

# Florida Retirement Is Murder

SNOWBIRDS DO MORE THAN JUST FLOCK

by

## KRIS COURTNEY

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# Chapter Twenty-Two

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Clarence Erickson looked like a man who preferred cats over dogs and could do much damage to the internet without much effort. He beamed at the sight of Stewart. His celebrity had already reached the gawky man with a weak chin and prescription glasses. The handshake was vigorous though the grip wasn't firm.

"Mr. Johnson, what a pleasure to meet you," Clarence said. He bumped against the desk, trying to back away from the doorway to give Stewart space to enter. "Please, have a seat."

Clarence had to move a plastic tote from the only chair available facing his desk. The windowless office wasn't much bigger than a broom closet. The room had a minimal character on the pale yellow walls. Clarence had a framed photograph on the desk near the laptop, but it was impossible to see the picture without leaning over the desk. Stewart wasn't that interested or curious.

Once he cleared the chair, Clarence returned to the desk chair, facing Stewart. He immediately stood before his cheeks made contact with the seat cushion.

"Oh, I forgot, do you want something to drink?" he asked.

"No, thank you."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Johnson?"

"Well, well, well, is this the infamous Mr. Johnson gracing our humble offices?" a young man asked over Stewart's shoulder. He gripped Stewart's shoulder and got closer than Stewart felt comfortable when the man reached around to shake his hand. The space wasn't enough for three people in the room. "You got us some good press — well, some attention. I'm Cody Hooper from accounting."

Cody was assertive and stank of pepperoni and onion. His clothes reeked of a pizzeria with a loose fitting shirt and an unshaven mustache. It was obviously after lunch. It didn't faze Cody or stop him from leaning against the door, crossing his arms over his chest.

"This place needs some good press. I'd like to capitalize on the YouTube video, but Kevin and Joan want to distance us from that kind of advertising." He took a breath, glancing between Stewart and Clarence. "Sorry, did I interrupt something?"

"Oh no, Mr. Johnson wanted to chat about extending his lease on the property," Clarence said.

"I'll let you get to it." Cody leaned over Stewart again to shake his hand. "It was good to meet you. If you need anything, let me know. I'm across the hall in accounting."

"Thank you."

“Take care of yourself, Mr. Johnson.”

It took almost a minute for the room to clear the scent of onions. The hallway door remained open to help move around the air. Clarence hunched his shoulders as he frowned at the laptop. He hadn't said anything since Cody's departure. Stewart cleared his throat to get the man's attention.

“I'm interested in purchasing the property I'm on,” he said. “I don't want to extend the lease.”

“Oh, purchasing?” Repeating the word gave Clarence a jolt.

“Is there a problem?”

“No, none at all,” he said, but something on the computer kept Clarence staring at the laptop screen instead of making eye contact. “I'm having trouble accessing the lot page. It's an IT problem. I'll get lagging and a bad VPN. Sometimes we get heavy traffic, and the site slows to a crawl.” He looked up from the screen finally. “You'll need to fill out all the applications before I can look at the available buying options.”

“I did that last night,” Stewart said. “I submitted them through the website.”

“Oh?” Clarence hunched forward, madly clicking the mouse. “Yup, there it is,” he said. “I typically get alerts for applications. I'm not sure what's wrong with the system lately.” His eyebrows rose. “That's a considerable amount of money you will need for the down payment.”

“I've got some money saved up.” Stewart glanced around the nearby walls and the lack of personality inside the office. “Have you been with the community long?”

“I've been here for six years,” he said. “Why do you ask?” Suspicion showed through the narrowed green eyes over the laptop screen.

“I was just wondering.” He didn't want to insult the gentleman for the lack of space or character. “I'm curious about Kathy Powell's property, too. She owned the lot behind mine.”

“Did you want to look into purchasing it, too?”

Stewart nodded. “I don't know what the legality is on the lease. And if the bank has a lien on the trailer, I could pay off the difference.”

