

## Buying Murder 1

Regan presented her final argument for buying the cottage to her husband. “The house is the last one on the street, as far back as you can go from where 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue joins East Cliff Drive at Twin Lakes Beach, so even though it’s only steps to the sand, it’s quiet and private. Schwan Lake is behind the house; that makes it both a beach house and a lake house. It’s got location, location, location,” she cited the realtor’s mantra.

She had endeavored to be as logical as Tom was, but now she entreated. “Besides, I really want to do this.”

“Is what you’re suggesting even ethical?” Tom asked. “The owner called you to list the house, not buy it. You said she lives back east and hasn’t been out here for years. She could say that since she had no knowledge of our market, she relied on you completely and that you manipulated her into selling to us for less than she should have.”

“But she isn’t just relying on me for market value. She talked to other agents, too. The owner said we all came up with similar market pricing for the house.

“She also said getting a quick sale is more important than getting top dollar. Her oldest brother is in financial trouble. He needs cash fast, and she and her other brother want to help him out. They want to be realistic. She asked for a price that would produce a sure sale within a couple of weeks.”

Tom shook his head, “There is no such thing as a sure sale in a couple of weeks in this market. Even a bargain price doesn’t guarantee an immediate sale.”

“That’s exactly what I told her. She said they would have to think it over and decide which of us to hire, but they would definitely be using one of the lower prices we agents proposed. If we offered them the highest of the low numbers, how could that be unethical?”

Tom’s chuckle was more an expelling of air than a real laugh. “OK, so we can come in and buy ethically and save the owner who needs cash. I don’t want to be so charitable that we overpay, though.”

“That’s where the true brilliance of my plan comes into play,” she offered a triumphant smile. “We take six percent off the high offer we’re going to make. The seller’s bottom line is the same because they won’t be paying commissions, and we get a six percent savings to insure we aren’t paying too much. Win-win.”

“You’ve got an answer for everything, haven’t you?”

Her giggle was mischievous and her eyes danced, “Of course I have. I want this house. I want a little escape pod, you know, somewhere we can go if there’s another fire in Bonny Doon. Besides, I’m sure we can make the house really special. It’s already quite charming — it just needs a little work — a wall knocked down here and there to open it up inside, maybe a new roof, and some new finishes in the kitchen and bathroom. I’ve even got an idea where a half bath could go.”

“Sweetheart, what are you getting us into?” Tom’s question indicated he already knew he wasn’t going to dissuade his wife.

“The backyard is mostly Schwan Lake. We can keep a canoe there if you like. And the house isn’t very far from the Yacht Harbor launch ramp. Maybe we could keep a little boat there, too. You’ve always wanted a boat, haven’t you?” Regan enticed.

Tom made a sound that fell somewhere between a groan, a sob, and a laugh. “I assume you’ve already figured out how we’re going to pay for this *little escape pod* that we’ll need if there’s ever another fire in our neighborhood that coincides with all the hotels and motels in Santa Cruz being full?”

“Trust me,” she cooed, “it’s all worked out.”

“Trust me. Those are famous last words if ever I heard any.”



Regan had a cardinal rule for buyers: always have a house inspected before buying it. But she and Tom had owned their little get-away cottage for three days, and she was just meeting Barry Bradford, the home inspector, for a belated look.

Her reaction to seeing Barry was the same as it always was. When she first spotted him, the opening cords of *Hail to the Chief* ran through her mind. His voice wasn't anything like his look-alike's, and the startle of recognition never lasted past his outstretched hand and his upbeat greeting, but so incredible was his resemblance to the former president, that from the moment she saw him until he spoke, she was in the presence of George W. Bush. She'd had clients elbow her as soon as he turned his back, or frown and quietly ask, "Doesn't he ...?" before she stopped them with a nod of her head to acknowledge, yes, he did.

What amazed her was that Barry didn't see his resemblance to the former president. He was a member in good standing of ASHI, the American Society of Home Inspectors, a designation that required the development of excellent observational skills, yet his face seemed to remain a personal blind spot as he looked in the shaving mirror and dismissed the stares of strangers.

As usual, Barry's greeting of, "How are you on this fine day, Regan?" banished her urge to address him as Mr. President. She smiled back a peer's greeting.

"I'm doing well, Barry." She couldn't resist interjecting some reality as she pushed a wind driven strand of hair behind her ear. "How are you on this blustery November day?"

