

Chapter 5

Katie's Second Visit to '999'

"So how's it going, Jan?"

"Can't complain, nobody'd listen."

"I'd listen."

"Now that's not a tattoo on the back of your hand, is it?"

"This? It's an ink stamp for getting back into the festival. It'll wash off."

With her elbows bent on the armrests, Jan held her unlit cigarette in one hand and her plastic tumbler in the other; Katie sat on the folding metal chair.

"It's good to see you again so soon, Katie."

"Same here."

"But where's your girlfriend or didn't she come along? Don't tell me she's still over in Oakland alone?"

"Nope, she couldn't get away. Had to stay with her folks up on Summit Road. Her dad's in pretty bad shape."

"I'm sorry to hear that. You aren't going back to Oakland after dark, are you?" Jan shifted her weight in her seat. "Or are you?"

"I think I'll head for home from here. Take 280 then 92 over to the coast."

"Well good. Now go get yourself something in the kitchen, whatever you like."

“I’m fine for now.”

“You don’t want something to eat or drink? I had the grocery boy bring some things up earlier today. Of course you can help yourself to the liquor cabinet. I won’t tell you-know-who. Or just go ahead and drink from the fountain of temperance. Suit yourself.”

“Drink from the what?”

“The tap, Katie. They say it’s pretty good water from Mister Bourn’s Crystal Springs.”

“That’s the reservoir where 92 goes over to Half Moon Bay.”

“Maybe it is, maybe it is. I don’t know anymore where anything is.” Jan used the glass lighter to fire up her cigarette. “So tell me, Miss Lowrie, what’s on the agenda today? More business, no doubt.”

Katie rose to her feet. “Maybe I will see what’s cookin’ in there.”

“There’s nothing cookin’ in there but crackers and cheese. You can open up that stupid wine Hudson left here. I don’t know if it’s any good or not. A light, white, sparkling lunch wine? He should know by now that’s not my cup of tea.”

“You want anything? More ice?”

“Why you devil you, I could use a few more cubes of ice! Go ahead and get yourself a glass of something, for God’s sake. *Mi casa es su casa*.” Jan threw her head back, lengthening the wattles of her neck until coughing stopped her laughter.

Katie passed through the dimly lit dining room and into the kitchenette. The one window gave onto a fire escape and a view of the exterior wall next door, providing the last natural light of day. There was a white refrigerator, and a diminutive gas stove with a teakettle on one front burner and a coffee percolator on the other. A single dish was set aslant in a wire drying rack occupying the narrow counter-top; half of the grout was missing from the splashboard’s cream-and-green hex tiles. Dirty cups, saucers, and plates were piled in the sink. A white Zenith clock radio and a tin breadbox sat on the breakfast nook’s tabletop; surmounted by a black rotary telephone, a mess of newspapers occupied one of two hinged bench seats. Katie lifted the phone’s

receiver from its cradle and heard the dial tone. Above one bench, the reproduction on a 1963 calendar displayed a familiar painting of a hefty stag with antlers of many points, eyes raised, the king of the hills and quarry of man—Landseer's "Monarch of the Glen," the caption read. A mousetrap, sprung and empty, protruded onto the linoleum floor from beneath the stove.

Katie opened one of two doors above the sink and found canned vegetables, fruit, tuna, and beans; a round box of Quaker Oats; a canister of Planter's peanuts; an empty tin of Folgers's coffee stuffed with Raleigh cigarette coupons. A Rice-A-Roni box-top banner read *The San Francisco Treat*. Apart from open cartons of Pall Mall and menthol BelAir cigarettes, the other shelf was empty. The bottom shelf behind the second cupboard door held the liquor bottles and the opened bag of pretzels. A collection of swizzle sticks jammed into several pint glasses meant for beer or ale sat among a variety of drinking glasses on the uppermost shelf.

Opening the refrigerator door, an array of bitters and flavors rattled in the rack, and the bulb lit up brown bottles of prune juice and Bailey's Irish Cream. The bottle of white wine stood alongside the canned V-8, a carton of orange juice, and bottles of lemon juice, tonic water, and Ginger Ale. The bottom metal bin served as a repository for miscellaneous creams and ointments in jars, vials, and tubes—the better part unlabeled and, to Katie, unidentifiable. In a second, smaller bin, a mummified potato sprouted leaves, an unwrapped stalk of celery had gone limp, and a banana turned black. Aside from one bag of frozen vegetables and a flask of vodka, the freezer harbored three aluminum ice trays. Katie popped several cubes into a bowl, poured some Ginger Ale into a pilsner glass, and grabbed the pretzels; on her way out, she noticed a padded folding step stool tucked in behind the door. Back in the main room, she delivered the ice cubes and sat down with her snack.