“Holy cow, Mr. Johnson, that's—”

“You can call me Stewart.”

“Between those two properties and the purchase of Mrs. Powell's trailer is—”

“Mr. Erickson, can I be frank with you?” Stewart asked.

He still had the aftertaste of someone else's lunch parked in his sinuses. Clarence had the appearance of a reasonable man, studious and polite. But some exchanges between him and Cody happened on a level

outside of Stewart's appearance. According to the property and development managers, office chatter about Stewart's incident made a negative impact.

They probably had an office memo or a meeting about what occurred between Stewart and the wayward-moving men. People got fired because they took wrong actions within the community. A sheriff's deputy got reprimanded for potential harassment against Stewart — a senior citizen according to accounting and the AARP that zeroed in and counted down Stewart's age longer than he wanted to get their junk mail fliers. He left a lasting impression on a few people. While on the surface, Clarence seemed interested, even excited about the prospects of Stewart making purchases, something prevented him from moving forward, and he didn't think it had anything to do with Clarence's lagging computer.

"If you think I need a steeper down payment, I can do that," Stewart said, keeping the edge off his voice. "I'm not sure what's happening here, but I feel there's a delay in what I'm asking, or you're avoiding it altogether."

Clarence's gaze had wandered around the room, even looking over Stewart's shoulder rather than making eye contact again. Once Stewart had his say, the man straightened up and did his best to recover from the visual faux pas.

"Oh no, Mr. Johnson," he said with great effort. "I don't mean any disrespect to you. Given the recent events, I don't want you to think we'd be unwilling to sell the property to you. Personally, I enjoyed the video, and I got some insight into what happened before they posted the video. I think it's utterly disrespectful the way the moving company comes here and treats other people's property. I don't have any control over the contracts. I know Mr. Frazier asked Mrs. Ferrell to look into sending out another RFP for the contract. That company got complacent."

He leaned forward over the laptop.

"I don't want to say there's nepotism, but..." Clarence said and shrugged, opening his hands. "I got the application, and I see you noted the interest in Mrs. Powell's property. I see your credit rating is exemplary. However, when I want to access the property listings, I can't."

He made a few mouse clicks and swiveled the laptop so Stewart could see the screen. The webpage displaced the HTTP 404 response code. Clarence tapped enter a few times and even refreshed the web, backing out of it to show the admin access portal.

"It's been intermittent for a couple of weeks now," he said.

"Is that why no one's been moving in?"

Clarence frowned at the question like it hadn't occurred to him.

"Has it been a few weeks since we've had someone move in?"

Clarence left the desk chair, had to ease around Stewart's chair to access the doorway, and rapped on the open door across the hall. Stewart remained seated, slinging his arm over the back of the chair to watch the exchange between Clarence and Cody.

"That's odd," Cody said. He stood from the desk to approach the hallway. Stewart decided to reach the hallway before the overwhelming onion stench permeated the little windowless room again. There was an issue with Cody's access, too.

"You've got an impressive application. You're approved for what you want," Cody said. "I'll need to reach out to the bank regarding any liens on Mrs. Powell's property." He joined Stewart in the hallway while Clarence took the place behind the man, remaining in Cody's office.

"You're having trouble with the internet?"

"No, the internet's fine. We've been having glitches with our website and the property pages for a few weeks," he said, dismissing it with a wave. "I'll give a call to IT."

"I put a call in earlier today," Clarence added, trying to step around Cody, taking up space in the doorway.

"See, Clarence is on it. And I'll do a follow-up for a trouble ticket. We'll get this resolved."

"I'd like to see the other available lots, too."

"Which ones?"

"All of them," he said.

"Good Lord, Mr. Johnson, are you serious?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Well, no, I mean, yes, for the moment. But do you want to see all the property listings?"

"I'm interested in a few places. I might want to make additional purchases later."

"That is fantastic," Cody said, rubbing his hands together vigorously. "That's the kind of energy this place needs. We've been hurting for a little while. We'll get this website business back to normal."

