

Santa Cruz' North Coast community finally sours on an unscrupulous developer; fighting the obliteration of all she values, an aging Katie Lowrie, last living member of Cliffport's pioneer family, becomes reluctant leader of the resistance.

The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport: Volume IV

By Peter Boffey

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12413.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**



THE THREE
NAKED LADIES
OF
CLIFFPORT

A Novel

VOL. IV

PETER BOFFEY

The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport
A Novel in Six Books
Vol. IV

Copyright ©2022 by Peter Boffey

Book & cover design, maps & interior images
copyright ©2022 Paddy Morrissey: www.paddydesigns.com
Cover image copyright ©2021 David Johnson
Line art ©2018 by Joan Hoffman

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form, or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means without written permission of author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Contact author and place orders at: www.peterboffey.com

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Boffey, Peter

The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport: Volume IV by Peter Boffey

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022902136

ISBN: 979-8-88531-062-8

Printed on acid-free paper

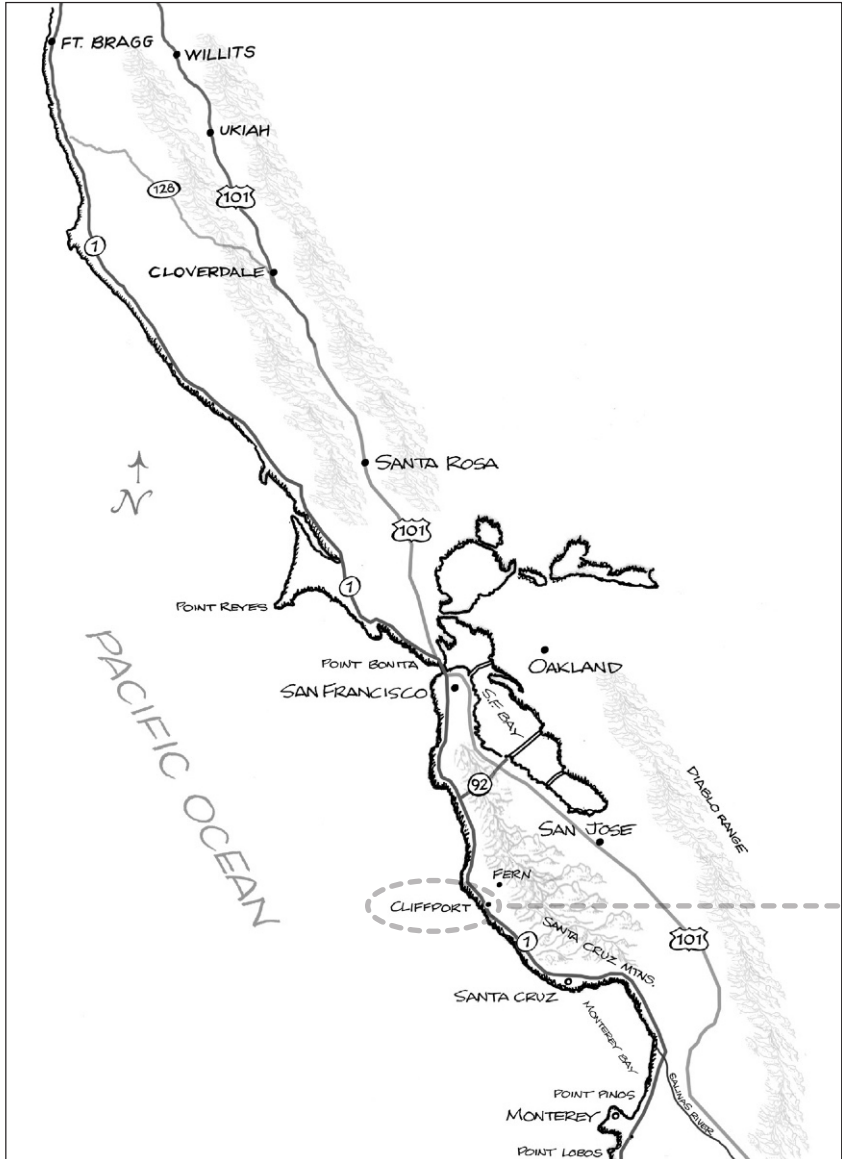
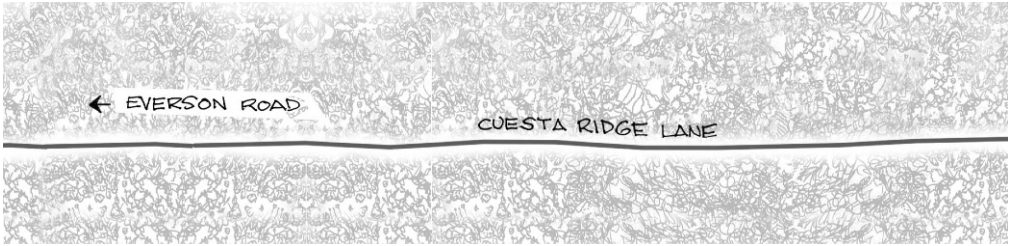
AUTHOR TO READER

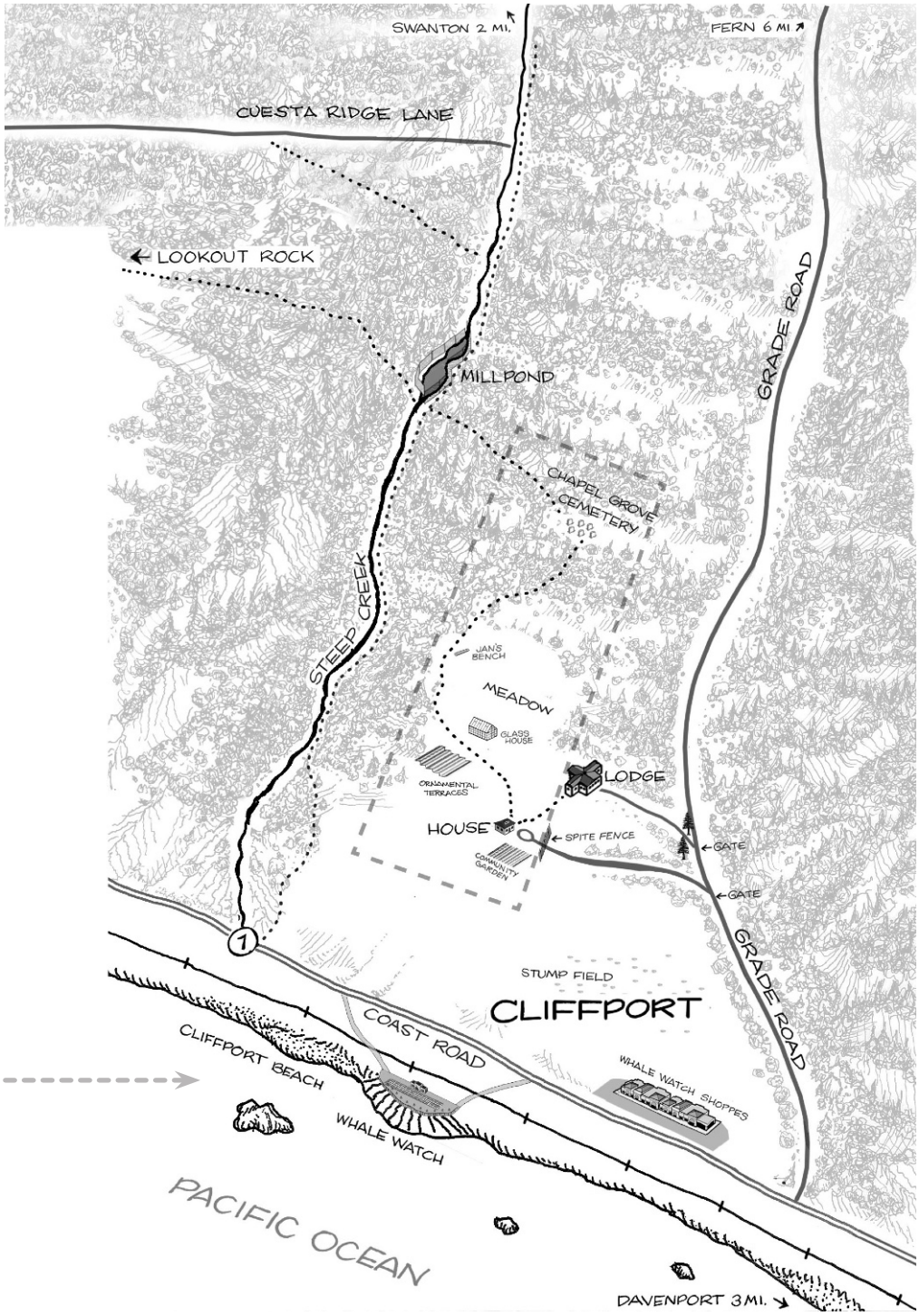
Book Six may be read and enjoyed with or without having read Books One–Five.

As in Book Five, certain backstories and passages—of perhaps greater technical or procedural detail than every reader may be interested in following—are marked with superscript numbers (^{1,2,3...}) indicating that they can be found in a section of NOTES placed after the main body of the text. Although enriching, these abridgments are not essential to following the story, and to read or not to read them is entirely the reader's choice.

The length, scope, and structure of *The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport* encourages a recursive approach to reading and re-reading the six books of the novel in part or in whole. Other materials in Book Six can be found under the NOVELS dropdown menu at peterboffey.com.

Foreign language words or phrases whose meanings are not immediately self-evident in the text are footnoted • at the bottom of the pages where they first occur.





BOOK SIX

January 1976–July 2020

<i>CHAPTER 1: Water Wars</i>	<i>p.1</i>
<i>CHAPTER 2: Betsy Young</i>	<i>p.15</i>
<i>CHAPTER 3: Damages Done</i>	<i>p.53</i>
<i>CHAPTER 4: Aftershocks</i>	<i>p.87</i>
<i>CHAPTER 5: Meet the Lodge Master</i>	<i>p.105</i>
<i>CHAPTER 6: The Golden Eagle</i>	<i>p.143</i>
<i>CHAPTER 7: New Tenants</i>	<i>p.191</i>
<i>CHAPTER 8: Miguel Avila</i>	<i>p.231</i>
<i>CHAPTER 9: Tourista</i>	<i>p.267</i>
<i>CHAPTER 10: Friends of Lowrie Ranch</i>	<i>p.337</i>
<i>CHAPTER 11: The Biggest Little City in the World</i>	<i>p.373</i>
<i>CHAPTER 12:</i>	<i>p.469</i>
<i>NOTES</i>	<i>p.513</i>

Chapter 1

Water Wars

Once Katie had Baby Blue put down, she carried the dog as far as Jan's bench, interring the body at the trailhead's twin redwoods, then hiked to the old growth trees to bury the Chinese box. Every Thanksgiving, when she laid the traditional wreaths and greens across the cemetery plots, she walked past Mother Merle and Baby Blue Eye's gravesites on her way to Chapel Grove and lingered there with a guitar, toggling between variants of the Castle Song.¹

In the house, in the garden, in the nursery—ever since her mother's death, Katie's everyday society was often only in her head. She grew so used to the solitary life that she no longer checked herself from speaking aloud or thought much about seeing no one for two or three days in a row. She left a neglected 5-string guitar lying about so she could pick it up on impulse, playing loudly or softly as long as she liked; she remained a bedrock folkie, burnishing the chestnuts. Although aware of contemporary music broadcast over the university radio or on albums given to her by friends—at infrequent parties she still entertained requests for classic popular staples by Roy Orbison and Patsy Kline—she rarely added to her own songbook, and her repertoire of old-timey mountain music, country & western numbers as well as classic English and American ballads was still welcomed whenever she took her cased Martin D-28—and her produce—to the

farmers' market; her singing remained in demand at local weddings, funerals, and the annual fund raiser at Mountain School. But her most powerful performances occurred when she was home alone by the fireplace, revisiting *Plaisirs d'amour* or *Silver Dagger*, lamenting *My Baby's Gone* while out on the deck, or floating the melodies of *Friendly Persuasion* about her mother's bedroom while she sat in the leather chair—rocking, whistling, reminiscing. Sometimes, in fair weather, she would take a beater guitar uphill and settle in at Jan's bench in the company of her new Border Collie, a brown-eyed, black-coated male with a white chest and copper points about his face—but no blue eyes, so as not to provoke associations with his predecessors. According to her mood, such solo sessions usually concluded with *Johnny's Gone for a Soldier* sung a capella in honor of Janet McLoughlin and her brothers, Glenn and Johnnie—the voiced verses alternating with a mock martial strumming of chords in the bridge between refrains.

