

CHAPTER TWO

Along the rugged terrain of the Pacific Coast, nestled in the mountains of Malibu that overlook the ocean, was a house that looked more like a cabin.

A car pulled up the dusty and dry drive and stopped with a screech and a jerk. It took a second for the cloud to disperse. The doors opened.

Two women descended like flies. Both were well dressed, both were real estate agents.

They stood and waited for the dust to settle then smacked their clothes clean.

One was tall and narrow with frosted hair. She was in her forties. The other was dark and sleek in a feline sort of way, a dozen years younger, her features sharp, exotic. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight knot at the nape of her long neck. She carried a notebook.

The blond one spoke. "It was expanded three times yet see how it maintains an earthly, primitive feel. It was built in 1968."

The dark one responded "Charming." Her voice exuded an edge of disdain. "Amazing it's survived this long. I love the dark wood on the porch, the stilts and over there on the overhang." She shrugged.

"The hanging fuschia and ferns are a nice touch."

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"But really, the condition--"

The blond one pointed at the windows. "I know but see the lace curtains?"

"They're ages old--"

"But not tattered," the blond one said. "I think they're original."

The dark one approached the porch and looked at a moldy wicker rocker, wrinkled her nose. Next to it was a table. On it were a crinkled magazine, an ashtray, a straw and a candle. On the floor by the rocker was a flattened pair of sandals, most likely from a summer long since past.

"God, who lives here, a hermit?"

"No, an artist. She may have been a real hippie."

"She must be ancient."

"Maybe," the blond one agreed. "I'd guess she's in her sixties at least, maybe more."

The dark one moaned.

"Let's get this over with. I'll bet the inside smells." She crinkled her nose again, kept her manicured hands off any and all surfaces.

"I smelled paint. I'll bet you've seen her work."

"You mean she's, like, famous?" The dark one's eyes lit up. She touched the antique wood. "Quaint," she said.

The blond one looked at her, narrowed her eyes.

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"She's the real deal."

The dark one tested the first step.

"I hear the ocean," she said to the blond, "That's a strong selling point."

"All I hear are crickets and those dammed wind-chimes."

"Don't you like the sound of the wind?" the dark one asked.

"It's annoying. "Aren't you getting into it then?"

"What is she like?" the dark one asked.

"Weird."

The dark one's shoulders visibly sank. She shook her head, resigned. "Aren't they all?"

The dark one took a deep breath. She crinkled her nose, looked in the direction under the porch. "Um. There's a suspicious odor. What kind of system does she have?"

The blond one said, "Hole in the ground for all I know. We'll get all the reports by next Tuesday. The guy wanted to know if she'll sell. It's an old lead, three or four months. She wouldn't agree."

"Then why are we here?"

The dark one heard far away voices, perhaps only the voices from Malibu or the beach that traveled through the hills like spirits. She shivered. Movement from the front windows caught her attention. They were open to let in the breeze. The scent of hillside wildflowers and scrub was strong, heady. The lace

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curtains pressed outward and inward in a swaying undulation that matched the breeze.

"To see if she changed her mind."

"She won't let me in," the dark one said.

"Bet?", the blond one said.

They knocked on the screen door; the massive wooden door beyond was open, revealed a large room, bare floored with a braided rug that extended eight feet to the right and another eight to the left.

The blond one poked her head in and pulled the dark one over for a peek.

"You can't get rugs like that anymore."

The fireplace was to the left in a cluttered living room. To the right was a wide and open dining room with a twenty-foot ceiling, wood beams and an open fireplace that separated it from the room beyond. The fireplace rose to meet the beams in a corner of the ceiling from which hung a round wrought iron chandelier six feet in circumference.

A table under it could sit twelve easily and probably twice that many. Claw and ball styled table legs were large enough to fit a grizzly.

The blond one issued a loud, "Hello? Anyone home?" She opened the screen door.

The padding of feet came from the room beyond the dining

room.

The blond one let the screen door close. It banged too loud. She winced.

The dark one pulled her back out of the doors.

"Yes? Who is it?" The voice was gritty, the tone annoyed. It was the voice of a woman as she approached the screen door.

The dark one looked up at her.

"Rita Worth, the real estate agent from Century 21."

The old woman came to the door and looked at the two women.

"What do you want?"

"Hello again, Mrs. Optin-Kendall. How are you?"

"What do you want?"

"That man wants to know if you changed your mind."

"Weren't you here last month?"

"Yes I was."

"I said no then. I let you look around."

"I know that but I wanted to ask if you changed your mind. I brought my associate. She's an appraiser."

"Yeah, and?"

"She can give you an approximation of it's worth."

"I'm well aware of it's worth. What do I need you for?"

"I found out his name--"

"Did you find out if he raised his offer?"

"Well if you're not interested I guess there's no point in

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wasting our time. I just wanted to know, you don't have a phone you know--"

A moment of nothing passed. No one spoke, no one moved.

"All right, you may come in but I still don't wanna sell."

The dark one spoke. "Might change your mind. This place is . . . priceless."