"I'm glad you found something in there to whet your whistle. So what's our first order of business, if you don't mind my asking? Let's get it over with so we can just sit and gab after that."

Katie leaned forward to extract her wallet from her jeans then slipped a check partway underneath the geode located in the center of the doily. “There’s the check to cover the note.” Jan sipped her drink, leaned forward and flicked her cigarette ash but did not pick up the check. “Did you get the other bill from Greenbrier yet?”

“In Thursday’s mail, the First of July. So they must have mailed it before the end of the month, the bandits.”

“They don’t waste any time, do they?”

“Not when there’s incoming money they don’t. Worse than a bank. That Cummings outfit is done dealing with me now, that’s for sure.”

“Good riddance. Can I see it?”

“See what?”

“The bill from Greenbrier. I want to see how much it is.”

“You do, do you? Well, you’ll just have to wait. Mister Hudson had a messenger come by to pick it up first thing Friday morning. He’s going to go over that bill with a fine-tooth comb. From what little I read to him over the phone, he thinks they’re trying to pull a fast one. They didn’t document anything, they just named things. This much for the civil engineers. So much for the building inspectors. Over one hundred dollars for soil tests and fifty for the septic system test and so on down the line. Oh yes—one hundred and fifty smackolas for a percolation test! Now how about that? Then they had the nerve to bunch some other ‘various services rendered’ together as a lump sum under one line item. We thought they might try that one.”

“How much is it?”

“What, the whole thing? Jeez Louise, Katie. You’re one curious cat, aren’t you?”

“And you don’t like cats.”

“But I like you. Listen, I forget if it was seven hundred and ninety dollars or nine hundred and seventy.”

“Almost another thousand dollars.”

“I haven’t got that kind of money right now, after I pay back the note.”

"We don't either, now."

"But Hudson's going to break it apart. He'll demand to see the receipts from the people they hired to do the work. And copies of all those tests. He doesn't think they'll share any original invoices though. Maybe they don't have to, legally. Who knows? They may not be able to come up with any."

"Why not?"

"Because there may not be any! Or they'll just concoct a bunch of dummy invoices, what do I know? They're all in cahoots, Katie—the realtors, the board of realtors, all their contractors and subcontractors and loan agents. Hudson says at the very least I'm entitled to take possession of the test results and the documents I'm being charged for. That information about the soil, the water, the condition of the structures By all rights all that should belong to me once I pay for it."

"How about the stump value of Chapel Grove?"

"The what?"

"Never mind. Nothing."

"One thing's certain. We're not paying Greenbrier for any 'various services rendered'. I'll use that bill to line the trashcan if he tries pulling that on me again. The test results, the other reports, Greenbrier can't make use of them. They'll rightly belong to me. So if Mister Hudson is satisfied with a revised line item accounting, once the figure gets adjusted down to what he thinks is fair, and they hand over the documents—then I'll pay. 'Various services rendered.' Ha! That was their gamble and they lost."

"What if they don't cooperate?"

"Then they don't get paid. The note was a note. I signed on that, I'll pay for that, thanks to an advance from certain sympathetic parties." Jan raised her whisky in a silent toast, nodded, and took a sip. "But just because I hired Greenbrier's firm doesn't mean I contracted him to proceed with each and every one of those services he was so eager to render, just so he could lock me in and close the deal in a hurry. Let him show me a document saying I authorized him to spend that money. After the note gets paid, it could be a long time

before they get another nickel out of me. Let them take me to Small Claims Court or big claims court or wherever it would land, I don't care." Jan snubbed her cigarette in the glass ashtray. "Mister Hudson may be a little old-school but he's got common sense. At least that man is earning whatever I'll owe him, when the time comes. And don't think he won't be dinging me for dollars too. Pass me that." Jan readjusted her eyeglasses. "Nine hundred and twenty-eight dollars. Right on the money. But there's no date on this check."

"Date it when you use it. Put any date you want on it."

"Oh, I'll use it. There's no question I owe them for the note."

"So pay it off. That won't bounce."