Burl became her most devoted fan, especially after Katie confided to the Collie how, three decades prior, she had tried “to sell out” back East but no one had bought her act. She explained that she and Josie had originally picked up starter guitars and raised their voices in a simple impulse to sing their girlish dreams, to play as children play, to match as best they could the sounds they were hearing on the radio, the television, and the portable record player that the girls lugged to and from one another's house. They had not initially considered putting out albums, chasing contracts, pursuing fame; once she had made that distinction perfectly clear, the newly educated dog grasped the music's enduring value to his mistress and apprehended the honesty of her simplistic instrumental accompaniment of earnest song. Scanning the events listings in the Santa Cruz independent weeklies or, occasionally, the East Bay Express, Katie would periodically run across an announcement that Yvonne Faulkner, her other erstwhile playing partner, was appearing at Cabrillo College in Aptos or at the Starry Plough in Oakland or at Berkeley's Ashkenaz Café, and she mused upon how Yvonne had indeed kept true to a lifestyle immersed in Celtic music, while she herself had not sought out another musical

partner since Josie left California in 1971. Yvonne would be in her late sixties or older; Katie was relieved that no promotional photos of the woman ever appeared in the free press.

Other than conducting nursery business—at the end of the driveway she hung a sign reading “Open by coincidence or by appointment”—going to farmers’ market, or visiting with friends, Katie passed most days and evenings alone at One Grade Road, where great horned owls hooted, Western screech owls tooted, and Pacific chorus frogs made a racket on warm March nights. Summer evening fog came in from the sea and withdrew by noon the next day. Gray whales migrated south in winter, north in spring. In broad daylight, pocket gophers yanked her vegetables underground; aboveground, by night, the opossums and racoons helped themselves to her garden produce. Katie kept a BB gun in the greenhouse to dissuade squirrels from raiding the flats, but she left more holes in glass panes than stings in any hides. In January, the cedar waxwings alerted her that it was high time—or past—to ornament the mantelpiece, the bookcases, and the windowsills with the oblong, slow-ripening Hachiya persimmons and, upon their April return from Mexico, the black-headed grosbeaks ravaged the box elders up Billy’s Draw in a couple of days. Labor Day weekends, Uncle Mike and Aunt Suzanne overnighted in Cliffport, returning home with a handful of Ellie’s Bartlett pears; Katie spent Christmas holidays with the Crogans in Cloverdale, at home away from home.

A changing cast of characters revolved through the one basic nursery worker position at the nursery, usually youthful explorers hanging out at the farm and garden project on the UCSC campus or enrolled in horticulture studies at Cabrillo Community College. None stayed on the job more than six months; some left after only a week or a few days, the repetitive, primitive labor having quickly lost its charms. Meanwhile, Ross Stewart proved out a semi-reliable resource to call upon when his skills and tools could be applied—on his own timetable—to special projects on her place. Although Ross and Katie could goddamn each other’s eyes like argumentative marrieds, hours

later they would reconcile, laughing it off while cracking open cans of beer out on the deck, shooting the breeze over chips and her homemade salsa before he headed home to New Faith. Some workdays he would park under the oak, let his German Shepherd out to play with her Collie, perform his job, call in his dog, and drive off—all without a word spoken between them.

Katie never heard from Leticia Novato de Morales or Donald Duncan Lowrie. As far as family was concerned, Pieter Tuelling was the closest thing. The two solitaires cultivated a rapport such that each was released from needing any particular excuse to call upon the other in Cliffport or in Soquel, just to hang out, and he remained her ardent horticultural advisor, steering the evolution of her Redwood Coast Nursery into its niche as a solvent specialty business never promising to make its proprietress rich; in exchange, whenever he played camp host in some Southwestern state or went snowbirding in Alta Baja or Sonoran Mexico, she remained the steadfast steward of his Drika's park. Together they visited public gardens and attended flower shows in the Greater Bay Area, and Katie pounced upon rare specimens at one-of-a-kind plant sales about which the man informed her in advance. When the Brazilian fuchsia gall mite epidemic caused a swollen, twisted, hairy deformation of growing shoots and flowers in rapid-fire infestations spread by hummingbirds, bees, gardeners, and the wind, wiping out the hybrid fuchsia industry throughout California in 1981, Katie was well-positioned to augment her collection of species exempt from infection. In addition to drawing from the wide and deep selection available in Fort Bragg, the enterprising pair scoured the tropical holdings of UCB's Botanical Garden, the Fuchsia Dell near Golden Gate Park's Conservatory of Flowers, and the Cloud Forest and Chilean sections of the Strybing Arboretum, searching out fuchsia species to add to her nursery's unique inventory of garden worthies; her hardcore fans of the genus were happy to try them all. Eschewing garden club meetings and society gatherings only nominally focused upon the world of plants, Katie and Pieter did frequent arboretums and botanical gardens with such regularity that the staffs and volunteers

came to expect the two habitués to appear in each other's company or not at all; whenever they traveled to Fort Bragg, they enjoyed separate sleeping quarters under the Van Windens' roof. During spring and fall weekend sales at One Grade Road, Pieter voluntarily functioned as a sort of major duomo; Katie watched with amusement as the Dutch expat put on the dog and raked in the dough, for Santa Cruz County's well-endowed gardening gals were mightily impressed by his European manners, entranced by his accent, grateful for his advice about which and how many plants they should purchase that very day. He would station himself in the ornamental display terraces, enthralling small groups with his knowledge about the specimens which, throughout the rest of the year, he tended to as if they were still all his own.

Upon his return from overwintering in Baja California Sur in 1982-83, Pieter learned of Jack van Winden's death and moved up to Fort Bragg for the spring, taking charge of Margaretha van Winden's closure of Rhododendron Acres Nursery. After half a century residing on California's true North Coast—chilly, windy, wet—the widow Van Winden was ready to relocate to warmer, drier climes. Her daughter and son-in-law, having finished raising their own children in hot-summer Sacramento, were glad to switch homes with her, but they had no ambition to run any business in retirement nor were they especially keen on plants, so Pieter was entrusted with selling off the entire inventory—once Katie had selected the pick of the litter. While Peggy was packing for her big move, her compatriot interviewed candidates from various local landscape gardening firms in order to hire one seemingly up to the task of maintaining the casual yet stunning, grand-scale, estate-like shrubbery established on the grounds at the end of still humble Rhododendron Acres Lane.

During Pieter's six-month absence abroad in 1984, part of which time he spent touring the Continent as the avuncular chaperon to a trio of thirteen-year-old British boys—his nephew and two of his nephew's friends—Katie recognized to what extent his impacts upon her nursery and landscaped property were irreversible. With the final influx of camellias, azaleas, and rhododendrons from Fort Bragg, and

their latest experimental forays into raising some of the frost-tender evergreen shrubs with points of origin in the mountainous rainforests of Burma, Bhutan, and Tibet, Cliffport's native daughter almost forgot that hers had once upon a time been just a place to shop for 4-inch pots of garden variety geraniums, paper pulp bowls providing instant annual color, or strictly California natives. Having reached a new stage in her career as a plantswoman, Katelyn Liliane Lowrie celebrated her forty-eighth year by phasing out of one last routine propagation cycle and clearing the glasshouse benches of her one last cash crop. She sank some specie pelargoniums in sheltered spots outside and stacked her hard-worked trays of dahlia tubers in the single plastic hoop house, which she had retained for obscure, no-good reasons.

*

The winter of 1985, scant rain or snow fell in Northern California, and 1986 ran dry. Rumors of groundwater basins giving out up and down the Central Coast's marine terraces were confirmed in August by the State Water Board's publication of another emergency study resulting in the Governor's declaration of severe drought and Santa Cruz County's announcement of draconian water-saving regulations. Yet even the historically low runoff in spring 1987 didn't explain the disappearance of water flow in Steep Creek. All Katie's life, wellsprings had refilled the reservoir feeding the creek, partially diverted to charge the cistern which fed the three-thousand-gallon redwood tank situated four hundred feet uphill of the main house. Gravity and successive generations of baby submersible pumps had always delivered enough untreated water to irrigate the orchard and the vegetable garden, to saturate the soil around the landscaped bushes, and to keep the containerized inventory moist. Since subterranean veins of cold water were the origin of the legendary frog ponds predating the creation of the millpond—which had in turn become the reservoir—she wondered if an almost inconceivable desiccation of those invisible sources was causing the unprecedented shortage.

In July 1987, the cistern emptied, and waterline pressure approached nil. As Katie watched the storage tank's float level

descend, she accepted the fact that the cistern would not be recharging and switched over to irrigating the nursery with potable well water. However, sporadic breakdowns of the pump providing the Lowries with house water had never been encouraging, and now Katie paid an employee at the sprinkler store to inspect the fifty-year-old, 150-foot-deep well; the man concluded that the system—overworked with increased usage—could fail any day. Cleaning or replacing the pump might postpone the date; more testing could be conducted; but given widespread evidence, the aquifer itself was likely lowering out of reach. In any case, the well and pump were obsolete, and deepening the existing shaft would probably cause the old borehole casing to collapse in upon itself, a waste of time and money.

After Monteflores' roving patrol guard had finished his evening shift, Katie snooped around uphill and discovered that her neighbors had made major alterations to the waterworks. A new pump had been installed and the reservoir drained down to a wide puddle lying below the screened outlet to Steep Creek; hundreds of feet of flexible pipe left exposed aboveground—except where shallowly buried beneath the privatized Cuesta Ridge Lane—now connected the reservoir to a second basin which the developer's hirelings had carved out of a former stock pond half a mile away on the adjoining upland. In essence, the plumbing had been reengineered so that whatever water, whether from springs or rainfall, was first syphoned off for use by the developer; the old millpond was no longer operative as a reservoir serving both its rightful users, and Monteflores was in violation of its obligation to guarantee Katie's customary access to freshwater.

Her inquiries were stonewalled; no one from the CPM-YMS-Gath Construction axis responded. But in the process of leaving messages with the Vignettes' switchboard operator, its off-hours answering service, and its telephone answering machine, Katie did learn that Sea-to-Summit LLC had apparently dissolved all amiable relations with Monteflores Inc: the contractual arrangement formerly contingent upon acquisition of the property belonging to Cliffport's holdout landowner was null and void. She visited the university,

caught the attention of some prelaw students, told them of the brazen reconfiguration of the waterworks, whose functioning water supply terms she herself had built into equitable easement stipulations inseparable from the deed and any transfer of ownership. Two idealistic senior year undergrads were outraged by the servient tenant's unilateral abrogation of responsibilities and took it upon themselves to draft a letter, signed by Katie Lowrie, addressed to Coastal Property Management, petitioning for an immediate rectification of the situation in favor of the dominant tenant.

Katie concluded that a regional supervisor in CPM's San Jose office must have assigned an underling to handle the reply, perhaps without the owners or developers having even been made aware of the dispute, for the only response was a poorly typed, shoddily spelled cover letter with some flakey documentary materials enclosed. The unprofessional communication presented a lame, patently self-serving explanation: the secondary pit had been dug—in all goodwill to all parties—as a retention pond designed to capture overflow from the reservoir in the event of another 100-year storm such as had wreaked havoc in the winter of 1964 or the Love Creek landslide tragedy in 1982. A faded photocopy of a tear sheet from the Santa Cruz Sentinel's 1965 New Year's Day feature article on the damage to the county's North Coast was enclosed, along with a separate photograph of Ben Lomond's massive mudslide, and a handful of boilerplate texts printed on the letterhead of a Nevada-based hydrogeologist. The documents offered detailed charts and tables addressing erosion rates of differing soils, vagaries of slope stability, angles of inclination, etc. Given the emergency state of drought throughout California, the pretext of preventative flood control was transparently bogus.

