

## FLORIDA RETIREMENT IS MURDER

*Snowbirds do more than just Flock*

*“Stewart Johnson had worked hard his entire life to reach retirement. However, his Golden Years would prove to be more of a challenge than he anticipated after his wife passed away. Seeking to find peace of mind and warmth in Florida, Stewart became surrounded by a tribe of Snowbird residents who took him on a journey of laughter and sleuthing inside a gossip riddled community filled with the humorous dysfunction of overgrown children.”*

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# FLORIDA RETIREMENT IS MURDER

SNOWBIRDS DO MORE THAN JUST FLOCK

by

KRIS COURTNEY

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**US Pre-Registration: # PRE000012144**

*'Excerpt'*

## Chapter Six

The lawn care office smelled like sweat, old socks, and fertilizer. From what Stewart saw of the business offices, the rest of the hallway appeared neat and orderly. The inside of Scott Larcher's office looked like the garden center of a thrift store exploded inside the room.

"Did you need something?" the man behind the desk asked.

There wasn't room to sit in any of the chairs at the desk. Garden equipment, used mower blades, and quarts of 2-cycle oil filled the chair seats. The desk had a menagerie of small engine parts resting in oily pools on the desk surface. The soles of the boots had something other than mud packed between the treads. The man barely looked up from the Smartphone in his hands.

"I bought the trailer on the corner of Meditation Lane and Gentle Rain Drive," Stewart said, thinking he'd never get a chance to use that phrase again. One of the appealing points of the community that drew Deborah's attention was the whimsical street names.

Finally, the man looked up. "You bought Doug's old place?"

"Yes, maybe I should come back another time."

"Naw, you're good." He put down the phone and laced his fingers behind his head. What was once a leather chair squeaked under him as his bulk shifted. "I'll get your property back on the schedule." He gave Stewart a long look, either sizing him up or memorizing his face. "It will be a few weeks before we can get out that way again unless you want to get on the top of the list."

"How do I do that?"

“You can pay a little extra.”

Stewart nodded. “I’ll wait.”

Scott shrugged. “Suit yourself,” he said. “It don’t matter much to me either way. Like my buddy Fisherman John always says, ‘It just don’t matter.’” He leaned forward, grabbing the phone again. The chair groaned under his weight.

“Is there anyone else I should talk to about my lawn?” Stewart asked.

The frown was so intense the bushy black eyebrows knitted together like feuding black caterpillars bucking heads. “Who says? Did someone say something about going to José?” he asked, pointing the finger at Stewart. “José works for me. You got that?”

Stewart was a levelheaded man. Sometimes he got tense as a passenger in traffic. But when it came to rude people and confrontation, he knew how to keep his cool and maintain the edge.

“Do you know me?” he asked. “Do you think it’s okay to talk to me or anyone like that, Mr. Larcher?”

“Look, I got a lot going on right now.” It took him a few attempts to get out of the chair. He wiped off his right hand on the oil-stained cargo pants. “No hard feelings. I’ll get to your property as soon as I can.”

Stewart grasped the man’s hand and squeezed it enough to let Scott know he wasn’t intimidated by the man’s outburst.

“You know, can I share something with you?” Stewart asked.

“Sure.”

“If you happen to run into five assholes in one day, there’s a good chance it’s not them.”

When he left the office and gave Scott some food for thought, Stewart wandered back through the main lobby. The receptionist barely looked up as he strolled down the second hallway. He headed toward the activities center, waiting for three women too busy talking and shuffling their feet to get by them.

Once they passed, Stewart continued along his way, reading the direction signs and looking at the artwork on the walls that residents frequented. Paintings, framed inspirational posters, and quilts hanging like medieval tapestries took up most of the wall spaces throughout the main hallways. Unlike the section of the building designated for business, the rest of the place, dedicated to guests and the community, had vibrant colors on the walls and artwork that reflected life, spirituality, and happiness. A table sat in the corner with miscellaneous items that had sale tags on them mimicking a neighborhood thrift store.

More signs and busier hallways meant Stewart was getting closer to the heart of the clubhouse. Soft classical music played through the speakers. People coming and going, some in bathing suits and others wearing the tropical flavor of the day had smiles for him in passing. Stewart held open a door for a woman before passing through behind her. As Stewart reached the last stretch to the second receptionist's desk, the elderly woman looked up from a book smiling at him. Her thick reading glasses distorted the size of her eyes. Silver hair, with streaks of teal blue, assembled in a thin collection of curls. She removed the prescription glasses and tilted her head back. The gold beaded chain around her neck kept them from falling.

