberland values might prove a distracting detour. Back in the living room, she found Jan still staring toward the TV set as if in a trance; even as Katie passed through the elder woman's line of sight and resettled on the sofa, Jan remained transfixed.

"Jan?"

"You know, I've been thinking. I can't think of a single McLoughlin ever went out of this world due to heart failure. Except for Dad, that is, if that's what it was. No matter what else fails us, we seem to have these strong tickers. This old Seth Thomas of mine won't be what stops me, that's for sure. Much as I wish it would."

"What are you talking about?"

"That's what I said: much as I wish it would. That'd be one way to solve my problems, now wouldn't it? Let my heart stop ticking in the middle of the night when I'm asleep in bed then go bye-bye."

"Don't you ever get out of here? How do you get up and down those stairs?"

"Some days I don't. Sometimes I don't collect the mail for days. What difference? Oh, I can get out if I have to. Mister Luen made me a copy of the key to his service elevator in the back of the building. I use that to get to the grocery store a few doors down. There's a nice boy there who carries the bag back for me and takes out my empty bottles. It works out. And whenever I want to I can get Mister Hudson to sit right where you are now. He came by two or three times this past month. But of course I'll be paying for his company. He's a lawyer, after all."

"What about getting a pet?"

"A what?"

"A pet. Wouldn't you like a nice house cat to keep you company?

"Some fleabag peeing all over the place? Pee-yew!"

"Oh right, I forgot. You're like allergic to cats or something."

Jan huffed, her fingers fiddling with the top button of her dress's front panel. "I had my fill of cats growing up. Tomcats, sick kittens, wildcats, you name it! I can do without any pets, thank you. Whatever do people want animals in an apartment for anyway? I never had a canary or a goldfish in the suite on Russian Hill. I had to be ready to go out of town on a moment's notice. Or make an urgent trip to the post office, attend to breakdowns in the lab. I couldn't be tied down by pets. When Mary-Helen was staying at the grandest of the big resorts back East—what's wrong? What is it? You don't have to go, do you?"

"No, not yet. Go on."

"Up until last year I had that Seth Thomas there in my bedroom. Before that, where that little clock is sitting now, I had a grand pillar and scroll clock. I could read the time from here on that one. Do you know what a pillar and scroll clock is, Katie?"

"No," she replied, rising up and moving to the mantelpiece.

"It's a big shelf clock. Mine was a period piece and it was made of cherry wood. One hundred percent. The chest, the ornaments, even the clockworks, mind you, all American cherry wood—except for the lead weights, of course. It was a museum piece, Katie. That was another blow below the belt, when I had to sell that beaut."

"How much'd you get for it?"

"None of your business, I got enough. My man in Maiden Lane sent someone over here to take a look at it, then to take it away, and then to deliver my money. I made out okay on that deal. Paid my rent for almost half a year. I told you, it was a museum piece. I wish somebody'd say that about me but they wouldn't even want me in a museum, the way my parts are working now." She drank and re-crossed her legs. "So now do you see what happens to someone who

spends all her time in an armchair staring at a clock she can't read and a TV that doesn't work?"

Katie stepped over to the card table, juxtaposing the first few puzzle pieces that she touched. "So you had a lot of expensive stuff once."

"I did. Mary-Helen left me things in the suite and things in the Claremont house. I don't know if she meant to but that's what happened. The woman had a compulsion for collecting and a knack for experimenting with whatever she collected. Above the Claremont she had the builders install a pair of old lamps from some fabled bordello destroyed when the Barbary Coast burned down. The lamps ran on gas originally, but she had them converted to run on electricity and convinced Mister Lambert to install them at the tradesmen's entrance to the rear of the house. Then there were her Oriental rooms full of Chinaware and porcelain, iron teapots, silk panels. I forget all what I've had to sell to keep afloat. Eighteenth-century Canton bowls, a set of Foo Dog Lamps, Philippine crab plates, you name it. Of course, not everything left in the Claremont house was still worth something. Sometimes she'd fooled so much with some things they weren't even re-sellable and so much of it was ruined toward the end. She fashioned a unique marriage between a Chinese lantern and some colorful glass beads that was so offbeat you couldn't give it away. Out of what was originally a Japanese barbeque, she had a piece of colored glass made to span across the top to create a coffee table. All sorts of removable lids and drawers. She loved that queer piece of furniture but nobody else did. Sure you don't want a drink or a snack or something? I put some pretzels in a bowl but I guess they only made it as far as the dining room table in there."