She unearthed relevant portions of the studies commissioned by Greenbriar's associates during the realtor's abortive attempt to help Cummings buy her out in 1965, and she contacted the same two zealous UCSC students, who were confident that a more strongly worded, notarized letter on stationary from the campus' Student Center for Social Justice would resolve the matter; this second message closed

by threatening legal action if the facility were not promptly restored to its prior condition, ensuring the reservoir's capacity to store and deliver freshwater to Steep Creek as prescribed by law. No response was forthcoming. Meanwhile, the official start of wildfire season was declared by Sacramento and, contemplating a protracted legal battle if she went forward with the students' ineffectual threat, Katie took one last look at Steep Creek gone bone-dry, measured the old well's failing recovery rate, assessed the pitiable flow at the house faucets and sputtering nursery spigots, and scrambled to find a well digger who could drill a new, deeper bore and install a pump, ASAP.

In her race to track down an available and affordable service, she fell back upon Ross Stewart and appealed to him for regional references; he came back with a proposal to do the job himself, under the guidance of one of their former high school classmates, Dell Simmons, whose father had run a family well digging business throughout North County. Dell wasn't a contractor himself, but he knew what it took to do the job and could start and finish the project the following week. Plus, he was comfortable teaming up with Ross Stewart and using the equipment inherited from Lloyd Hanover—and he was cheap. But certain conditions applied: Dell wouldn't deal with any permitting processes; he would be paid up front in cash and, while Ross might be available for callbacks, Dell would not, for he was headed elsewhere, indefinitely, soon.

Upon meeting the man in person, Katie reflected that Dell might well have been one of many who had tried to get into her pants during their junior and senior years at Regional High—or had it been his brother? She could not remember whether either one of them had “scored” but the subject never came up, and Katie hired the dubious duo on the spot. She was accustomed to taking chances on Ross; most recently she had gambled and won when stealing bamboo with him from Bill McGrath's abandoned grove on the neighboring land, a joint venture netting her \$1,500, which was about the amount the well drilling partnership would be charging her—if nothing unexpected intervened, like bedrock blocking their augur or a deep

aquifer requiring boring below two hundred feet. In any event, that was her ready cash and, considering its provenance, she relished the poetic justice, for the funds derived from her resale of the purloined rare bamboos. Katie wasn't thrilled to be tapping into what was to have been seed money for her home improvements, but up against the prospect of a total water outage at One Grade Road she had little choice.

On a subsequent visit to the millpond, Katie observed that all the plumbing was now locked inside a cage and an inline shutoff valve had been added to the outflow pipe leading to the new reservoir on Monteflores' upland. She could not risk climbing over the chain link to get a closer look, but she interpreted the installation of the valve as a frivolous reaction to her "lawyers'" complaints. Of course, the valve's existence did not address the issue; she resolved to one day challenge—in earnest—the developer's violation of the letter and spirit of the legally binding deed.

*

When Georgellen Davies died, Katie sang at the opening of the memorial gathering held at the Ben Lomond's Quaker Center and afterwards, in the background, strummed quiet guitar. As participants slowly emptied out of the hall, a man named Jesse approached to express how touched he had been by her sensitive music and how he would love to hear her sing some more. He identified himself as Georgellen's soon-to-be ex son-in-law who—in the final stages of divorce proceedings with Georgellen's daughter—found himself in an awkward, untenable position as the sole executor of Georgellen's estate. Jesse claimed he had always respected his mother-in-law and still retained a fond feeling for the deceased, but he had not spoken out during the leaderless service since his presence wasn't particularly welcomed; he was only visiting Santa Cruz to honor Georgellen and to transfer his designated role to one of the woman's surviving relatives in attendance.

The next morning, Jesse found his way to One Grade Road. It became clearer and clearer that the man didn't want to see the Redwood Coast Nursery so much as he wanted to spend time with its proprietress and, during a tour of the nursery and grounds and an improvised garden salad lunch, their mutual yearning to minimize the space between flesh became obvious to both of them. Their shared longing became palpable as she walked him down to his rental car parked under the oak, and she invited him back for a hike to Lookout Rock. The next day, on their descent through a sunlit corridor of manzanitas, he took her hand; she let him hold it a long while then squeezed thrice and let go.

Friday, he telephoned with a proposal that she join him for the McGarrigle Sisters' concert in Santa Cruz on Saturday night; Loudon Wainwright III might also appear on stage. Katie witnessed her pent-up pining for masculine companionship drive her to absurd lengths while she prepared for her first date in years. As she started prettifying herself after lunch on Saturday, in her mind's eye she leapt ahead to the moment when their lips might touch—if only he knew how to navigate the maze of her own conflicted moods better than she did. *And who would lead whom to bed? Did he think she was such easy pickings? And what if he didn't bring a rubber?* She trimmed and filed the extended nails of her thumbs and pointer fingers usually left long, the better to pluck guitar strings and work close-in with plants: sprinkling seeds, pinching shoots, picking at petals, flicking off bugs. She laughed aloud, imagining herself getting pregnant at fifty-one years of age. *Is there any chance? Is the wolf picking me off like some pathetic stray from the herd? Maybe I better not go to bed with him, if it comes down to it, at least not so soon.* Yet with Jesse only passing through Santa Cruz, and nothing else to check her desire—and no one to answer to but herself—she knew she would. *If I can. If he will. Oh, he will.*

Midway through Saturday afternoon, Katie drove up to the Western Wear Store in Half Moon Bay and purchased a pair of

slimmed, bootcut blue jeans. Back home, she bathed and put on one of three oversize white dress shirts, which months earlier she had washed, ironed, and hung in the hallway closet downstairs after discovering these forgotten relics from her long-gone father's wardrobe in the attic. She tucked the shirttails into her waistline encircled by a narrow tan leather belt with discs of drilled white shells sewn zigzag all the way round. She turned up the collar, rolled the sleeves above her elbows and, looking in the dresser mirror, gathered her long, full, chestnut waves between her hands, removing a lacquered chopstick from between her teeth and sticking it through her hair. *What are you a potter now?* she laughed, imagining how Jan, the old fashion hound, would crack up at her rare reaching after feminine effects. *And wouldn't Mom tsk-tsk if she could see her idiot daughter taking off one necklace then putting it right back on?* It had never occurred to Katie to attempt galvanizing Pieter Tuelling's attentions. *He's like my older brother but this one's not, Jesse's not. And wouldn't JoJo be surprised if she found out I do manage to get laid every five or ten years or so just don't tell Aunt Suzanne.*

Anticipating her date's arrival, she let her hair fall back down her neck, pulled it up off her neck, let it drop again. She fished one of Jan's celluloid barrettes from the bureau and arranged her natural waves on the left side of her neck, setting them with a tortoiseshell clip, hiding one ear; then she reversed the procedure, partially veiling her jumpy right eye, covering her other ear with a deep-blue wool beret worn aslant. At the mirror by the door, she was dangling an earring from her earlobe, debating how much hair to leave in bangs—*will he like it this way or maybe this oh there you go again, giving your eyes away to another damn man. I'd give this jittery eye away forever if I could*—when her gentleman caller bounded up the steps, duded up in crisp ranch-hand attire that looked newly bought. They could not help but smile at each other and hugged wildly right there and then, but she didn't invite him in past the screen door for fear that they'd never get to the concert on time, maybe not at all—rushing everything, ruining it all; if she let him take one step inside the house, she knew they would.

During their weeklong affair, Katie often wore only panties under the loose white shirts and, when not tangled up in sheets, he ogled her movement throughout the rooms as they played house, often asking her to sit still and make her music. Jesse openly adored her mannish surety and spoke of trying to decipher her more mysterious moods. Katie likewise studied his moves as—unclothed—he lounged and paced, poking about her place, the musculature of his shoulders and hindquarters as smooth and viscous as that of any healthy Western pleasure horse. After concluding his business in Santa Cruz County, Jesse left for Tucson, declaring he had finally figured out that it was her forceful character that still disarmed him most, not some glossy, eye-popping, magazine-cover-girl look. Before that moment, he had not once dared broach the subject of that attractiveness peculiar to her, which he now avowed he had sensed immediately and confirmed whenever he viewed her from certain angles and in certain light.

When menopause and the first serious patches of gray hair appeared a few years later, Katie remembered Jesse's ambiguous gift of words and her satisfying yet perhaps final fling at sex. He had found her features "intriguing," she liked to recall, and had treated her physical preferences with care, yet she worried Jesse might be the last man ever to go deep enough below the prickly hide of her personality to savor the succulence within. In her mid-fifties, naked before the mirrors in her house, she was still that familiar scarecrow without stuffing staring back at her, but at least Jesse had given her an enduring confirmation: as a lover, she was neither armed nor dangerous, just different, and sometimes damn good. The two funny ears; the twitching, squinty, slightly inwardly crossed right eye—she tried covering half her face with her hand then the other half, studying the split. *It's all yours*, she told the mirror on the wall, *so what should you do next, whoever you are? Sign up for a makeover at the Chaminade Resort and Spa?*

Chapter 2

Betsy Young

“What the heck is *that*?”

“That’s a fence, Pieter.”

Burl obeyed her scowl and sat; Katie walked closer and copied Pieter’s stance—feet apart, arms crossed—as they stared at the wooden stockade pickets.

“Is so high.”

“That’s what you call ‘a spite fence’.”

“But for what?”

“They didn’t say. A crew came by and threw this up in my face. One guy told me they’d lose their jobs if they talked to me about it. By the way, welcome back. How the hell are you, world traveler? Give me a hug.” They embraced; Katie’s one look back at the whining dog released the pet from her command, and the three of them ambled up the gravel ramp to stand in the opening between the walls.

“*Jaja*, is good to see you too, Missus Katie. But not this ... this....”

“Spite fence,” she reiterated.

Pieter patted the Border Collie and lit up a cigarillo, shaking his head while surveying the structure’s two sections running perpendicular to the driveway’s opening. None of the posts, rails, and toenailed buttresses facing the Lowrie residence on the backside

were visible on the frontside presented to Monteflores Lodge West, a modified Arts and Crafts edifice of redwood, glass, and limestone cladding.

“How tall is it?”

“Something like twelve feet.”

“That’s three meters! That’s crazy!”

“Not if your idea is to hide your neighbor’s property from sight,” Kate replied, “and royally piss her off at the same time.”

“*Ach!* What those peoples going to do next?”

“Probably add a gate right where we’re standing. But that’d be so wrong I’d just take it down. Oh, *Inspecteur Tuelling*, I’m so glad you’re back! Walk out to the road with me. Let me show you something.”

Their view in from Grade Road offered a straight sightline framing the far end of the drive between the vertical panels of pickets abutting one another in two matching, smooth, solid facades.

“See how they did a good job making it one shot down to the kiosk and the oak. Looks almost quaint from out here, right? Could be on the cover of *Sunset Magazine*, all so clean and tidy. No problem; everything under control. Come on up to the house. I’ll make us some fresh coffee and you can tell me about your trip. Or your trips. I got your postcard from the Alhambra, by the way.”

They chatted on the return; Katie had nothing dramatic to report about her dutiful caretaking of his house and garden park above Soquel Gulch.

“Those deers been bad this summer here too?”

“They have. Wait till you see what those l’il ol’ black-tails have done to some of Peggy’s plants in your display garden, Mister Tuelling.”

“That’s not *my* display garden!”

“No? Okay, *our* display garden then. Does that sound better? Sometimes I wish they’d put one giant fence up all around this place. That way at least the Lowrie barrio would have a decent deer barrier. Come on.”

On their way past his truck, he fetched a grocery bag from the cab.

“Some *koekjes* for Cliffport?”

“*Oh jaja*, I got to give someone sweet something sweet for taking care of my place.”

“No, you don’t.”

“... *Ja*, I do. She will never take money for it, you know that.”

“She sounds kinda stubborn,” Katie responded.

“Oh, she’s stubborn, that Katie Lowrie.”