"Does the neighboring property management have anything to do with why you're having trouble leasing lots?"

"Who says we're having trouble?" Cody asked.

"You mentioned you were hurting," he said. "I assumed you meant you had trouble leasing properties. I wondered if it had to do with the high-rise development next door."

"I'll admit that the few times we've had inquires on that side of the community, no one's interested. I don't think we've had any real success leasing anything there since they broke ground."

Stewart nodded. "It bothered me also when I saw the area. All that land on that side of the community won't be habitual once they clear the rest of the trees and level out the parking area. The buildings are going to block a lot of the sun on that side."

"It's the price of progress and out of our hands." Cody finally moved enough for Clarence to access the hallway.

"I'll get IT on the phone as soon as we're done here," Clarence said.

"As soon as we can access the lots, I'll have Clarence crunch the numbers while I draft a portfolio for yours and the adjacent lot. You'll have more than a few options," Cody said. "We'll get this straightened out. I promise. At least, even after they finish the construction next door, you won't see it from your property."

"That's good to know."

"And I will get those numbers done," Clarence said. "I'm sorry it's not working right now."

"No problem gentlemen," Stewart said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"That's good," Cody said. "I see they got you wired up for sound." He motioned to the heart monitor.

"It's routine," Stewart said. "Is this the way out?"

"Yup," Cody said. "I'll take you."

They left Clarence standing in the hallway. Stewart wasn't sure if there was a bonus, finder's fee, or some compensation when it came to leasing or buying, but he intended to make sure Clarence didn't get left out when the time came to purchase.

They turned the corner as Kevin Frazier got up from the chair in the large office. Joan Ferrell followed him out the door to catch up to Stewart once he exited the hallway.

"Mr. Johnson, good to see you up and around again," Frazier said, extending an arm out for a handshake. "We've not met officially. I was in the hospital while you were there. Kevin Frazier, I'm the head of business development here."

"I remember seeing you and Joan," Stewart added, seeing the woman standing to the left of Frazier, looking smug with tight lips. Her hair was a faded red again but this time her roots were showing black. The gold half rimmed glasses clashed with her purple earrings, polk-a-dot twister themed blouse and an ankle length green skirt.

"Hello, Joan."

“Mr. Johnson,” she said with emphasis like it was inappropriate to stay on the first name basis. “You look better.”

“Thank you,” he said while silently refraining from the obvious. “I thought it was a little weird seeing you and Mr. Frazier in the hospital, and it seemed a little unorthodox.”

“That’s true, Mr. Johnson,” Frazier said. “But you’re not exactly the typical resident.”

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered or guarded.”

“Definitely flattered,” Frazier said before leaning toward Stewart. “Can we have a brief conversation in my office?”

“Sure.”

Stewart followed Frazier into the large office with the glass walls. He closed the door and remained standing. From his angle, he saw Joan talking to Cody and Clarence. Frazier propped his backside against the desk folding his arms over his chest.

“That was an interesting video,” Frazier said. “It sure set off some alarms around here. I’ll tell you if poor old Patti Brightman saw that fence or what you did to Miles Sánchez’s arm, she’d shit cats. Did you know Patti?”

“Before my time,” Stewart said, paying attention to Frazier but monitoring the interactions between Joan and the leasing agent with the accountant.

“Well, she was the HOA president, and I’ll tell you, she was tough on people.”

“How do you mean?”

“I think the job went to her head. She stepped on a lot of toes. I mean really, she was just a retired accountant.”

“From what I heard about her, people appreciated what she did,” Stewart said, feeling obliged to speak better of the dead than a man who knew the woman directly.

“Oh, they did,” Frazier said with a slight change in his voice. “But to a point.”

“She was good friends with Kathy Powell.”

“Oh, you knew Kathy?”

“I got to know her pretty well,” he said. “She never had anything bad to say about Patti.” The opening allowed him to test the waters. “In fact, Kathy mentioned that Patti wasn’t too keen on the development next door. She even had a map of the vacant lots around the community.”