"I'm not hungry." Katie sat back down on the couch and reached out to trace a fingertip across the variegated, odd-angled facets of the violet-blue stone on the table.

"Isn't that rock a beaut? I once had in mind to get that broken up and turned into gemstones set in brooches. An amethyst brooch to give to each of the gals." "The gals?"

"My salesgirls."

"Oh, that's right."

"But that never happened, did it?"

Katie shifted her position, facing Jan directly. "So what about us, Jan? I asked you but you didn't say anything. What about me and Mom and DD?"

Jan extracted another cigarette from her dress pocket then cinched the belt-tie and sat back in the chair without lighting up. "Tell you the truth, I haven't given you all much thought since those coconut heads started throwing monkey wrenches into the works. Greenbrier sent me a telegram the other day—a telegram, mind you. Where is that? Where the ... here it is. Listen to this, get this: 'BETTER MOVE FAST BEFORE MARKET FALLS OUT OF BED STOP CUMMINGS READY TO PAY WHEN YOU MEET TERMS STOP OFFER EXPIRES JUNE 30 STOP HAVE HUDSON CONTACT US ASAP.' 'Before the market falls out of bed.' Now doesn't that take the cake? 'ASAP."

"What's it mean?"

"Who cares what it means? It's just another sales ploy. They're putting the pressure on me so I'll cave in. Oh, there's no way in hell I'm selling that place at some bargain price. Right now I'd rather stick it to both of them, Greenbrier and Cummings too!"

"So you're definitely not selling to Cummings?"

"What do I want to give him a good deal for? That family's treated me and my people like second-class citizens all along. But the thing is, I have to do something by the end of the month. That's the honest truth."

"What if you don't?"

"Then the jig's up, Katie girl. If I don't renew the listing with Greenbrier, or if they don't want to extend it, then I'll owe him a junk of cash I just don't have." She clucked her tongue, wagged her head, and used the cut glass lighter to fire up her cigarette before she coughed. "Here I was sure I'd have money in the bank by now. Enough to go for a cruise while this place gets remodeled from top to bottom. You can

see for yourself I'm not exactly rolling in dough. You can see that, can't you, Katie?"

Katie rose to her feet and walked over to the closest window where she rolled up the blind and breathed in the fresh air. "I see lots of shit," she said, her back turned, looking out, each hand wrapped around the opposite shoulder.

"Do you think I like having you see me living like this? I do not! You should've seen me ten years ago on Russian Hill. Now that was different."

"I'm not blaming you, Jan." Katie turned and drew the metal folding chair away from the card table and straddled it backwards, draping her forearms over its top while facing Jan. "So now you don't have any more antiques down in the basement, is that it?"

"Did I tell you that too? My lan'! Don't you have a memory! No, I'm all out. The well's run dry. By now Mister Luen's probably swept out my bin and put it to some other use. So you remembered about my treasure trove, did you? At least someone pays attention to what I have to say. I'm glad you came by, Katie. I haven't exactly been out chopping wood since I saw you last but I always feel better when you're around. Listen. I've told you all I know about the deal, believe me. I never know all of what's going on myself, you see? That phone in the kitchen's not exactly ringing off the hook." She cackled and examined the level of liquid in her glass. "Sure you don't want those pretzels or something to drink?"

"OK. They're in here somewhere?" Katie said, parting the double doors.

She flipped a wall switch; a ceiling fixture shed weak light on the interior, which seemed to serve merely as a passageway to the kitchen. One dining chair remained at one place setting. The blue glass bowl of pretzels sat atop a stack of manila folders. A wooden hutch occupied the wall opposite the single window facing west. On one of its shelves, a broken platter gathered dust; Katie turned it over to read the backstamp: *Point Merrion Botanical Plates*. On the second shelf, chipped and fractured remnants of Roseville Pottery lay pell-mell. The

Chapter 2: Katie's First Visit to '999'

glass-faced built-in cabinet was bare but for a dusty teapot without a lid and a cylindrical bamboo holder with more wooden coasters.