“*Yaya!* I think I know who you mean!”

They made their ascent up the front porch steps and turned to take another long look.

“I never heard of a ‘spite fence’ and all like that.”

“I guess they’re punishing me for staying put and not marveling at their new lodge or their ‘betterments’ down on Highway One. Have you been down there yet?”

“I saw something.”

“Those Whale Watch Shoppes at Cliffport Village opened for business while you were away. But come on inside: coffee time.”

“*Cookie* time,” he corrected her, rattling the paper bag.

Katie cleared space on the round tabletop where she had taken to leaving her mail, newspapers, and paperwork spread helter-skelter, having relegated the back “office” down the hall to shelves of seed jars; a bookcase stuffed with garden books, calendars, and catalogues; drying herbs hanging upside down from a clothes rack and spread out on trays.

Dipping *koekjes* in coffee, she accepted the compilation of colorful pamphlets and postcards the retired plantsman had collected during extended, guided tours through private and public gardens in Spain, Portugal, and the Canary Islands. Before going back outside to inspect their tender rhododendrons and vines, they paused at the picture window to gaze downhill.

“From out there,” Katie volunteered, “they managed to hide some of my funky stuff. But they sure didn’t take my view into consideration,” she added, pointing toward the maintenance yard located behind the neighboring lodge. “From here you get a fine view of all the crap they don’t want their guests to see, right?”

Inside an expansive enclosure of tall, chain link fence fitted with privacy slats, the yard contained two dumpster bins and, around its internal perimeter, lumber scraps, piles of pipes, stacks of precast concrete piers. Mounds of gravel and white sand backed up to the slatted fencing and, in one corner, empty beer and soda cans sloped away from the wall. Orange safety cones were stored beside a blue, plastic portable toilet. A reel mover and greens-keeping tools were stashed beneath one three-sided tent and, under a larger canopy, a trio of golf carts was parked parallel to a black minibus.

“You should see those little carts scurrying around. The four-seater takes guests back and forth from the shopping center. The head janitor uses the little one, and the guy who takes care of the practice putting green and the sand pits on the side over there uses the beat-up one.”

“Have you talked to that gardener, Katie?”

“I don’t go near that place. I do see somebody gardening outside the building but somebody else rakes those two sand pits and babies that putting green every single morning just after sunrise. Manicuring, aerating, spraying, you know: high maintenance.”

“And that big black automobile...?”

“I guess that’s for picking up people at the airport and shuttling guests up to Monteflores to play golf, maybe have a looksee at their mansions being built at Vignettes II.”

“Vignettes II?”

“That’s how they’re advertising them: The Vignettes II at Monteflores.”

“*Wauw, wauw, wauw*, they got no sense of history, those peoples.”

“I think they buy the lots before their private palaces are built out.”

“*Oh jaja*, I think is so, I think is so.”

“So, I get a bird’s eye view of all their rubble, but mine gets hidden from their guests.”

The pair went out through the pantry door; Burl promptly joined them at the deck rail as they again gazed at the fence that seemed so out of place.

“Katie!” Pieter burst out. “Your advisor just now got an idea. How about you plant that monstrosity with the coral passionflower vine what you like so much? Just let it climb all over that darn fence. You could smother that spite with beauty.”

“Not a bad idea, professor: flower power! It wouldn’t take long with enough water and fertilizer. But did it work back in the Sixties? Anyway, that fence is set back from the line so it’s all on their property. I can’t plant it or paint it or anything else or I’m sure to get another serious letter from their attorneys. My only hope is that Ross and I left enough running bamboo roots in the ground to become a real nuisance to them in years to come.”

“Maybe you got to get one of those attorneys too, Katie, one these days. I can’t see how they got a permit to build that fence that high for no good reason.”

“Maybe one of these days I will. But first let’s see what damage those little darlin’ deer can do when they’re hungry ... or just curious.”

*

As part of the mitigation measures mandated by the California Coastal Commission for violations of environmental laws during their construction of The Whale Watch Shoppes, YMS Int’l had been forced to finance a major upgrade of the traditionally informal, impromptu whale watching turnout on erstwhile Coast Road. A wider, paved parking lot had been configured as a thrust stage surrounded on three sides by bluffs and dramatic surf; a double row of safety railings, three weatherproof explanatory panels, a pair of modern restrooms, a telescope, and a steel staircase leading down to Cliffport Beach had been installed. Painted lines now directed vehicles exiting from and reentering traffic on Scenic Highway One; lines had also been striped to keep the parked cars in order.

Immediately opposite, on the inland side of the widened road, the developers of Vignettes I and II and Monteflores Lodge West had sited the shopping center almost exactly where, one century prior, the old town’s hotel, livery, and general store had been the going concerns.

Basically a strip mall with designated parking slots set at an angle out front, the shopping center leased retail space to a half-dozen enterprises in a single-story complex of deliberate aesthetic harmony. The stylized Western false front motif and a reliance on the same building materials throughout—especially redwood bleached to resemble the soft gray of naturally aged driftwood—gave the impression of one long, large, yet casual ranch house, whose repeated architectural features created a sense of natural coherence. The faux-gray planters and boardwalk planks contributed to a sense of one continuum tying things together. The redwood shingles of the siding and overhanging eaves of the shake roof reinforced the unified feeling throughout, inviting a flow of foot traffic in and out of the recessed bays of the shop entrances—all sliding barn doors with matching iron hardware; half-doors gave onto the shared courtyard out back.

In the centrally located passageway between front and rear, moat-like bands of succulent plants were sunk below the boardwalk in bands running alongside the buildings so that one looked down upon beds arranged to simulate coral reefs. The underwater tapestry effect was enhanced by employing minor variations of the same restricted palette of plants creating one curvaceous, linear garden running throughout the complex. Rosettes of aeonium lengthened their stems; staggered clumps of echeverias threw up nodding flower spikes; submerged masses of sedums and sempervirens seemed to crest in waves; donkey-tailed euphorbias sprawled this way and that, as if swaying in tidal pools. Congruity was also orchestrated into the complex by a suite of large-scale, black-and-white photographs framed in raw wooden lath, each image featuring the California gray whale in one of its typical behaviors. Mounted throughout the center, shots taken from onshore and shipboard showed classic postures of the iconic sea mammals breaching, blowing, spy-hopping, lying still like giant breathing rocks in hooked, coastal coves. Aerial photography had captured mothers with calves; juvenile pods; dramatic instances of tail fluking and lobtailing; and huge individuals surfacing, draped in kelp. The collective effect of these iterations subliminally prepared

all visitors to feel instantly familiar with the rear courtyard's polished marble sculpture of the Whale Watch's insignia—a leaping gray whale—where it glistened within thin jets of water spray thrown wide enough to blacken a ring of white pebbles surrounding the fountain's rim.

Before Pieter returned from abroad, assuming that she would remain incognito among strangers, Katie had once overcome her resistance to visiting the newly opened establishment. In addition to Monteflores' own occupancy of the two end units (a satellite real estate sales office at one corner and a small-scale golf clothes shop at the other), the complex housed the Seaspray Art Gallery; a jewelry store called Amber & Abalone; Another Foggy Morning—a boutique dedicated to hats, scarves, gloves, sweaters, and blankets—and Sand in the Wind, A Nature Store. There were two eateries: an upscale, white-linen bistro called A Deluxe Dive, and The Hungry Whale, a deli-café with picnic supplies. Having confirmed her suspicion that the place represented much of a culture she was wont to rail against and would remain loathe to patronize for the rest of her life—or so she pledged—Katie had left within five minutes. Yet, upon further reflection, she had felt relieved that The Whale Watch Shoppes at Cliffport Village boasted no overpriced antiques store, no museum—glitzy or shoddy—of local history, no gussied-up ersatz General Store. Better that this haven for genteel consumerism display no commemorative plaques or sawmill blades or whaling harpoons than make some fatuous pretense of honoring the local historical community and commemorating those who truly deserved it—a judgment that neither the international investors nor their agents would ever know how to begin to evaluate or respectfully present.

*

Pieter and Katie sat over coffee and pastries, studying the tourists in the wind-protected courtyard.

“You see, Miss Lowrie? No one knows who you are.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel good?”

He leaned over the white, wrought-iron café table, tilting his forehead so that his blue eyes stared at her from between his glasses' dark horn rims and his wiry white eyebrows. "This is simply not our place, my dear," he whispered in an affected British accent.

"That's for sure!" she shot back. "I think the old Pottery Works was right about where we're sitting. God! There's not even some saltwater taffy or some macramé driftwood mobiles, something I can relate to."

"*Jaja*, no kitsch allowed in Cliffport Village."

"I feel completely out of it right where I was born and raised."

"And you couldn't afford to move into one of those villas they got for sale up the hill either."

"Duh!"

"Me neither," he said. "Say, what about the little burg of Fern? Anything new up there while I been gone."

"They're finally putting in a 7-11."

"*Nee nee*, not one of those!"

"*Yaya*, anoder won a doze, Pieter Tuelling! What you think? They're out of the coastal zone so they do whatever they like up there. That's the reason YMZ starting buying Cummings' land in the first place. Once those corporate investors bought the Scaroni Ranch in the late Sixties, people realized leapfrog development was on its way. Bye bye, North Coast! They once tried to build five or ten thousand homes on Wilder Ranch—"

"... *five thousand?*"

"And another thousand on Scaroni's. 'You can't stop progress,' they say, but those monster developments got stopped by protests and the Coastal Commission. '71, '72, '73, that's when the development wars up this way were hot, before I even met you. Seems like I'm the only one still caught in the crossfire. Come on, let's go, you've seen it all by now. This place freaks me out."

"I got to admit I like the Dutch doors, sorry about that. So, you want to try out that telescope they got set in cement across the road?"

“Not now. There aren’t any whales out there this time of year. You want to know something else?”

“Ja...?”

“That telescope is on the spot where my mother and father met for the very first time.”

“I didn’t know that, Katie.”

“Of course you didn’t. Nobody does. He was painting. She was out walking or something, I don’t know. My mom told me about it once. I wasn’t around at the time.”

“*Nee nee*, not exactly! Okay, so, no whale watching today, eh?”

“No, we can check it out, I guess. I wonder if any of the Pottery Guild survivors have been down here yet. Ah, shit, Pieter! Maybe you better check out that scope by yourself some other time. All this is okay, I suppose, if you’re not from here.”

“Now what have we got here, Burl?”

The dog joined her mistress descending the railroad tie steps to greet a nondescript Chevy Nova parking under the oak. “Pieter!” Katie called, recognizing his bulky back expanding out from the opening passenger side door and a stranger’s big body emerging from the driver’s side. “To what do we owe this pleasant surprise?”

“Katie, I want you to meet Betsy Young, what I told you about.”

The two women shook hands.

“Pleased to meet you, Betsy.”

Betsy looked to be in her mid-thirties; she was a heavily shaped figure with sandy hair in a ponytail and a long-sleeve plaid shirt jacket worn outside her jeans. Despite her girth, the woman crouched to put the Collie at ease with soft sounds and a friendly hand.

“Same here,” the first-time visitor said, standing up again and adjusting her shirt tails. “I’ve been wanting to meet you for a long time. I’ve heard lots of good things about you and your place here.”

“Oh? That’s nice. So, that’s what kept you here in fishing season, Pieter?”

Betsy opened her mouth to reply but, glancing at her escort then lowering her eyes, closed it, obviously waiting for their elder to speak up first.

“I want to walk up Waddell Creek, Katie. It’s twenty-three years today since Drika passed away.”

“And I asked if I could come along,” his companion added, extending her hand to touch the man’s elbow.

“Did you know Pieter’s wife?”

“I sure did, since I was a little kid. She was like a second mom to me. The Tuellings lived down the street from us in Corralitos forever. When I finally found this guy up in his hideout last weekend and found out he was coming this way, I asked if I could come along.”

“And you can join us, Katie, *jaja*.”