“Good morning, young man,” she said. “How can I help you?”

“Well, you already did by calling me ‘young man’.”

“When you get to my age, everyone's younger.” She spoke in a sharp voice to command the respect her age had rightfully earned.

“I was looking for Becky.”

“Well, she’s got a pottery class now, but it should be wrapping up,” the woman said. She handed him a brochure. “That’s a map to the rest of the facility. The pottery class is on the third floor. The elevators are around the corner there. Have a good day.” The woman was quick to place her glasses back and lower her head to continue reading.

“I’m Stewart,” he said, feeling it was necessary to ignore the sour attitude he got from Scott and share the warmth he received from the woman’s generosity.

“I’m Gladys,” she said. “Good to meet you. I volunteer here once a week. Perhaps we’ll see each other around.” The woman spoke from the crease of the book without looking back at Stewart.

“Thank you, Gladys.”

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The third floor of the clubhouse had a different ambiance with softer hallway music and better lighting through the abundant windows that overlooked the rest of the community. Stewart got sidetracked from locating the pottery classroom, standing near one of the tall, expansive windows that showed a view of the golf course, common grounds, some of the residential trailers, and a snippet of the river and surrounding greenery.

He took in the sights, settling into the location. Lost in his thoughts, Stewart faced a wonderful smile when the hand gently touched his shoulder.

“You looked lost,” Becky said.

“No, I was getting my bearings.”

“Are you up here for the pottery class?” She wore loose-fitting overalls with rolled-up sleeves. Dried clay clung to her forearm in a way that was almost seductive to Stewart. “It’s over for today. I was headed down to start the yoga class. Do you want to enroll? There are some other residents who do an outside class too.”

Stewart chuckled, shaking his head. “I’ll pass for now.”

“Well, there’s a small café at the end of the hall with a better view.” Becky removed her Smartphone from a pocket, glancing at the time. “I have about ten minutes before the class to get cleaned up.”

“I came to talk to José like you mentioned,” he said, trying to think of something to talk about and keep her close.

“Oh? Did you find him in the building?” she asked before touching his elbow. “You can walk with me.”

They set out on foot, heading back to the elevator. Becky was polite, attentive, and somewhat intoxicating whenever Stewart got close to her. Inside the elevator, they stood shoulder to shoulder. Her White Diamonds perfume gave him a sensation of desire that Stewart had not felt for decades. Becky began shrugging out of the cotton coveralls. Respectfully Stewart could not help but become aware of her girlish figure.

“How are you liking the place so far?” she asked, noticing Stewart watching her. “Have you got to know any of your neighbors yet?”

“I have,” he said, smiling. “I rode with Suzy Fuller to the clubhouse.”

“Suzy’s nice. She can be intense.”

Stewart’s phone chimed when he received a text. As the elevator doors opened for the second floor, he checked the text. It was an emoji of a catfish making kissy faces against an aquarium glass.

“Is that something fun?” Becky asked when Stewart laughed.

“It’s a representation of something,” he said, showing the gif. “I think my ride’s out front.”

“Ah, yes, Joan.” Becky nodded and winked. “That must be from Suzy. If they got you on their list, there’s a good chance everyone has your number now. You’ve been accepted.” She reached out with an open palm. “May I?”

Stewart handed over his Smartphone. Becky got into his contact list with a few quick motions and expert navigation. She held up the phone, facing them, and leaned close to Stewart. He was almost taken back by the silkiness of her skin and the scent of her fragrance. Stewart had not been touched or shown any attention for a long time.

“Smile,” she said, taking the picture. Becky added the photo to Stewart’s contact list and returned the phone. “There you go. Now I’m in your phone too. I don’t want to be added to their group texts, but if you need anything and can’t find me, you’re welcome to send a text.” She thumbed at the door where she stood. “I need to get ready for my yoga class. After that, my day is done. Are you sure you don’t want to join up? We have more than a few men in the group.” Her lips pressed together before adding, “Although, I think they’re mainly in the class to look at the women.”

“Anything is possible,” he said.

“Well, I’ll see you around.” She pushed open the door and said, “Don’t be a stranger.”

The walk back to the parking lot from the main doors took the wind out of Stewart. He found shelter under an aluminum roof-covered bench at the edge of the lot. Pedestrians wandered by him, nodding and smiling. He sat down, taking gulps of air that felt heavy in his lungs.