"I'm ready to work, but I'll put off a look-see at the roof until the end of the inspection and hope the wind dies down in the meantime. I don't want a good gust to blow me off the house."

She laughed, "Has that happened to you?"

Barry grinned and the uncanny resemblance grew. "Only once, but I never want a repeat. I landed in some bushes that broke my fall, but it scared the blazes out of me."

"Tom and I just bought this house; since your inspection is for us, you can skip the cosmetics. Tell me

about the plumbing, foundation, electrical, and if we can get along for a while without a new roof. The interior is pretty chopped up; we want to knock down some walls and open it up, so we need to know which walls are bearing and which can come down easily.”

“Sure, no problem. I’ll take a good look at the structural members from the attic.”

Regan unlocked the front door and stepped inside. Barry followed, carrying his neat tri-fold ladder and a satchel filled with his inspection tools.

“Could I ask you a question before you get started?” She led the laden Barry across the living room. “I’m curious why the house is built like this; maybe you’ll be able to explain it to me. The fireplace isn’t centered on its wall; it’s close to being set in the corner, but it isn’t quite. There’s just this short wall between the fireplace and the side wall; it can’t be more than three or four feet long, but see how it angles from the edge of the fireplace? There are conventional straight walls on the kitchen behind here and on the hall to the left. There aren’t any openings for a closet or storage of any kind on any of the sides. I’ve checked. It seems like there’s just a blank triangle of space here. Why doesn’t this wall parallel the back wall and make a square corner?”

Barry put his gear on the floor and tapped on the angled wall. “It sounds hollow. It’s plaster like the surrounding walls, not sheetrock like it might be if it was added later. It looks original, like it was built that way. Now you’ve got me curious. If you don’t mind me maybe getting a little insulation or dust in the house when I come back down, I’ll start in the attic, take a look at this area and let you know which walls are load bearing before I look at anything else.”

“I don’t mind a little dirt — I’m anxious to understand the house’s construction.”

She walked Barry to the back bedroom and pointed out the attic access hatch in the closet. Barry set up his ladder and climbed up high enough to push off the hatch door. Then he put his hands on opposite sides of the opening and pulled himself up and through it like a gymnast.

A moment later his head dropped back down through the opening. “You don’t have any insulation up

here, Regan. This house is going to bake in the summer and be expensive to heat in the winter.”

“I’ll add insulation to my list.”

His head disappeared again. She briefly saw his upper body highlighted by a beam from his flashlight, and then she could hear faint scraping sounds as Barry disappeared from sight and moved along the ceiling joists toward the triangle space.

“Can you hear me?” he yelled.

“Yes I can, easily.” She followed his movements, walking under him through the house.

“You’re going to have lots of options for opening things up. So far it looks like the only bearing walls are the perimeters and left of center, front to back. Wiring is Romex, not knob and tube. Looks good. Looks nice and clean up here; one or two desiccated mice, but that’s normal. No signs of a rodent infestation.

“OK, I’m to the triangle space. It’s open to the attic. I don’t see any reason for the construction being the way it is. I’m trying to shine my flashlight into the space for a look, but I can’t see anything much ... it’s got stuff in it ... I don’t know what exactly ... it almost looks like ... like cat litter. And ... there’s garbage ... a black plastic garbage bag, at least. Hey, Regan, I know what it is. Somebody hid Jimmy Hoffa in here,” he laughed. “You want me to pull the bag out and see what’s in it?”

“Sure. Maybe you’ll find pirate treasure — we are near the beach. I like the idea of finding treasure better than your suggestion.”

“This bag is harder to get out than I thought.”

She could hear muffled grunts — Barry trying to pull the bag up to the attic, she assumed.

“It tore,” he said. “There’s a piece of material in it ... it’s dirty ... it looks rusty.” A heartbeat later a guttural cry of, “Uhh ... Ahk!” exploded through the ceiling above her.

“Barry, are you OK?”

She heard him scrambling along the ceiling joists back in the direction of the attic hatch, moving recklessly and without concern for the plaster ceiling he would damage if he slipped off the beams. She ran through the house to the closet, arriving just in time to see him lower his head through the opening. He was clearly in distress, coughing and gagging, and pale, even though the blood rushing to his lowered head should have been flushing his cheeks.

He fought retching. “No joke!” He poured out his words rapidly, like he didn’t want what they described to linger in his mouth. “Somebody’s in there. Maybe not Jimmy Hoffa — but somebody. He was looking up at me with empty eyes.”