Katie batted down a rush of jealousy, picturing this chubby, plain-faced, brown-eyed woman as a girl then as a grown, young, adult female who might be frequenting the older man’s Soquel abode. “Nah, better not today. I’m expecting a good customer, not that he ever shows up when he says he’s going to.” Katie knew she was over-reacting, yet she sensed an intimacy between the couple she didn’t care to breach. “So, you two have known each other a long time.”

“Oh, *ja*. I know the Youngs and this Betsy here since ... well, like she said now ... since she was....” He extended his right hand, raising and lowering the palm as if gauging the distance from the ground; the dog came to attention, his eyes following the ambiguous signals with a quizzical tilt of his head. “Say about like this...? Remember when we first met?”

“Of course I do.” She shifted her weight and propped one elbow on top of the subcompact’s roof. “Here’s this awfully pretty lady and this really friendly man with a very strange accent moving in right down the street from us. What was I, four or five?”

“Then maybe we make it smaller,” he replied, again lifting his arm from his side but adjusting the hand’s height downward.

“I may have been that petite once,” Betsy remarked, chuckling. “But nobody’d dare call me that now.”

They all laughed.

“And within the first five minutes inside my father’s new greenhouses, this Dutchman here was telling my dad what to do with his plants.”

“*Nee nee*, nonsense!”

“That’s the way Dad tells it!” Betsy protested.

“*Ach*, I gotta talk to that hardheaded father of yours! Anyway, he never once took my advice in all these years!”

They all laughed again.

“That’s not true,” Betsy stated, addressing their hostess. “Pieter has always been my father’s best horticultural advisor.”

“Mine too,” Katie concurred.

“And *friend* too,” Pieter insisted.

“And friend,” Betsy echoed.

“And friend,” Katie chimed in.

“And Dad’s drinking buddy too,” Betsy added, winking at Katie. “Right, Pieter?”

“*Ach* ... she means *fishing* buddy, Katie,” Pieter corrected her. “You know, this Betsy’s English ... is not so good.”

“Come on, everybody,” Katie announced, as she watched the woman throw a playful punch into the man’s ribs. “Or do you want Pieter to show you around?”

“Oh, I’d love to have a look. But you come too if you have time.”

“I do,” Katie said, gesturing in the direction of the main path up the hillside. “Until ‘The Garden Artisan’ shows up.” She snickered. “That’s what some guy calls his business, ‘The Garden Artisan.’”

“I like that!” Pieter stated.

“I’ve heard all about your green thumb and the plants you won’t see anywhere else in Santa Cruz County. How come you never enter them in competition at the County Fair?”

“Oh, Betsy!” Pieter guffawed. “Don’t waste your breath on this one. I’ve tried, I’ve tried. This one’s stubborn!” he concluded, tapping his bucket cap with a fat finger.

“Well, they’re Pieter’s special plants actually,” Katie countered, throwing her arm partway around his torso from the side. “Let him show them off and win the blue ribbons.”

“*O mijn god! Vrouw!* • Would you two stop teasing an old man and let Katie show us what she got? Or else I leave you both here and take Burl up to Waddell Creek, if I can fit in behind that steering wheel in that little tin box.”

They laughed and smiled and started up, each separately pausing to study a flower part or sniff a blossom or test the texture of a leaf between finger and thumb. “So, you know about plants, I can see,” Katie commented, pausing at the first turnout in the gravel path.

“Oh, yeah. You could say I was born in a nursery, after the hospital I mean.”

“Don’t you be so modest, Betsy Young,” Pieter complained. “Betsy here got her master’s degree of science at Davis and now she got a good job with the Conservation Service.” He beamed so thoroughly his eyes stayed closed. “How do they call you now, Betsy?”

“How does who call me?”

“Oh, come on. Every government worker got to have a title and a rank.”

“Program Specialist? I guess that’s what he means.”

“*Jaja, das is het: Programmaspecialist.*” He flicked his eyebrows while looking at Katie. “You see what I mean? A Program Specialist in Santa Cruz County, that’s good!”

Betsy smirked and flipped a wrist in his direction. “Don’t pay him any attention.”

“A specialist in what?” Katie asked.

“Forestry, I guess. Every time people in the office don’t know what to do with a small rural landowner in unincorporated Santa Cruz County, they send me out to look at their trees.”

“Well, that’s me and I have lots of those,” Katie replied, indicating the upslope woodland of oaks and bays giving way to the forest of redwoods and firs.

• *Oh my God, women!*

“He’s told me about your old growth grove. But I’ll look at anything you want to show me,” the younger woman responded, shifting her weight on her feet.

At home in each other’s company, the outgoing, unadorned, stocky country gal from Corralitos and the lean, rough-skinned, laconic nurserywoman with green-gray eyes gazed cordially into each other’s faces.

Pieter cleared his throat while taking a cigarillo from a tin. “*Jaja*,” he declared, lighting it up. “Katie here also keeps a magnificent vegetable garden and all organic too! Come on now, Betsy, let’s get a move on. There’s lots to see.”

“He means he wants to check on his fuchsias and rhodies,” Katie whispered as they all followed Burl farther uphill.

*

“Now I see why Pieter’s been raving about this place. I really am glad I got to see your nursery ... and to meet you.”

“Like I said, it’s good to meet you too, Betsy. And you’re the kind of person who would really appreciate Chapel Grove too.”

An 1889 edition of Edward J. Wickson’s *California Fruits and How to Grow Them* had become Pieter’s default reading material during quiet times on his visits to One Grade Road, and he had again taken the tome from the hallway bookcase and retired to the deck, where he could smoke and read in the historical guidebook for orchardists while the women spread lunch out on the table inside the house.

“So, what made you decide to get a master’s degree, Betsy, the pay?”

“There’s that. Also, you just get more say-so with a master’s. I’m not crazy about making lots of money or gaining power or anything, but I don’t want to waste my time either. After high school I got a certificate from Cabrillo to be a vet’s assistance.”

“You wanted to be a vet?”

“I thought I did. Doesn’t every high school girl go through that? Where I come from, they do. Or a nurse—”

“... or a mother,” Katie said to herself.

“But horses have always been my thing. Still are. So, I went up to Humboldt State to study animal science or wildlife management or something. But then I got hooked on botany. Botany! I couldn’t believe it myself. I think I just liked the botany teachers and students better, I guess. And I futzed around and futzed around until I ended up getting a bachelor’s from Chico.”

“Chico?”

“Majoring in pre-forestry.”

“You did bounce around.”

“Oh yes, I did. Then I found out a BS in pre-forestry isn’t worth straw. Only job I could get was digging holes at the Plant Material Center in Lodi. Pieter can tell you how I drove my folks crazy, floundering around until one thing led to another till I got accepted in the Vegetative Management master’s program at Davis. With that degree I got my job based in Capitola, close to my folks. And my horses. So that’s my story: my family and my horses and the trees.”

“So, you ended up working for the government ... well, not *ended up*....” Katie corrected herself.

“I like it so far. I’ve got my own little apartment in Aptos—I really can’t live with my parents anymore, you know...? But I go home a lot. If I don’t show up for Sunday supper by five-thirty, I get a phone call, that’s for sure. When I have to go to the state office in Sacramento, I see my friends in Davis, say hi to my former professors and all. That’s the part I like best, being out in the field. Not the paperwork at my desk.”

When Katie compared her job description to that of the retired county ag agent sitting outside, Betsy wholeheartedly agreed. “Oh, Pieter has always been so supportive of my career. And after Missus Tuelling died, he was like one of the family at Mom and Dad’s. Then after he sold the house and moved out, we didn’t hear from him. They’re glad I’ve dug him up at his brother’s old nursery. But it seems like he’s away a lot these days.”

“He does go away a lot.”

“And you take care of his place, I hear. He’s lucky.”

“*Yaya*. But I enjoy it. It’s peaceful there.”

The table was set and sandwich makings ready, but they sat for a moment before calling the man inside.

“His wife was special,” Betsy spoke sotto voce. “It almost killed him when she got so sick.”

“I bet she was, and I bet it did almost kill him. He’s tender under all that gruff stuff of his. I never met her, of course.”

“Well, she was like a second mother to me.”

“You said that.”

“But she really was, Katie. I could come and go in their house when I was a school kid. My mother always knew where to find me, at Missus Tuelling’s kitchen table doing my homework and eating her cakes.”

“How old are you, Betsy?”

“Thirty-three. You?”

“Fifty-five.”

“Oh.” Whatever Betsy thought, she kept it to herself. “I can’t believe it’s been twenty-three years since Missus Tuelling died. That really changed him.”

“How so?”

“It started when his brother was dying. You know about his brother Nico, right?”

“I know something about him.”

“Well, of course, Pieter was very upset. I mean they always had this weird, complicated relationship—I have two brothers and I know it can get weird between guys—then Nico got sick and died. Missus Tuelling was the one who really took care of him. That’s when Pieter started getting ... bigger. He was trim when they first moved to Corralitos. At least that’s the way I remember him. But later every time I saw him he was getting heavier and heavier ... and ... well, he was eating and drinking too much, that’s all.”

“I guess I can picture that,” Katie volunteered.

“Then when Missus Tuelling got sick, he suddenly stopped drinking. He didn’t make an announcement or anything. He wasn’t in any AA program or anything we ever heard about, but it was definitely a big deal when he stopped drinking. He never went to church with our family, but he was always welcome at Sunday supper and he did used to come around. His wife used to go to church with us but not Pieter. That was okay with everybody. But after she died he was always smoking his cigars and eating too much—I should talk, right? Anyway, he put on all that weight then he stopped coming to the house. That meant he was done drying out, I guess.”

“He was drinking again, you mean?”

“That’s what we figured. We didn’t see him for long periods of time. You’ve seen his new setup above Soquel. It’s nice, right? He doesn’t seem to be drinking very much now, does he to you? He goes on his trips and camp hosting, you know, and I think that’s good for him. But we do still worry about him being all alone. I’m not criticizing him, you know that, right? I just love that man so much. I think you know what I mean.”

“I do. It’s hard not to.” Katie reached out to pat the back of her worried guest’s clasped hands. “Come on, Betsy. Call him inside and we’ll have some lunch.”

*

During lunch Pieter started complaining about the weeds he had seen spreading at the Van Winden’s in Fort Bragg; Betsy jested that he should contact the county ag agent up that way.

“Oh, what does any county agent know about weeds?” he jabbed back.

“They know you don’t want them!”

Katie listened to their repartee and recognized the many layers of affection beneath their banter.

“And I know I can’t seem to kill weeds but every plant I do try to grow in my window boxes dies!”

“You see, Katie!” Pieter perked up. “That’s what a Master of Science gets you!”

They laughed then Betsy neutralized her expression. “I’m okay with using herbicides if it’s really and truly the only way to get rid of some weeds or prevent a population of noxious weeds from taking over some place you want to protect. I know you’re pretty committed to organic, Katie, and that’s great, but when you’re up against some invasives on a landscape scale—I mean square miles of stuff threatening an entire watershed...? Please don’t take away the only weapons we have right now. Do you know what I mean? It’s all some ranchers and farmers have to stay in business or make a profit—same thing, I guess—until some more affordable way of controlling weeds comes along.”

Katie caught Pieter stealing a glance between the two women as if he were observing an interesting exchange.

“Tell you the truth,” Betsy added, “I really don’t see how you keep your place so clean without spraying.”

“Well, the Redwood Coast Nursery may never be a very profitable enterprise, but ever since I started following the good doctor here’s advice, I manage to keep the profits and the weeds down. I do spray some oil sometimes. I guess I make the time and take the trouble most people won’t, that’s all.”

“What nonsense you two talking now, eh?”

“I was usually non-profitable before I started getting visits from my County Agricultural Inspector. Now this place is permanently not-for-profit.”

“I thought your nursey was wholesale to the trade and a little retail. Is the Redwood Coast Nursery really a nonprofit organization?” Betsy inquired. “You never told me that, Pieter.”

“No, it’s not a non-profit. I just don’t make any money, not on a regular basis anyway.”

“You know, if you were a non-profit, there are a lot of resources and—”

“... thank you, Betsy,” Katie interrupted, “but let’s enjoy the food and you enjoy your busman’s holiday, please.”

“*Busman’s holiday. Jaja*, I know that one!” Pieter remarked.