As Katie sat back down with the blue bowl in hand, Jan burst out coughing.

"That's not the first time you've coughed since I got here."

"Just clearing my throat."

"You were clearing your throat this winter too."

"What? Oh, that was just a bad chest cold. Hung on for months."

"That's good to know."

"What? That I had a bad chest cold?"

"That you don't have it any more. At least you're not coughing all the time."

"No, not all the time. So let's change the subject. How's the Hielandman?"

"The who?"

"Your boy, the Donald. Getting bigger?"

Katie responded with some pleasantries about Donald's development then decided she would reinforce Jan's disenchantment with the sale by reciting the Lowries' list of grievances. She related how one pair of strangers, declaring they represented the Cummings, had shown up unannounced in order to examine the heating system in the crawl space and, unless Katie had not been there to stop them, would have proceeded inside the house as well. The same two men had returned days later with a legally worded notice, when they did enter the premises, testing the plumbing and windows, shoving screw-drivers into dry rot around the bathtub floor and kitchen sink, and studying the attic's exposed electrical wiring.

"A month ago Marcy Cummings came riding over on a platinum horse."

"She did?"

"With some guy. Her knight in shining armor, I guess."

"Was it Cummings Junior?"

"I don't think so. Looked like some other dude."

"What'd she say?"

"Nothing. But they were on beautiful horses."

"But what'd she say, what'd she do?"

"I told you she didn't say hello-goodbye. She and Prince Valiant circled the lodge a couple times, rode up and down our driveway then they rode off without even dismounting."

"Bitch!"

"Went out through the bamboo grove. I couldn't see where they went after that. Probably back up the trail till where it hits Grade Road."

"That haughty bitch! You see? I told you I don't know half of what goes on down there. I ought to have her cited for trespassing. Riding all over the place like she already owns it."

"Hey," Katie said, snapping some pretzels into pieces. "Maybe that's when they got the big idea about leveling the lodge and clearing out the ditches."

"You might be right about that, Miss Lowrie. That'd be just like 'em. You see what I mean? Thinks she's the Princess of Pocantico Hills! I didn't know those people have been pestering you and Elisabeth like that. Why, they have no right to bother my tenants without advanced notice. But it doesn't surprise me one bit. In this world there are people who will steamroll right over you, if you don't push back at them. I had a boss like that. And realtors, well ... they'll plow you down with the best of them, if you let 'em. 'Better move fast before the market falls out of bed.' What a laugh that one is!"

"Sounds like BS to me."

"Doesn't it though?"

Katie waited while Jan drowned the remnants of two melting ice cubes in more amber liquor and put the tabletop lighter to use on another cigarette. "So what's next, Jan?"

"Hell if I know what's next! Who do they think they are, hammering me down so I'll sell them one hundred acres for a song? What's today?"

"Fifth of June."

"We were supposed to have the whole deal wrapped up and delivered by now. I have half a mind to have Hudson tell Greenbrier to go to hell."

"You said if you pull out you'll have to pay Greenbrier back for that loan—what'd you call it...?"

"The promissory note, you mean?"

"Yeah, that."

"Sure I will. And sooner or later I suppose I'm going to have to pay for all those damn services Greenbrier has been hiring on my behalf. Sale or no sale, the bill will come due on those inspections and tests too. Won't that take another nice bite out of what I'm supposed to be taking to the bank! The whole thing's stopped making any sense, from a business point of view."

"From what point of view does it make sense?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, doesn't our living there add up to something?"

"Oh, you crazy character you! You think I can go on supporting you living down there while I barely make rent up here? And for what? To live like this? And don't forget the property taxes on that place. I've put off paying the second installment as long as I can without it costing me penalties again. What am I, a philanthropist all of a sudden? FDR? I'm definitely not Eleanor. No, I never was a great believer in any New Deal and I don't intend to start now."

Jan batted the lampshade aside; Katie nibbled a pretzel.

"Well, Jan, I'm afraid...."

"What is it? You have to go? Why not go get your things and change in there?" she proposed, waving her lit cigarette towards the closed doors.