"Funny. Just last night, or maybe it was this morning, I was remembering how Missus Bee used to tear company checks from the back pages of the register, as if I'd never find that out. Writing herself fat checks from the business account. She was like that at the end. What a shopper! Clothes, antiques, even cars for a while. 'Let's have that and that and....' I had to put a stop to her sprees sometimes. Her husbands wouldn't, not in the beginning. And once they saw how crazy she was to get stuff, by then it was too late. They couldn't stop her. They had to start thinking about the settlement! Oh, she couldn't help herself. She had to win something over then throw it off. Win someone over then throw him off. She was her own worst enemy, she was, when it comes down to it. Sometimes it got ugly, to tell the truth."

"What did?"

"The way she plowed through husbands."

"How'd she get away with it?"

"Oh, some men were such fools for her nonsense. I'm not saying just any man would go for her. The lucky ones shied away. First, she was intelligent. But most all she was so good-looking and very very busty. What a hefty bosom! I don't know how else to say it. And she carried herself with such certainty. I helped her pull off that impressive carriage, the way she held her head. I had her wear ponderous, pendulous earrings that'd look ridiculous on just about anybody else. But they drew some attention away from her top-heavy

avoirdupois. From the second men picked her out in a room, crowded or not, her presence just commanded their attention. A big string of pearls or long loops of barrel-shaped amber beads spread across her décolletage. Conquistador types, they adored that sort of thing. And she had her own money, at least after that first settlement she did. Mister Landmark paid a fortune to get her out of his beautiful curly hair.”

“So why'd she have to marry money again, if she had her own?”

“She couldn't not do it, Katie. I suppose she needed to have drama going on all around her all the time. She'd let people take her just so she could get what she wanted back from them later on. Isn't that hard to believe? But it's true. You take poor Mister Landmark, who moved her down onto the Peninsula. He must've known she was taking him for a ride. He had other women on the side, that's true too. So once she found out about his cheating game she had her ticket out. She rode that marital arrangement until the first winter holidays then bam, she let him have it. She was good at that sort of thing. Never said anything to him then, holy Toledo, she broadsided him! Man the torpedoes and full speed ahead! It was all over the papers, she made sure of that.”

“Of what?”

“Of the divorce being in the newspapers. Why sure! And the settlement amount in the gossip column. Oh, that was the cat's pajamas as far as Mary-Helen was concerned. It exploded after Harry Landmark's big New Year's Eve bash with about half the people in the Social Register right there. Of course, you-know-who was the life of the party. A few hours before midnight she took me aside and told me she would be suing him for divorce first thing New Year's. I just about fainted when I watched her getting tanked during the big build-up to midnight. She was standing beside him in front of all the guests. 'Doesn't Harry make the most terrific nog?' 'Hasn't Harry got the most terrifically curly hair?' Things like that all evening long. And she got away with it, all that phony baloney. Until the first business day of the New Year.”

“She sounds pretty creepy to me.”

“She couldn’t help herself, Katie. One thing Mary-Helen never did learn was that you can rectify your mistakes without drowning the fleet. But no one in her right mind would go through all those divorces and battles over alimony and all the business of adopting the child. But she did. She had to show the world she was in charge, one hundred per cent in charge, every time. Then she’d go make the same mistake all over again.”

“But why’d she have to get officially married every time?”

“Crazy, I guess. Listen, not everyone could take Mary-Helen. I saw plenty of wives who wanted her out of the picture. Once we arrived late at some party uninvited. We knew no one. At least I knew no one. I suppose she knew someone or we wouldn’t have gotten in. Anyway, Mary-Helen only took me along so she could get in without a male escort. So this was one of those times when she was on the prowl, and the place was packed with wealth and sophistication. Lots of women in jewelry and lots of men with good looks with their hair slicked back, sleek as seals. The hostess was racing around. ‘Has anyone seen my husband? Has anyone seen my husband?’ She was frantic. ‘Have you seen Mister So-and-So?’ she asks Mary-Helen. ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Mary-Helen answers, scanning the room. ‘All of these husbands look equally appealing to me and all equally available.’ Well, when she added that, that about floored the poor gal throwing the party in her own house. ‘All equally available.’ Can you beat that?”

Katie slid forward on the seat of the folding chair, leaned backwards, and crossed her lengthened legs at the ankles. “So you think you could end up owning all those documents, huh?”

“What?”

“The property documents. The terrain report, the erosion report, the structural....”

“Yes, yes, all of them, that’s right.”