Over cookies and coffee, Katie could not resist engaging the younger woman.

“Have you ever considered going for a doctorate so you could really call the shots?”

“A PhD in forestry, you mean? Seems like that would keep me in a lab coat or standing up behind a lectern. Or aiding and abetting the factory tree farming industry. Maybe I should’ve stuck with animal science after all. I almost went into ornithology like one of my roommates at Humboldt, but I didn’t like to get up so early in the morning.”

They laughed.

“And those dang birds keep moving, not like the trees. Anyway, I like the people where I work now, and the pay scale is okay too. Pays to board my girls and I’m saving money too.”

“For...?” Katie asked.

“Maybe I’ll be a fulltime horse breeder someday...”

“How many horses do you have now?”

“Two to breed, two to saddle and trail ride. Just four—no, make that five! A newborn foaled the other morning to my seventeen-year-old Paint mare. Her sixth so far. The stud’s a buckskin Quarter horse. Don’t know how the foal will turn out but it should be interesting.”

“Elizabeth, you are a horsewoman!” Katie declared.

“*Wauw wauw*, I told you she’s something all right,” Pieter said.

“Did you just call me Elizabeth? Last time anyone called me that must’ve been when I was baptized.”

“Oh? I’m sorry. It was my mother’s name.”

“Elizabeth was...?”

“Elisabeth Piagère Lowrie, *jaja*.” Pieter said. “Liesbeth. A wonderful person ... *prachtig*...” •

The women scrutinized each other’s faces, again allowing their gazes to settle in, and they smiled.

“So, now you’ve got yourself another mouth to feed,” Pieter said, picking up the slack in conversation.

• *magnificent, wonderful, gorgeous*

“Not much to it yet. A foal that fresh gets up on its feet and sticks close to the mare at first. My other mare’s a three-year-old maiden looking on from the next stall. Oh, she’s pretty curious about everything, for sure!”

“So, you’re already in the breeding business.”

“I guess I am, for a hobby. But maybe that’s all I’ll do someday, breed horses. I’d like to raise Paints, Arabians, and Quarter horses, maybe somewhere far away from any city, you know what I mean? North Sacramento Valley or up in Southern Oregon, I don’t know where. It’s getting too congested around here. I think I could settle down in the country with horses for the rest of my life.”

“And never get married?” Katie hazarded. “Raise a family ... of people, I mean.”

“Oh, who’s going to marry Bets the cow?” she stated, scratching her bovine double chin.

Pieter crowed his disapproval, and Katie watched the woman’s generous jowls blush. *I might marry you if I were a man and Pieter might too if you weren’t the daughter he never had.*

“You two have to help me come up with a name for that horse. Funny looking thing. After its coat got licked, when it was up on its feet not one hour old, starting to suckle, all ribs and legs like four wobbly stilts a yard long. Skull like an old man with a beard on its chin. What a hoot! It’s hard to believe such a creature might command top dollar someday.”

“I love old things like this turned into a bench,” Betsy declared, settling back into the quarter-cutout log. “And yes, yes, Burly boy,” she added, disheveling the thick coat of the dog nestling in between the two women, “I love you too. Some of the things people did in the past without modern machinery, it’s amazing. Did you know the lady this was named for?”

“Who, Jan McLoughlin? I did. Towards the end of her life I got to know her pretty well. It’s her people, and my mother and my brother,

who are buried up in the cemetery. And some other folks. You'll see if we ever get that far. John Mackenzie and his wife are buried there, the big shots who more or less owned Cliffport Town when there was such a place. They had the dairy and two mills and the lodge before that new one down there now. I guess Mackenzie was lord over all labor in this neck of the woods." Katie stopped herself from relating the story of the pair of redwoods positioned like a portal at the trailhead to Chapel Grove. Or describing the view down the hillside before the split rail fence had been put in along Grade Road. Or eulogizing the dogs, mostly Australian Shepherds—like Burl's predecessor, Baby Blue Eyes—buried three feet below rocks still positioned right where Katie had placed them. She didn't want to overwhelm her return visitor with too much information or depress the younger woman's buoyant mood or unearth too many memories of her own. "My mom would've loved you, Betsy."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you're natural. You understand about plants and trees and all the things she cherished about this place. My mother was an orphan when she moved to the McLoughlin's old dairy farm here—I guess it was an egg farm by then, actually—when she was about twenty. And she never went anywhere else."

"I know an old-timer in Pleasant Valley who's never been outside California. He's proud of that too. Native Son of the Golden West and all that stuff."

"Well, my mom was born in San Francisco and, come to think of it, I don't think she set foot beyond the Central Coast. Did she ever even get up to Humboldt Bay or down to LA? I don't think so. Wow. The City, San Jose, Big Sur, Sonoma County—that's about it. Makes her sound like a hick."

"I bet she wasn't."

"Hold on, wait, you're right. My mom did go to Europe too. For her honeymoon and some 'roots' research." They exchanged smiles. "And she'd dig you because you're a good person too."

Betsy clucked, gently and rhythmically tapping the back of her boots against the front of the log. “And how do you know that?” The dog sighed and laid her muzzle in the visitor’s lap.

“I can tell that much about a person. You’re the real deal, Betsy. Hey, that’s funny. Jan McLoughlin used to say that about some people—not very many but a few: so-and-so was the real deal. Sitting here on Jan’s bench and talking just like her—now that’s weird.”

Her guest grinned.

“You’ll have to tell me what your father raised in his greenhouses, Betsy.”¹

They both noticed the first wisps of high white clouds migrating inland over Monterey Bay. Katie stopped debating disclosing her estrangement from her son.

“You know, Betsy. I’ve got a son somewhere out there,” she said, sweeping her hand in an arc.

“I know. I mean, I knew you had a son. About my age, right?”

“Thirty-three years old. Did Pieter tell you about Donald D.?”

“A little.”

“Yeah, well ... I did my best.”

“That’s all you can do, I guess.”

“I don’t know. By example, my mother taught me to acknowledge the shortcomings of others, not to judge them. To understand all human weaknesses and to forgive. But I still struggle to understand my son’s complete rejection of me. I am sorry I never managed to provide him with a father while he was growing up but by the time DD came into the world, his blood father’s behavior was out of control. I’ve never regretted my judgment about that man’s complete unsuitability as a father or as a husband. And growing up, Donald never showed one bit of interest in taking care of this place, Betsy, not the way it should be taken care of anyway. He doesn’t give a shit about it ... or me, basically.”

The cirrus clouds continued in a moving curtain of long thin streamers.

“Do you know what he’s doing with himself now?”

Katie snorted. “Oh, he’s out there doing something he doesn’t want me to know about.” She inhaled deeply and exhaled with a sigh, glad Betsy Young knew better than to fill the silences with insensitive speech. “Truth is, he’s up to his neck in growing dope, Betsy. I think his center of operation is Mendocino County. At least that’s what my one informant tells me.”

“Whereabouts? I know that area ... some.”

“You think I have any idea?”

“Not about ten miles east of Weott, I hope.”

“I don’t know where that is,” Katie said.

“Ever heard of the Avenues of the Giants?”

“Sure. I went through there once. When DD was a kid, as matter of fact, once upon a time.”

“Well, my Aunt Millie—my mother’s sister—she married a real old-time lumberjack from Mendocino County. They moved into the woods on some tributary of the Eel River’s South Fork in Humboldt, never had any kids. But Mom took my brothers and me up to her sister’s place as soon as school got out every summer. She’d shove us and our sleeping bags into the station wagon, and we’d spent a month up there with Aunt Millie and Uncle Bob. Dad had to work, and anyway he was probably glad to get us out of his hair. For one whole month there was only one rule: no bare feet outdoors and no matches. We had to wear our sneakers at all times. Other than that, we could run around like wild animals.”

“That sounds great. My mom took my brother and me—when he was alive—up to her best friend’s ranch in Cloverdale a few times, my ‘Aunt’ Suzanne. But it was never that wild. I wonder whatever happened to your aunt and uncle’s place?”

“Oh, Lord only knows. It’s not in our family anyway. ² Nowadays? It’s probably a dope farm with who knows who—oh, I’m sorry, Katie.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Katie squinted but not due to the sunlight. “Anyway, you don’t have to go to Mendocino to find old cabins and

logging stuff left behind from the old days. Like this bench here. If you get off trail off Last Chance Road a little up the coast, you run into them. Some dope farms too.”

Betsy sat quietly caressing the rough nape of Burl’s fur. “This log must’ve come from a very old tree. It’s so big.”

“Wait till you see the size of the trunk up ahead. Maybe you can measure it for me.”

“I can do a DBH estimate: diameter-at-breast-high.”

“The giant I’m talking about went down a hundred years ago. It’s lying on its side half-rotten in the ground. We have to climb up and over stairs chopped into it.”

“Cool! Let’s go. Wake up, pup!”

*

Ambling through patches of sunlight and shade, Katie was impressed by the younger woman’s quick grasp on the lay of the land. In Chapel Grove, other than pointing out a fairy slipper orchid blooming way out of season, Betsy remained silent, but on the way through the corridor to Lookout Rock, she expressed awe at the stand of rare Santa Cruz Manzanitas in the bald-soil chaparral. At the vista point, they ate the sandwiches and apples they had packed ahead and sat quietly while thrashers, towhees, wren-tits, and quail made themselves heard if not seen in the slope below the semi-shaded spot. At the end of their rest, Betsy excused herself to step a few yards into the shrubs and—sheltered from Katie’s view but subject to Burl’s investigation—squatted there.

Katie proposed taking a shortcut to her second-growth acreage, a route off the beaten path that would require trespassing but would save them time and maybe half a mile all told; Betsy Young said no. Up to that moment, they had traipsed either on Lowrie property or stuck to easement trails. If Katie’s shortcut meant they would be digressing from authorized paths, Betsy had to beg off, explaining that the liability was too great: if ever caught having knowingly trespassed on private property, her job with the Soil Conservation Service would be terminated, her career in the Resource Conservation District thrown

into disarray. They backtracked to the junction where the main trail dropped them onto Lowrie land near the reservoir.

“Oh, come on, guys! It’s 1991 not 1891!” Betsy declared, lodging her hands on her hips and shaking her head at the sight before her.

“What do you mean?”

“Look at this mess!” Betsy exclaimed, her eyes narrowing on the area below the millpond fence where the outlet into Steep Creek used to run with water year-round. “They say cattle hooves trampling and chiseling the ground can wreck a creek bed, but what about all this? I’ve seen environmental degradation before, but this is out of control. Whoever only blames cows and not men ought to get an eyeful of this. Isn’t anybody monitoring this site? Somebody ought to sick Fish and Game on them. What about the Native Plant Protection Act? We’re in the Coastal Commission zone now, right? Didn’t you say it goes up to the first ridge?”

“Yeah....”

“Then the Coastal Commission should know that this kind of crap”—she swept her thickset arm out to include the millpond and the berms of boulders, tree stumps, and construction garbage plowed to either side of the desiccated creek channel—“still goes on.”

Katie laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Welcome to Monteflores country, Bets!”

“But this is serious. There are so many riparian zone violations I wouldn’t know where to begin. Wasn’t there a CEQA • evaluation submitted? What about endangered species? Lord almighty, if an EIR • was ever done on this whole project—well, obviously it never was, or they couldn’t have gone ahead like this.”

“Listen, Betsy. I wasn’t laughing because I think it’s funny. Believe me, I was laughing instead of crying because this is the way it always is. As far as I can see, the developers know how to cut deals with the Coastal Commission—”

• *California Environmental Quality Act*
• *Environmental Impact Report*

“... what they call ‘spot zoning’?”

“Plus, they seem to have Fish and Game in their back pockets too. They’re crooks, Betsy, with bullshit coming out their mouths and boatloads of money coming out their butts. You should’ve seen the list of the Whale Watch shopping center violations when it was built.”

They both sat down, and Katie told her listener of the increasing sense of isolation she felt the older she got. As she witnessed the growing popular response to both Monteflores Lodge West and The Whale Watch Shoppes at Cliffport Village, Katie said she saw there was another world-at-large, a new world in which she would never play much part. The people in that world—some her age, some older, some younger—moved ahead or backwards or sideways or simply went around in circles, it seemed to her, while her corporate neighbors continued to operate their proprietorship in manners ignorant of or blatantly hostile to her own interests.