"Don't have any things."

"Didn't you bring a change of clothes for the concert?"

"It's not a concert. It's just a club. It's casual."

"I'll say," Jan retorted, flicking the cigarette's ash toward the ashtray and giving Katie's blue jeans and plaid shirt a glance. "So now people are going out on Saturday night in San Francisco dressed like that—is that what you mean to tell me?"

"It's not downtown. Anyway, I've got a jacket in the truck."

"Tell you the truth, Katie, when you walked in here dressed like that, I thought, What the heck is this? When I was growing up, when we went to the City, young women never thought of wearing something like what you've got on in public. I know, I know, times change. And your neck and your arms are beet red. You know that, don't you? I noticed that right away even if I am blind as a bat. Can I give you just one small piece of advice before you go on your merry way? As a friend."

"Sure, why not?"

"To be out in the sun without protection, it's the one thing people with your complexion cannot do. No listen to me, don't make a face. I've seen it a million times. Girls come out to California from Illinois or Boston or Ohio ... I don't know where they come from. And the first thing they do is try to get a California tan. A California tan, ha! I know, you're not one of them; you're from Cliffport—quaint, quiet, queer old Cliffport! But why am I wasting my breath with you sitting there smirking at me?"

"I'm not smirking, I'm smiling. It's just funny to me is all. You sound like my mom twice over."

"Oh, criminy! I give up. You better go on and come back on another day. You will come back, won't you, dear?"

"Course I will, Jan."

"Oh, you young people! The clothes you wear even when you do dress up. They're calling them 'slip dresses' in the magazines but they aren't dresses. They're the slips without the dresses. Of course the people who make clothes will do just anything at all to sell them. Don't think I'm preaching to you about a lack of morals or whatever you want to call them because I'm not. Billy Graham can get on his bus and ride it out of town as far as I am concerned. I'm just talking

common sense and good taste. Style. But no one from your generation understands a word of what people my age mean."

"I think I understand."

"Do you? Then what about those tops they're calling 'fashionable summer blouses'? All armpits and no sleeves at all. And the bottoms? Those aren't pants, they're underpants! Then there are those horrible suntan lotions! What a stench! At least I hope you have enough sense left in your noggin not to go in for that new Miss Mantan suntan lotion being advertised. Have you seen that stuff on TV?"

"Must've missed it, Jan."

"Horrible! Keep away from all that cheap junk, Katie. In any case, you have a natural pale complexion and should keep yourself as pale and as soft as you possibly can."

"Jan...."

"And no mascara, Katie. No dark lip gloss either."

"Don't worry. I won't use any dark lip gloss, OK?"

"No, that's right. Can I ask you something else?"

"What?"

"Why are you letting your lunatic fringe grow so long?"

"My what?"

"Or aren't you doing anything at all with it?"

"Oh, this."

"Holy moly, Katie! You're letting your bangs hide half your face when you've got such wonderful gray-green eyes and a good strong nose. You may as well show them off, not hide them."

"What's a quote lunatic fringe unquote?"

"You be careful, Katie Lowrie, or people will confuse you with that whole society of lunatics invading Golden Gate Park. Free speech, free love! I wish I could enjoy the good life for free!"

"I don't call that 'the good life." Katie shifted her boots in preparation for standing. "Before I go, what I want to let you know is, we have some money now. A little while back my mom sold a painting worth a lot of money. At least for us it was a lot. We have some of it in the bank still, Jan, if you can believe that. Your tenants have money in the bank!"

"I'm glad somebody does. I know I don't, yet."

"But that's what I am getting at."

"What are you getting it? Oh Jesus H. Christ! I feel like a fool for barking at you just now. Now you'll never come back for a visit."

"I will too. Don't sweat it. I'm used to hearing it from one direction or another."

"Sometimes I don't know if it's me talking or this stuff. Promise me you'll come back here dressed however the hell you want to."

"OK, I promise. So you know we want to stay in the house as long as we can."

"I know that much, Katie. Swear to God, I'll never understand you. You've gotten more attached to that hillside than Elisabeth. Too attached, I'd say."

"I was born and raised there."

"So was I, Katie. So was I...."