“No one’s happy about the bullshit next door, Mr. Johnson,” Frazier said. “I’m not surprised to hear about Patti and her map. She was a little OCD about things.”

“Someone broke into Kathy’s trailer the other night,” Stewart said.

“What? When? How do you know?”

“It happened the night I went to the hospital. I know because I saw the man who knocked me down after he ran out of the bushes.”

“Are you serious? Did you tell security?”

Stewart sniggered. “Your security isn’t worth the money they’re paid. And I didn’t tell anyone because I’ve already got a reputation around here as a troublemaker.”

“You’re right about that,” Frazier said. “Tell me, did you get a good look at the man who broke into Kathy’s place?”

Stewart didn’t answer immediately, trying to read the man’s face, deciding if he cared or just wanted to appear interested. Finally, he shook his head.

“I’m not sure what anyone would want from an old lady’s house in the middle of the night.” Frazier was indifferent about the break in. “You need to stay away from any bad elements, Mr. Johnson. You don’t want to set off that monitor.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“What did you come by the office for today? I saw you talking to Cody and Clarence.”

“They’re building portfolios for me to look at,” he said. “I’m interested in purchasing the real estate the trailer is on. I’m interested in Kathy’s place as well.”

“Oh wow, that’s good news,” Frazier said. “That’s the kind of interest we’ve wanted around here but can’t get enough people interested. This is a great location, and the property values around here are outstanding. You’re making the right investment.”

“I agree, but something feels a little off.”

“How so?” Frazier asked.

Joan broke away from Cody and Clarence. Both men retreated down the hallway as Joan marched by Frazier’s office. The woman did her best not to glare at Stewart when they made eye contact.

“I’m not feeling the warm welcome from the clubhouse as I am from the residents,” he said. “Mrs. Ferrell doesn’t seem too fond of me. I mean, I get it. Since I got here, I’ve stirred up a couple of hornets’ nests. None of it was my intention.”

“Well, Joan sometimes is like an aged wine,” Frazier said, winking. “She’s an acquired taste. She’ll warm up to you. But you can’t blame her for staying cautious. We debated about calling the police about the incident.”



“Did you want to press charges against me?”

“No, not at all, nothing so dramatic,” he said, waving it off. Frazier pushed off the desk edge and took the expensive leather chair behind it. “Our residents are our highest priority. You understand we’re doing our best to look out for their best interests. We’re not a long-term facility here. We’re not assisted living or palliative care. We’re a glorified trailer park management team, and we’re all trying to make ends meet.”

“Maybe I should see about getting elected as the HOA president,” Stewart said.

Frazier laughed. “Do you think you’ll have time to do that and still stay out of trouble?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Well, I got a conference call in a few minutes. I’ll check in with Cody and Clarence about your portfolios. You’ll have to organize the HOA thing on your own, Mr. Johnson. It’s got nothing to do with me. Joan can get the paperwork started for the petitions. Good luck with that.”

“They’re having trouble with the website.”

“I know, the damned thing keeps crabbing out on us,” he said before lifting the phone from the cradle. “I’ve talked to tech support a few times this week. They’re not very helpful. I’m sure we’ll get the bugs out of the system, and Cody will get things out to you as soon as possible.”

Stewart opened the door. Before he left the office, Frazier had one more tidbit to drop on him.

“Mr. Johnson, I’d appreciate it if you could stay out of trouble,” Frazier spoke with a more deliberate tone.

“It does send the wrong message. I can’t stop people from posting videos, but I can step in when it comes to maintaining safety around here for our residents. Even if they see you as some kind of vigilante hero that will not work for us,” Frazier said in a salty tone. He smiled as he stabbed the keypad on the phone with his finger. “I Googled you and you’re not on any social media.”

“I have nothing to prove to the rest of the world.”

“From my point of view, I’d say it’s just the opposite.”