“Katie, what we’re looking at here represents a textbook study in violations of every protocol in the protection of habitat that I can imagine.” She rose, tromped across the exposed roots of a row of standing firs, and ran her hand across scars gouged in their wounded bark. “You mean nobody ever called them on this BS?”

“The alternate newspaper over in San Lorenzo Valley, the Smoke Signal, does all the time.”

“Oh, that outfit. That’s pretty unhinged journalism, wouldn’t you say?”

“But at least they run an article in every other issue about the gangsters of Monteflores. Nobody else does. About how projects get red tagged by the county, the developer says they’re sorry, pays some peanut penalty, and proceeds. They say, ‘it’s the cost of doing business,’ then throw another beef ‘n beans day in Fern and call it good. Monteflores just keeps moving forward. It’s all so obvious. They keep the Smoke Signal out of semi-public hearings or the planning meetings where all stakeholders are supposed to be able to attend. Money, Betsy, money! And the Coastal Commission has no jurisdiction over the local zoning authority on that side of the ridge. They

just annex and rezone every parcel they want to develop and that's that."

"I think they call that 'contract zoning.' I thought that was illegal too."

"Oh, who cares? The original landowner is in cahoots with the developer and he acts like the feudal lord of Fern. I'd take you up to Cuesta Ridge for a peak at what little's left of his cattle spread. You could see the backup reservoir they built to store the water they steal from me. Looks like just another stock pond if you don't know better. But that'd be trespassing."

"No, thanks."

"Well, I sneak up there from time to time and put binoculars on the place. Big heavy equipment garages with deep cement pillars. A hangar for some pleasure boats and custom kit cars. They grade new roads wherever they want, tear up fields and creeks, just like they this one here. They even seem to be storing motorcycles in a big shed on the back forty. They hide all that from the homeowners, of course, but backstage it's pretty ugly. Well, look at that prison fence they built around the millpond. Is that supposed to be legal? I grew up swimming in that pond, Betsy. Wood ducks used to nest up here. I remember my brother and me with flashlights coming right about where we are now, to watch the newts and the frogs fighting or fucking or whatever they were doing in the spring at the edge of the pond. Not anymore. It's so sad."

"Sad? It's appalling! It makes me mad! Times like this I wish I'd gone into enforcement!"

Katie whistled in the dog and they wandered down the rutted creek bed, where the destructive tracks of large vehicular equipment were still discernible. Katie knew she had to translate nothing for her guest, who was upset enough to request, when they reached the junction, that they save the visit to Katie's second growth forest for another day.

- This is Betsy Young.
- This is Katie, Betsy. Katie Lowrie in Cliffport.
- Why Katie Lowrie, how nice!
- How are you, Betsy? Can you believe it’s been two months since we went on that hike?
- And can you believe I have yet to see the rest of your property?
- Well, that’s sort of why I called. Maybe now you’ll get the chance.
- Why?
- I got a letter from the Planning Commission saying the time has expired for me to have implemented my Timber Management Plan.
- Oh, you mean the letter. And?
- Well, I haven’t done a thing. I had to get that plan drawn up and approved to get the TPZ tax break. That was years ago. You know about the TPZ?
- Know about it? I deal with some aspect of Timber Production Zoning every single hour of the day since that batch of letters went out.
- I thought it was called the Timber *Preserve* Zoning.
- It was called that at first until about Eighty-two when the commission decided to show its true colors. But go on. You aren’t alone in this, by the way.
- But the letter says there are penalties and—
- ... the letter is a year late, right? Maybe I shouldn’t be telling you this, as an employee of the government and all but please, don’t sweat it, Katie.
- Don’t sweat it?*
- A lot of folks in Santa Cruz County just got the same letter. They finally got around to sending out the first reminder letters—a year late. You have time to get your act together, believe me.
- But the letter references my parcel and quotes the actual board feet that I’m supposed to have hauled out and—

- ... whoa, Katie.
- What’s so funny? It’s good to hear you laughing, Betsy, but tell me why.
- You’re what’s so funny! Now I just told you I’m aware of the situation you’re in and you don’t have to worry. That department is chronically understaffed and already dealing with much bigger parcels than yours. They won’t get around to making any inspection of woodlots your size for a long time to come.
- So, what should I do about the letter? Don’t I have to comply with that plan I submitted?
- You will but there’s no emergency. That letter arrived a year past their own published deadline. Some advance reminder! You’ve already done the first thing right.
- I have?
- You called the regional office of your Soil Conservation Service and asked to speak with the forestry program specialist.
- That’s you!
- That’s right, Missus Lowrie, that’s me. And the whole State of California’s Regional Conservation District is now at your service, ma’m!
- Oh, Betsy, I’m so glad I caught you in the office.
- Where else would I be after those technocrats sent that letter out? I’d rather be outside. It looks beautiful—out the window!
- I’d love it if you’d come visit again. I don’t know why I haven’t called you sooner. Can you come up to Cliffport any time soon?
- And now you’ve done the second right thing.
- Which is...?
- Didn’t you just request that a specialist from SCS make a field call to help you assess your options on this matter of complying with the TPZ ordinance? Do you still have a copy of your plan?

- I think I do. Sure I do, buried somewhere in that back room.
- Well, at least you know what room it's in. That's more than most people can say. If you can dig it up and have it ready so I can take a look before we take that walk in your woods we never got around to.
- Oh, Betsy, would you? That's so kind of you. Don't laugh, it is!
- I'm laughing because it's my job. I'm getting paid to talk to you right now, and I'll get paid to come see you too. And look at your trees, of course. Can't beat that with a stick, can you? I'll study your document and give you some ideas on how to satisfy the planning commission and to be a good steward of the land, which you already are.
- It sounds wonderful, and I'm glad you will get paid to be doing it but.... Well, I don't have money to pay for—
- ... for what? I'm supposed to be doing it. You silly goose! It doesn't cost you a penny. What do you pay taxes for anyway, patrolling the Persian Gulf or invading Central America? Take your pick.
- It's free?
- Might cost you a cup of coffee—
- And lunch at noon!
- How did you know I get hungry about the same time every day?
- This is so bitchin'!
- Bitchin'*, did you just say? Ah, Missus Lowrie, I've not heard that particular expression in a long while. You're something else, Katie! Okay. So, would you like to make an appointment? My schedule is highly impacted, highly impacted but ... how about tomorrow! Katie? You still there?
- I am but ... Betsy? Would your visit go into some permanent official record with the county government? Would the information travel with the deed or anything?
- Well, I'll have to turn you into the FBI and the CIA for falling behind on your timber plan, of course. Oh, I'm sorry. You really are concerned about this.

- If I’ve enrolled in some program that forces me to do excessive logging, can I pull out? I’m trying to do the right thing, not mess up the land. I’m surrounded by enough destruction of the natural environment as it is.
- Are those hoods still harassing you? Listen, Katie, any observations and suggestions I make will be nonregulatory. The SCS makes recommendations and steers you toward resources but you don’t have to follow them. Lord knows, few landowners do until some funding comes along.
- Is there funding available?
- Sometimes. It depends. There are plenty of free services and resources. Now if you would kindly make a formal request for me to visit.... Your street address, please?
- What? It’s One Grade Road, of course.
- One Grade Road, Cliffport, California. Zip?
- What?
- I’m writing this down. I’m opening a case file.
- 95017.
- And I’ll need the number of your timber plan and other details when I come up. Don’t worry. You can have a copy of whatever I write up then I’ll stick your paperwork in the cabinet, and nobody will ever look at it, not unless you contact me again. Honest.
- If it were anybody else but you, Betsy....
- Oh, don’t be paranoid. Say, have you seen or heard from Pieter lately or is he away again?
- He hasn’t asked me to take care of Drika’s park if he is. I haven’t seen him, no, not since you two were here the first time.
- Hmn. Just curious. So, how many acres did you tell me you had in second growth?
- About twelve. I haven’t touched it in years. Not since my mother died.

Chapter 2: Betsy Young

- If it’s got any giant redwoods like those old timers in your cemetery grove—
- Oh no, I don’t think so. It’s all second growth, third growth. There are some tanbarks and madrones and pepperwoods. And lots and lots of blackberries and poison oak.
- Sounds about right. When was the last time you went through there?
- I collect the thimbleberries and huckleberries in through there every year. Betsy?
- Mixed conifers and woodland. Twelve acres. How many board feet did you just say...?
- What? What are talking about?
- Okay, that’s over. My supervisor just passed by my desk and gave me the evil eye so I had to sound boss. He’s gone now.
- Would you get in trouble for talking to me like this?
- He’s the only hard-ass in the office.
- Well, don’t bring him with you when you come. Are you sure it’s okay for you to come?
- Don’t you get it yet? This is my job! But I better get off the phone. Others are waiting.
- But wait, first, how is the newborn horse? Getting bigger, I bet!
- Can I tell you about Coffee when I come up?
- Can you get here by lunchtime?
- I’ll take you up on that! Noon sharp.
- Do you like quesadillas and—
- That’s my problem! I like anything you put in front of me! So, get out that plan and any documents about easements that might apply. You don’t know if there are any old mill records to see when that land was last logged, do you?
- No. The only people who could tell you that are resting up in Chapel Grove or somewhere else. What do you need those for?

- I don’t need them. But sometimes we can extrapolate the value of the standing timber by determining the cost and prices from earlier operations. Just another way to keep your timber cruisers halfway honest.
- But all you’re going to do is make recommendations, right?
- I told you: we’re a nonregulatory agency. I’d never get along with any of you ornery private landowners if I were a cop.
- I’m stoked! See you tomorrow around noon. Wait, you named the horse *Coffee!*
- Yup! With cream and sugar! See you then. Here he comes again, gotta go, sorry—
- ... bye.
- Good-bye now, Mrs. Lowrie.

*

Betsy arrived in a white Ford Ranger with a blue-and-white seal on the door and a name badge pinned to her shirt. Katie had carried her Timberland Management Plan down to the welcoming hut in case, on an official visit, the younger woman proved to be all business first. But Betsy Young was generous with her smiles and playful with the dog, apologizing for being late, appreciative of her client’s homework, and happy to eat lunch before they went up into the woods. In the house, she reviewed the plan in five minutes then turned to the food.

“Now help yourself, go ahead. There are more tortillas on the stove.”

“Thanks, this is great.” Betsy said and continued to speak while piling on ingredients and pouring on salsa. “That document’s what we call boilerplate, Katie. I’ve seen dozens just like it. I hope you didn’t pay too much for it.”

“I forget.”

“Did the author of that even walk your land?”

“I think he did. I remember him checking in here once. Remember, this was years ago.”

“What I mean is,” Betsy continued, casually speaking while consuming the food, “it’s full of typical overkill. All options to facilitate logging are built in, which makes sense for the people depending on the TPZ for their economic survival. Without the tax break, they’d have to sell the land—to pay the taxes, of course. According to that plan, you can build as many roads and staging areas as you like. Create landing pads, skid trails, creek crossings. You could pretty much clear cut the place if you snuck it by the Coastal Commission.”

“But I don’t want to clear cut the place. I do want to reduce any fire hazards and thin the trees for a healthier forest—”

“... and healthier logs. I’m pretty sure you’ll be fine, but I’ll have to take a look. That plan there is a no brainer, though. Any so called certified forester with some two-bit lawyer backing him up could walk through your place blindfolded and write that up on the dashboard of his car.”

“Well, when they changed the minimum size of the units and I decided to enroll, I didn’t know who to call. The only trustworthy person in land use I knew was a gentleman who retired from UCSC, but I found out he had died.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Unfortunately, there are so many phonies out there trying to make a buck off regulatory issues, nobody can keep track of them. You’ve had your tax advantages. The flip side is you will have to fulfill some of the items in this plan that you pledged to do in case they actually ever do check up on you. We’ll figure it out. Nobody ever reads all the ballyhoo in those documents. You could use those papers to start your toothpick forest on fire.”