They looked at one another for ten silent seconds.

"So here's the deal, Jan. How about we pay rent now for the rest of 1965? All of it."

"Please sit still and say that again."

"All I'm saying is, if you need some cash to tide you over ... like say the deal with Greenbrier falls through."

Jan adjusted her eyeglasses and again stared in the direction of the TV.

"Did you hear what I just said, Jan?"

"You're proposing to lend me money, is that it? There's a twist."

"It wouldn't be a loan."

"No? Then what would it be? A bribe?"

"It'd be six months' rent in advance is all. We pay you six months' rent in advance. Or how about a whole year? That'd give you money to live on until the right buyer does come along." "Who thought of this? Did you think of this by yourself? Does Elisabeth know about this idea of yours?"

"Sure she does. Sorta."

"What a hoot! A landlady borrows money from her tenants so they can live in her house! Who ever heard of that one before?"

"But it's not a loan, Jan."

"No?"

"There's no interest. We'd be paying you the rent as usual only in advance. You keep calling it a loan like you don't want us to pay you rent even though we'll be living there."

"That's not what I meant. You know damn well that's not what I meant."

"Well, that's what I meant. We have the dough now, Jan. You need it now. Let us pay you in advance. What the hell, I already bought a truck. DD got the second set of braces he needed. Mom's seeing a chiropractor. We're in pretty good shape for a change."

"You all better be careful, Katie. Don't do what I've done or you'll end up living in a hole like this." Jan adjusted the hemline of her dress and swiveled the belt's knot back toward the front. "I could use a trip to some dentist myself, to get some work done on this broken bridge in my mouth."

Katie glanced at the clock. "I gotta get going now. So will you think about it?" She pulled her wallet from her back pocket. "Right now let us pay for you to get your phone hooked up again."

"What'd you just say?"

"I said we want to be able to telephone you, you know?"

"I have lived without a telephone for almost two years now, Miss Lowrie, and I can live without one for a little while longer too."

"Oh, shit on a stick, Jan. I know you!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't be so false proud."

"Don't be what? What did you say to me, young lady? My lan'!"

"I said, I know you, Jan. I know you! I know you! Can't you and me at least cut the bullshit? Take this and get the fuckin' phone turned on, would you?"

"My word! My, my, my! Well, go tell a man! Maybe Elisabeth's right, the way you just spoke to me. Oh me oh my! I might be a bad influence on you after all."

"This is ridiculous! This is the twentieth century. You need a telephone. What if there's an emergency? How much will it cost to get Pac Bell to turn it on again?" With her left hand, Katie held the wallet open and with her right hand pinched a wad of bills. "Come on, how much?"

"Is this part of your scheme? What are you trying to pull on me? You better watch your step, girlie!"

"OK. So don't get your hands dirty with any bills. Where shall I put it? Twenty bucks to get your phone turned on? No, here's forty in case they need a deposit or something. You haven't even raised the rent on us, for Christ's sake. We owe you something for that." Katie slipped two twenty-dollar bills under the tabletop lighter. "Think how much easier it will be with a phone, Jan. You can call that lawyer of yours anytime you want. You can call Greenbrier up and tell him to go to hell!"

"That'd be nice."

"And you won't have me writing you and popping in on you not even knowing if you'll be here. I want to be able to phone you. Don't you get it? I want to be able to let you know what's going on at our end. I want to be able to find out what's going on at yours."

"At mine?"

"Yeah, you know, with Cummings and the Greenbrier boys." Katie shoved her wallet back into her jeans, placed her left leg forward of the other with the knee slightly bent, and crossed her arms, waiting for Jan's response.

"I haven't been to Reno in a long time, Katie Lowrie," Jan said, shaking her head, "but it seems to me someone like you might win against all odds over there." "Reno?"

"Reno, Nevada. I kept an apartment there for a while, you know."

"I didn't know that."

"And I can still spot a gambler when I meet one."

"What?"

"You're playing poker with me, aren't you?"

"How's that?"