“Are you having a heart attack, a stroke? Do you smell toast?” The series of questions came from Suzy in rapid succession as she pulled the golf cart onto the curb in front of Stewart. She leaned back against the vinyl seat, arm slung over the back, watching Stewart. She wasn’t in a hurry to help. “You’ll get used to the heat.”

“It’s the humidity,” he said after another deep breath. He stood from the bench and slid into the passenger seat of the cart.

Suzy didn’t pull away fast, easing off the curb and driving through the parking lot again. The air on his sweaty face helped cool him. He watched more people walking along the sidewalks with their service and therapy dogs. Most of the dogs had faces that matched their owners, and for a half-second, Stewart wondered if he had heatstroke.

“Did you ever wonder why people look like their pets?” Suzy asked, seeing the same phenomena from the driver’s seat. With a head shake, she glanced at him. “Man, I remember how Patti used to rail at anyone walking their dogs. I swear that woman considered running over pets. I never met a person that hated animals as much as her. You won’t see cats running around the neighborhood because she managed to get the local sheriff’s office to file with the main office. They will cite anyone that lets their cats roam free.” Suzy drove through the neighborhood without the lead foot, glancing at Stewart.

“She carried a petition with her to overturn the ruling on pets in the community. I don’t know why that woman had such a sore spot.”

“Is anyone taking her place as president for the HOA?” he asked conversationally.

“No one wants it,” Suzy said. “None of the residents cared much for what Patti did. She was a pain in the ass, but if the main office tried to pull a fast one on any of the residents, Patti was there with a magnifying glass

and copies of the guidelines showing the property managers what they could and couldn't do to us."

Stewart watched the river again, passing on Suzy's side of the cart this time. The ducks swam in single-file along the shoreline. They turned down Silver Canoe Way instead of turning right on Grandiose Drive. Suzy drove along a scenic route that took them further along the river toward the overgrown pine and palm trees. A smattering of cypress trees twisted their way through the half-hearted woodlands. The palms grew long and thin, topped with fronds of various shades of green and accents of wilted fans, while the Florida Oak grew thick with spindly limbs and massive canopies. Spanish moss clung to the branches, hanging like living limp green linguini.

"What happened to her?" he asked lightly. Everyone died, but Suzy showed compassion for the woman. Talking about her made Suzy docile.

"She had an accident with her golf cart," Suzy said, slowing at a curve in the road overlooking the throng of trees and tall grass down an embankment. Suzy motioned with her chin as she slung her right arm over the passenger seat. "She went right off the road here and down there."

"You were close?"

Suzy nodded. "It's been about six months since she died. We all go. But I thought that bitch would outlive us all. She was tough as nails, hard as enamel. When we heard about it, I thought it was a joke."

"Why?"

"Patti was night blind. We used to make jokes about how she'd drive around all day measuring grass but had to get home before dark because she couldn't see," Suzy said, staring across the treetops that were almost level with the roadway.

“I saw her come home that night before dark. I live a few houses down from her. Sometimes we had dinner together. She had all these stories about New York. She knew the mayor. She used to handle stock options for the mob. When I thought she didn’t have any more stories left, Patti would get a few drinks in her, and Patti would spill more tales.”

“She sounds like a fascinating woman,” Stewart said, feeling inclined to say something.

“Oh yeah, Patti was a rebel. She did a lot of firsts for women. If I had the funds, I would have bought land here when she told me,” Suzy said. “She didn’t have any family, and I don’t know if she had a will. I remember Patti mentioning leaving something behind for the rest of us if she went first.” Suzy shrugged. She had big shoulders, and the movement became familiar to Stewart.

“All jurisdictions have intestacy laws,” Stewart said. “If she owned the property here, it goes into probate court.”

“Well, I don’t know much about all that,” Suzy said. “Patti used to manage my money. She did my taxes and looked for places where I could save a little more. I wasn’t good at money management, and I figured you had to be in management if you wanted money.”

“What kind of work did you do?”

“I thought it was obvious,” she said.

It was a loaded statement. The knee-jerk answer might fall well short of the facts. Stewart didn’t want to insult Suzy by suggesting she fit the profile of a dockworker or truck driver. She was burly and intimidating with her height and weight. She was comfortable not caring about others looking down on her because she wasn’t a pretty woman. Stewart respected anyone willing to swim against the stream and forgo some of the social filters people carried around like a loaded gun.

“Not from where I’m sitting.”

Suzy nodded, smirking. “I think you’re all right, Stew,” she said.