"Glad you think so. Come in. What's your name?"

"Sierra Bachco." She walked up the step into the interior after Rita.

"Claire Optin-Kendall."

Sierra studied Claire for recognition, found none and walked in.

They nodded and walked to the living room, twirled round and round as they took in the ambiance of the place.

"It was built in 1968," Claire informed them.

Sierra looked at her.

Claire was at least sixty-five, maybe sixty-eight but Sierra thought she acted older. Claire was tall yet slim. She wore long gauzy fabric in layers, a long skirt, long tunic, long vest over that. The color was deepest blood burgundy. Her hair was wavy, shoulder length blond, almost fly-away. Sierra placed the color at somewhere between Clairol #39B and 47R. Her features were delicate and she was beautiful in a plastic surgeon, text book sort of way, too perfect for her age. Sierra changed her mind,

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put her at sixty-nine years old. Good job on Claire's part. Her blue eyes were enhanced from brown.

Sierra knew because her own brown eyes were enhanced as well and only those that had the procedure could tell. To the outside world, the color of their eyes looked as baby blue as baby blue.

They walked through the dining area to the kitchen. It was massive. The sink was chipped and the tile floor dull. The appliances deserved a good burial some ten years gone; had worn out their warranties decades ago.

Through the stained windows above the sink a deck and garden could be seen. The wood was curled, faded.

Through the kitchen and to the left was a room used as a painter's studio.

"Look at all this, Sierra. You won't believe it!" Rita said and led the way.

"Don't touch anything," Claire said.

Sierra took her hand off of the wall in a sudden jerk like she'd been burned.

Stacks of canvases lined the walls and all along the floor.

Rita stepped over the stool, went around the easle and saw the Santa Monica mountains through the grimy windows.

The smell of oil paints were overwhelming, pungent.

"Wow," Sierra said, "it's apparent where your time is spent. Rita was right. I've seen your work."

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The women walked along the creaking floor boards, through the studio to a room beyond.

The den was spotless but the carpet was threadbare. The bedroom was no larger than a closet. There was only one bath and it didn't have a shower, no automatic temperature gauge, no drier. The commode was stained.

There was no computer system, no heating system. Books and magazines littered every free inch.

The whole place, from the ancient dented Utilitrans in the drive to the macrame plant holders above the Thermal Biofeedback Pool on the back deck, could have been in the Museum of Natural History. It could serve as a study on the nineteen sixties.

It was dark, it was drafty. It needed work and not only decorating. It needed a bulldozer and an engineer. By market standards this house was not worth a plug nickel.

Rita looked at Sierra.

Sierra shook her head.

Rita said nothing.

"I know that look," Claire said. "I'll stay then. It's my place, no one cares for it but me. I own the house free and clear, have owned it outright for almost thirty years now."

"We didn't say--"

"You don't have to."

"Mrs. Kendall--" Rita said, "We just thought--"

"How much?" Claire addressed Sierra.

She shrugged. "Maybe two, two and a quarter."

She looked from one to the other.

"What's he offering?"

"It depended on Sierra," Rita said. "He offered two ten last time."

Sierra saw that their welcome was gone, could tell by the curtain that dropped over Claire's expression. She turned to make her way back to the front.

Claire saw the two women to the door and stood there, still as a statue as they went out. She let it slam shut with a blam and a bang as a reply.

The women walked down the three steps and Claire heard Sierra say, "Better to knock it down and start over. That's just what the land's worth. You can't see the ocean from here, only hear it and that's only sometimes."

Claire shook her head and went back to her studio. She wondered what damned fool man wanted her house. She forgot to ask. She went to the stool by the easel and resumed her work.

It was no good. She was distracted now.

Paint brush in hand, she stopped in mid stroke and thought

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momentarily about that. She was an extinct species, an artist who used real paint and real sable brushes. A dinosaur.

Just like this house. I'd like this room to be the last one I see when I close my eyes to die. To die here, in this place by the sea and the mountains, in this house, in this room. Perhaps in this stool. I not only want to die here but I want this house to die with me. It has to. There can be nothing left when I'm gone. Nothing whatever. It will have to be attended to.

She stood and placed the brush, filled to capacity with burnt umber Grumbacher oil color, down carefully on the lip of the easel, brush tip facing outward. It dripped, lost its load to the hardwood floor below. As evidence she looked down at the colorful splotch that now resided in a circumference of about eight inches, all of it under the lip of the easel.

She retrieved a reminder book from a shelf above the supply chest. She opened the book to the next day, Monday July 2, 2023. In a fine and meticulous script she made a notation to contact her attorney to change her will.

There. Done. It's amazing how the very small and tiny thoughts become momentous decisions. The house goes with me. It must. I don't know why I never thought of this. Years ago! I should have known that I couldn't allow her, of all people, to ever, ever see this place. If I go before she does and the existence of this house gets out she would find it I'm sure. I

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know she would. It would be just like Lydia to hunt it down with all the enthusiasm of a killer shark.

She wrote under the attorney's name; "The house goes."