“Nobody’s starting any fires!”

“I know, that was a bad joke. If you’d lead me back up to the junction and point out the rest of the way to me—”

“... the legal way—”

“... the *legal* way, I’ll be fine alone. You can come if you’ve got nothing better to do. I’d love your company, but it might take me a while to walk the place and take some measurements and make my

notes. Longer than it took whoever signed that plan to copy board feet numbers out of a table in some lumber company handbook.”

“Oh no, I want to come along. I want to learn from you.”

“And I want to learn from you!”

“And no trespassing!” Katie reiterated. “Here, let me get some more tortillas.”

*

“No wonder those greedy pigs want to gobble up your place. What a piece of land you own, Missus Lowrie! Hm, this is good coffee too. This’ll get me through the end of the day.”

“You should see the stack of letters they’ve send me over the years, Betsy. Threatening me with this, warning me about that. I’d love to put a spoke in their wheel, but they’d run over me with all their lawyers.”

“They break every rule in the book and try to squeeze you out too—nice people!”

“If I’d known what they’d be putting me through, I might have accepted their offer the first time they start working on me. They’ve worn me down.”

“No!”

The dog rose up on its forelegs.

“No, not you, Burly. I mean no, Katie, they have to be stopped. That’s their plan, to wear you down but someone has to stand up to them.”

“David and Goliath, right? Well, I can’t do more than I am just by standing my ground. I told you it’s already been in the papers. Not the Sentinel or the Mountain Echo so much, but the Smoke Signal reports on their shenanigans. Nothing comes of it.”

“What about the rest of the community up here? You can’t be the only one pissed off at Monteflores. Didn’t PG&E once try to build a generator right up the coast before popular uproar stopped them?”

“Jarro Point isn’t *up the coast*, Bets. We were looking at Jarro Point from Lookout Rock. I should’ve pointed it out to you. Yeah, we stopped those assholes at Jarro Point, I guess. That whole proposal

went underground in '71 but then it resurfaced in '77. Let's build a nuclear power plant on the San Andreas earthquake fault, yippee! Will they ever stop trying to build power plants up and down this coastline? Who knows? You know, PG&E held the option to buy all the Coastal Dairy property. I don't know if they still do."

"So, you *can* stand up to PG&E *and win*. Look how that Sea Ranch construction got halted until they made concessions. That's where the Coastal Commission really cut its teeth, up at Sea Ranch."

"But PG&E takes the cake. Before Diablo Canyon, before Jarro Point, the geniuses at PG&E had some ridiculous idea—more than an idea, they actually dug a seventy-foot pit—to build a reactor at Bodega Bay, another nuclear power plant right on the fault line."

"I don't remember that. Maybe I was in diapers."

"Maybe you were. But I can't take on Monteflores alone. I'm afraid you're looking at a bad case of battle fatigue, Bets. Sometimes it feels like I live in a guerilla war zone."

"Have you considered hiring a lawyer?"

Katie paused and sighed. "Pieter suggested that too. About the fence."

"The fence, the driveway, their replumbing at the reservoir. Not to mention the environmental violations in the creek that's no longer even a creek below the pond. Anyway, for sure you have legal standing to challenge them on your water rights and their easement violations on the driveway."

"That fence is on their property—"

"... I know but still," Betsy countered.

Katie withheld her thoughts, realizing it was the time of day she usually took a nap; she felt too tired to keep up with the younger woman.

"Okay, I better get to my last stop. But I can tell you one thing. If I were in enforcement or a land use lawyer or something, I'd be all over those creeps for you pro bono. Those Fern politicians should be ashamed. Meanwhile, I feel fortunate to have gotten to know the

owner of one fine place on the Santa Cruz North Coast. Sitting here talking to someone like you—talking too much probably—is what I like most about my job.”

“Thank you, Betsy. Same here.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, Katie, I do. When I write up my suggested amendments to this plan, I might refer to the county’s Significant Tree Protection ordinance, but it won’t be for your sake. You seem to have that ordinance coded into your DNA. It’s just be for the record.”

“And the next owner who comes along...?”

“That’s right. And whatever I write in my report will only enhance the value of your real estate.”

“The way it’s going around here,” Katie declared, “there’s one and only one customer ever likely to consider buying this place, and even Monteflores couldn’t cut down the old growth Redwoods. Another four, five acres are dry gulches and rocks and —”

“... twelve are in timberland,” Betsy interjected.

“And twelve are in timberland, but nobody would have any idea in hell what to make of this nursery operation and the planted gardens. And this crazy old house is over a hundred years old. It’s in serious need of repairs, remodeling, replacement. You can see that without leaving your chair.”

“I don’t know. I could see living on a spread like this when I get long in the tooth. Pasture my horses up the draws and in that lower meadow beyond that wall of yellow roses you’ve got. Put stables in where your old barn’s falling down.”

“Well, maybe we’ll get there one day, Betsy, because a sale to my current neighbor is only going to happen over my dead body, literally.”

“I don’t want to think about that possibility right now,” Betsy responded. “So, I better use the bathroom before I have to sit in that traffic snarl where One and Nine and Seventeen come together—what a bottleneck that’s gotten to be.”

*

Katie greeted Betsy at the kiosk. “You didn’t have to come up all this way, Betsy. You could’ve stuck that in the mail.”

“But I wanted to come up. Besides, I ganged up a couple of stops to make in Bonny Doon so why not? Well, here it is.” She passed her client a manila envelope. “And here’s your original plan back. Don’t tell anybody, but my amendments really amount to more of a conservation plan than a timberland management plan. Same thing, from my perspective. Anyway, if you follow even one or two of those suggestions you’ll be able to demonstrate to any commission in the county that you are complying, and that you’re up to date with current thinking too.”

“Oh, Betsy, thank you so much. I’ll do exactly what you say in here.”

“Really, you will? Better not get carried away....”

They laughed.

“Do you have time to come up to the house and—”

“... better not today. I’d love to but I have to roll. But listen, I wrote some sensible stuff in there. High pruning, not to achieve any well-manicured look but to eliminate the fire ladder and open up the floor for recruitment of more young redwoods. You’d satisfy the harvest requirement just by hauling out half the downed trees and cutting out some of the dead ones still standing, but also leaving some snags for the woodpeckers and all—I put that in there too. I also added some unconventional notions. With you as a client, I couldn’t resist.”

“Like what?”

“Like that stash of huge old stumps lying by the fire road on the northwest property line. They’re a gold mine. You could sell those to someone who knows how to run them through a saw and make lumber for high-grade picnic tables and footbridges. Contact Big Basin and see if they put contracts out for that sort of thing. I had another idea that’s so off the wall I didn’t bother to write it down.”

“What’s that? Sit for just a sec’,” Katie proposed, sitting down and making room for her. “Please, tell me.”

“Hey, where’s Burl today?” she asked, settling in on the stoop to the hut.

“Oh, he’s gets bored with me. He’s off barking up the wrong tree somewhere. He’s getting independent, Betsy, or absentminded. They say Border Collies stick to your side but he doesn’t stick to mine. Maybe ‘cuz he’s a male. So, tell me, what else?”

“Have you ever heard about pulling living redwood stumps out of the ground and sinking them in a clearing where they sprout new trees. That’d be an interesting experiment.”

“Wow. Whoever thought of that one?”

“Don’t know, and I don’t know if a smart old woodsman like my Uncle Bob ever did it either.”

“Betsy, I don’t know how to thank you. Dealing with this has been hard for me. I have a reputation for being anti-logging and now I’m going to be implementing a timber plan.”

“Or at least some of it. That’s the trade-off for the reduced tax rate.”

“I never thought I’d be so grateful to a government employee!”

“Oh, I know. We get painted with a pretty broad brush. When you talk like you do sometimes, it takes me back to Uncle Bob.”

“What does?”

“He’s wasn’t a big fan of government regulations. ³ The last thing Bob Severson wanted was for some college-educated environmental agency employee—”

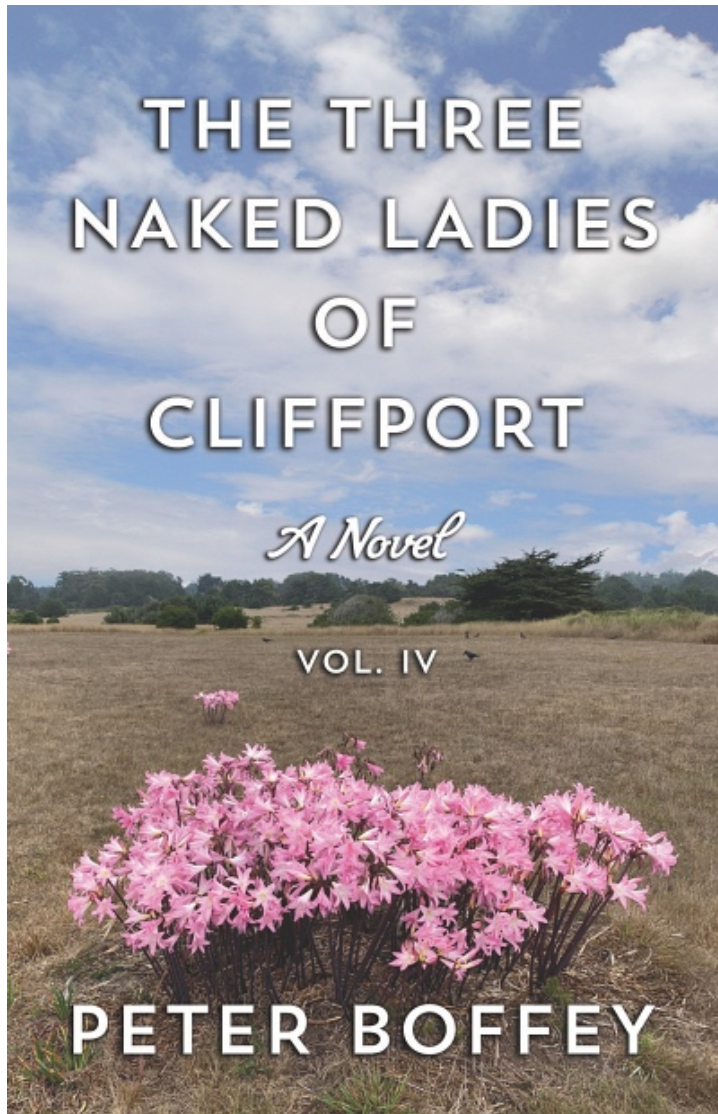
“... like you—”

“... like me, telling him how to take care of the woods and the water and the soil and the birds. That’s why I feel good about offering you advice, Katie. There have always been good people into respecting the land without the law telling them how to do it. You’ll know what to do with my suggestions. I’ve learned a lot from you, and I’ve tried to put it back into the plan. Leaving the tanbarks and madrones and pepperwoods, only going after the fir. That’s smart. You know your own place better than I do. Better than anyone else on earth, I guess, anymore.”

About the Author

Throughout *The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport*, as well as in his first novel, *Two Half Brothers, or Separating Out* (2014), Peter Boffey has drawn upon his experiences while traveling—with brief residences—in France, Israel, and Morocco. Fifty years of living in Northern California and Oregon, with a career in applied horticulture—gardening, landscape design, nursery production, and the seed trade—have also informed his narratives.

When not out exploring the West, particularly throughout the Pacific States, with a focus on flora, fauna, geology, and cultural history, Peter—a grandfather—lives with his wife, Ophira, in the San Francisco Bay Area, often volunteering as a docent at the Ruth Bancroft Garden in Walnut Creek and serving as a Roving Ambassador at the University of California Botanical Garden in Berkeley. For more of his writings—including poetry, translations, interviews, and essays—and to contact the author, visit **peterboffey.com**.



Santa Cruz' North Coast community finally sours on an unscrupulous developer; fighting the obliteration of all she values, an aging Katie Lowrie, last living member of Cliffport's pioneer family, becomes reluctant leader of the resistance.

The Three Naked Ladies of Cliffport: Volume IV

By Peter Boffey

Order the book from the publisher BookLocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/12413.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**