“And the appraisals. They had an appraiser up two or three times, you know. Once I had to take him all the way up to the millpond

just to get rid of the guy. Maybe he was snooping around the lodge to estimate those demolition costs.”

“Could be. I’ll pay a fair price for all that information but not until they give it to me. Hudson says we won’t get everything we’re asking for, but I will not be hoodwinked by a bunch of yahoos who think they can pull the wool over this old lady’s eyes. Hudson’s pretty sure they’re padding the bill all to hell. Staff time, my ass! That’s just the cost of doing business. Mister Greenbrier’s the one who elected to get in over his head on this deal. Not my fault if his plan went hay-wire.”

“This is pretty big news, Jan.”

“It is pretty big news but these things take time and someday I’ll have to cough up dough I don’t have until I sell the place.”

Katie dragged her heels backward and came to standing.

“You’re not leaving, are you?”

“No no. Just puttin’ these away.”

“Oh, throw them in the sink with the rest of the mess.”

“Then I think I’ll go out for something to eat. Want anything?”

“Where’ll you go?”

“I don’t know. Some Chinese restaurant. Pizza. Something simple. Wanna come?”

“Oh, heaven’s no. Are you kidding? But you’ll bring it back and eat it here, won’t you? Try your luck at Luckee’s Chinese Restaurant down the street. I say try your luck because you never know what you’ll get when you open the box at home.”

“Pizza sounds better than that.”

“There’s a pizza parlor on the corner of Jones and Bush. I hear it’s pretty good too. I’m sure they’ll put it in a carton for you. Wait, where’s my bag?”

“Right there beside you.”

“Oh, yes. Here, take this key to the front door so you won’t have to use the buzzer.”

“OK.”

“And push in the lower button in my door. That way it won’t lock you out in the hall.”

“But what about...?”

“What about nothing. There hasn’t been a robbery in this building since I’ve been here. Go on. Now for Pete’s sake don’t run off with my front door key.”

“OK. Looks like pizza. Here I go....” Katie stuck her head back into the room. “No onions, no garlic.”

“Oh, go on, you. And come back soon.”

“See you.”

As Katie slipped the coins into the phone, she spotted the liquor store where she would stop on the way back from the pizzeria.

“Hello. The Lowrie residence.”

“It’s me, Mom. I’m in a phone booth. I can’t talk long. I gave her the check.”

“Did you get a receipt?”

“I don’t need a receipt.”

“But if she took it she’ll be cashing it.”

“I don’t need a receipt from Jan.”

“Oh, Kaitlin! Ask the woman for a receipt. I can’t call you naive anymore so you must be temporarily blinded by....”

“Euphoria, Mom! We’re paid up through December and now she owes us about a thousand dollars too.”

“And we’re broke again. Aren’t you trusting our landlady a little too much?”

“Don’t you see what this means? Things are working out. Greenbrier laid some bogus invoice on her for like another thousand bucks or something but her lawyer’s contesting it. No telling when their hassling’ll be over with. Let the lawyers and realtors have at each other’s throats.”

“Oh, Kaitlin! Sometimes you make human relations sound like a Mexican cockfight!”

"Shoot! I just thought of something."

"What?"

"Josie and I could be doing summer camp after all. Oh well, at least now I can plant a fall garden. So, what do you think? The old battle-axe's in our court, Mom. And I have another idea."

"Can't it wait until you get home?"

"No, this is hot."

"What is it then?"

"OK. Next let's see what the place is really worth. Now that Cummings and the Greenbrier boys are out of the picture, I'll talk to someone who knows about farm and ranch property and who isn't already in bed with our neighbor."

"You mean Professor Jonson?"

"No, I mean some professionals in the rural real estate business along the coast."

"With her permission, you will."

"What?"

"You can't go talking to realtors without the landowner's permission, Kaitlin."

"No? So I'll tell her. She'll give me permission to show the place to a realtor so they can give me a legit estimate on quote the market value unquote."

"But don't you see you'll only be facilitating our eviction? What sort of pipe were they passing at that music festival?"

"I'm just going to muddy the waters some more. At least that's my plan."

"Do you think she'll trust you that much?"

"I do."

"You do? You trust her and she trusts you. You trust each other."

"We do. She's been a straight shooter with me all along. If anyone's being two-faced around here it's me. I'm trying to protect us, Mom. And if my plan works for her, it works for us too. So do I have your OK to propose it to her?"