"Well, aren't you betting I'm so hard up that waving a couple of Stonewall Jacksons in my face will win me over? Against Cummings. Against Greenbrier. Isn't that your game? Didn't you come up here to kill the sale for good? Sure you did. You came here to make sure I get off that leaking ship I've been on with that band of Santa Cruz County real estate pirates. Well, I am getting off it and may it sink to the bottom of the deep blue sea! But don't think you and your family can live happily ever after in exciting colorful Cliffport, California. What a fairy tale! Then again, you just might. I just might die right here in this chair tonight if things keep up the way they're going. Then what?"

"Baloney."

Jan took a gulp from her drinking glass then reached out to turn the top bill over so that both twenties showed face up. "Well, will you look who I'm standing drinks to now! You're a natural salesman!"

"Me?"

"Getting an old dodger like me to agree with your point of view. That's a good one!"

"What have you agreed to?"

"Oh, sit down a second, would you? I know you have to run but you better listen so you can report it all to Elisabeth correctly."

"OK. I'm sittin' down. What?"

"So what if this deal with Greenbrier Realty does sink in the Pacific? What if I let the listing expire without meeting their demands and without asking for an extension? What'll I have left then? There's that note to pay. OK. Then they'll be the bill for those so-called 'services rendered.' OK. But I won't have any buyer, will I? No. Don't you see I can't go on living on a monthly pittance from the government and rent checks from you? There's not a single antique left to sell, Katie, and I mean it. Don't I deserve better than this or the almshouse? I can answer that. After all the years I worked for the Belcanto Company? Yes, I do, I deserve better than this."

"You do. You do deserve better than this. I get that, I agree with you. Don't you hear me? I'm like totally agreeing with you. But those jackasses...."

"Which ones? They're so many out there."

"Greenbrier, especially. Has he ever shown the place to anybody else besides Cummings to see what somebody else might offer for a hundred acres on the Central California Coast?"

"I don't know. Maybe he has."

"He hasn't."

"Oh, so maybe I made a big mistake when I gave him the exclusive listing. But maybe he'll be showing it to other parties before the end of this month."

"Bullshit!"

"Ha!"

"That guy never even bothered to find out what the market will bear. Wow! I can't believe I'm talking like this."

"Go on, keep talking. It's starting to make more sense to me, your crazy way of doing business."

"You know what I mean, right? Greenbrier's got himself a sweetheart deal with Cummings cuz they'll be bigger fish to fry with that Land and Cattle Company down the road. The McLoughlin acreage in Cliffport? They'll be way bigger fish to fry than that. All I'm saying is this: it looks to me like Mister Realtor of the Year has worked out a bargain sale for Mister Cummings Junior. It's sure not for your sake, Jan. He wants to get the next generation of the Cummings clan into his back pocket, right? When it comes to big land deals up and down the California coast, probably inland too. Come on. After this

transaction Greenbrier'll be Cummings' man and vice versa." Katie glanced at the clock. "I better go now or I'll miss my friend."

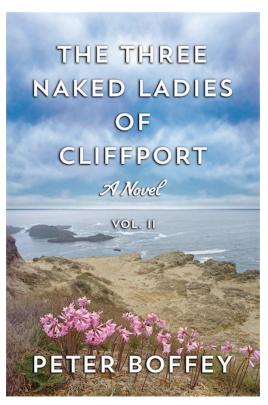
Jan paused in preparation to light another cigarette. "I always knew I liked you, Katie. It's good to see you all fired up. But then I've always been a sucker for a Sandy Andy kind of girl."

"Who? Oh yeah, her."

"You're feisty. You're a scrapper. It's the only way to be in this mean man's world we live in. There's no other way for females like us. The both of us born and raised in Cliffport, my lan'! I knew I liked you from the start. Your mother, now she's a harder row for me to hoe. I'll admit to that in a heartbeat. But you? You've kicked around some."

"I've been kicked around some."

"OK, go on now and don't be late. Go listen to your rock 'n roll or whatever you call it and I'll consider what we've been talking about. And don't worry. I'll take this here and contact the telephone company then I'll bide your call. No, on second thought I won't. First thing I'm going to do when I get that phone turned on will be to call you up—how about that? That's the first thing I'll do, Lady Katie, swear to God. Let's see if the old bat can still manage to dial a damned telephone number. Now go on, git, or you'll miss your big show."



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