

## Murder House 1

It was a pleasing house, cozy rather than spacious, like something Thomas Kincade might have imagined for one of his paintings. The board and batten siding was painted a creamy color as comforting as a glass of warm milk. The window sashes were done in humble cranberry and the front door was a deep forest green set off by a polished brass kick-plate and equally bright handle trim that glinted in the afternoon sun.

Redwood trees towered behind the house and at its sides, stately green and brown sentinels, but the house was south facing so they didn't cast a pall of shadows over it like they would have on a less perfectly situated dwelling. Trees had probably grown in front of the house at some point, too, given the nature of forests; if any had though, they had been removed.

Broad brick steps interspersed with pocket-sized patios that jutted into the manicured proximate gardens cascaded from the elevated house to the rich green lawns and guest parking below.

Regan climbed out of her car and took in the house and its surroundings.

"You're picture perfect, aren't you?" She spoke to the house as if it were an animate being. "You're supposed to be a derelict with a cruel past, but you look comfortable and charming. When did that happen? When did you, the most notorious house in Bonny Doon, take up such welcoming and benign airs?"

She ducked back into her car, grabbed her briefcase, and started up the steps. She had done her research for the meeting — she liked being prepared — but had already decided her visit was as much about getting a read on the house and its owner as it was about getting the listing. If her instincts told her there was anything untoward about either of them, she'd take a pass.

She remembered walking into a house in Aptos once where the hair on the back of her neck stood up the moment she crossed the threshold. She had turned on her heel and fled — she couldn't even preview the house, let alone show it to buyers — because there was something palpably cold and

menacing that she sensed immediately. She planned to leave this house just as quickly if she picked up a similarly bad vibe.

Regan rang the doorbell and took a step backward, facing the door while she waited for the owner to open it, unwilling to turn her back on the house to enjoy the gardens like she would have done at any other property.

A brutal double murder had taken place inside the house almost two decades earlier and the killer had never been caught. One of the victims was a real estate broker, Roger Commons, a man she had met when she was in her early twenties and brand new to the business, who got by more on his charisma and good looks than his negotiating skills. The other victim was one of the house's owners, a female client of his.

The coroner had determined both had died at the same time or at least so close together in time that it was impossible to determine who died first. The female owner's throat had been slit, the realtor had been bludgeoned to death; but from the location of the bodies, the blood spatter in the bedroom where the owner's body was found, and the gore that corresponded with the broker's body in the entry foyer, it was clear they had not died together.

There were rumors the house was haunted. Regan had often overheard tales told at the unpancake breakfasts, fundraisers for the local volunteer firefighters, but never at the fundraiser dinners and dances that happened at night. Locals, it seemed, were willing to talk about the house during daylight hours, but reluctant to do so after dark.

At a recent event, one neighbor whispered she had heard wailing coming from the house, especially on dark nights, and had seen a dark-haired woman in a red dress materialize in an upstairs window. The neighbor said the figure called for help and then raised her arm and cowered at some unseen terror before vanishing as suddenly as she had appeared. Other neighbors oohed and nodded and added their own tales of sightings, undeterred by the conundrum of how one could perceive hair color or dress color in the dark. Several also agreed they had seen a moving bluish ball of light; and some said they had

recently seen the light assume a human form as it slipped through the trees by the house.

Murder always generated gossip and speculation. The murders in this house caused more talk than usual because officially they remained unsolved.

Long-time realtors were particularly aware of the house's history because one of their own died there, and to Santa Cruz realtors who remembered what happened, like Regan did, the house was known as the Murder House.

With all the memories and imaginings going through her mind, Regan jumped involuntarily when the front door opened with a shrill squeal.

"Yes, I know. You don't have to tell me. I have to do something to stop that squeaking."

"Definitely," Regan smiled her greeting to the man opening the door.

"Remind me again, please, which one are you? I've had so many real estate agents come through, I've lost my place," the slightly built man said somberly. A broad smile erupted on his face and he laughed out loud, "I'm kidding, I'm kidding, well, sort of, at least. Come on in, won't you? Should I call you Regan or Mrs. McHenry?"

"I'm Regan," she tried to sound let down, "and not your first choice or interview? How disappointing," she teased as they shook hands.

"True. But you'll forgive me that, as long as you're my last," he laughed again, "won't you?"

She liked him immediately. Both he and his house felt amiable and engaging. The way he tried to get a rise out of her reminded her of how her oldest son, Ben, tried to shock her when he was a teenager; but instead of unsettling her, the way the young man spoke made her feel like they were sharing a joke. She was at ease with him, and even though she wasn't old enough to be his mother, she felt like he was one her boys.

"I should warn you right up front, though, if you're like your predecessors and tell me the only way to

sell my house is to give it away, I will try again.

“I’ve learned you realtors seem to favor sitting at kitchen tables to talk. Follow me.” He stepped back to let her come farther inside and then led the way through the living room and dining room into a kitchen-decorating-magazine’s concept of perfection. The counters were granite, the appliances stainless steel, and the cupboards cherry and definitely custom. He motioned her toward a chair, inviting her to take a seat in surroundings that were not only clearly expensive but, she surmised, were recently redone because they showed no tell-tale signs of even minor wear.

“I can’t play the innocent game with you, can I Regan? You’ve probably been in the real estate sales game long enough to have heard of my house and its past. I won’t get anywhere waiting for you to give me a value and pretending I forgot to mention two murders were committed here, will I?”

“No you can’t, and no you won’t. In fact, if you tried that maneuver with me, I’d already be on my way out the front door.” She smiled as she spoke, but knowingly, and her words were delivered with a certainty he couldn’t miss. “Shall I call you Josh?”

He nodded his head yes. “It’s been more than three years since anyone died here. After filling out papers with several new agents — agents who didn’t dismiss me outright because they didn’t know about the house’s past until they were warned by more experienced agents — I know the three-year limit is all the disclosure that’s legally required. Why do I have to let people know about the murders since it’s been nineteen years since they happened?”

“You’ve already answered your own question: the house’s reputation is out there. Your house is notorious, and for your own protection, you need to let the less well informed know about the property before they buy it, or you’ll risk litigation when they find out afterwards.”

He sighed and looked away like a beaten dog. “My uncle gave me the house free and clear when I graduated from college. After sitting empty in the woods since ... for so many years, it was habitable but a wreck. I planned to live here and work on the house as I could afford to.

“Unfortunately one day I went to one of those seminars about flipping houses and got all excited. I thought if I really tripped it out, I could sell it for enough profit to buy a little condo by the beach, which is where I want to be, and still have enough left over to pay off my student loans.

“I had no idea how expensive it would be to get my house to what it looks like now. It needed everything; I had to borrow a lot more money to fix it up than I intended and I used credit cards to do it, which was a bad idea. Now that it looks perfect, I’m in hock up to my eyeballs, my condo and debt payoff dreams are over, and you realtors are telling me I can’t even sell this house for as much money as I put into it. It’s just not fair.”

“It is what it is. Let’s see if we can figure out how to work with what we have.”

“Are you going to wish me well and leave like all the other experienced agents when I tell you the ballpark number I need to get for this house is more than \$300,000?”

“You’ve got ten minutes to convince me not to,” she played his take-a-back game. “You have to answer my questions truthfully, no half-truths allowed, even if you don’t like telling me what I want to know. And you have to tell me why you want to sell. Then I’ll be completely candid with you about the value of your house and my marketing plans for it, and we can decide if we can work together or if you should move on to the next name on your list.”

“Deal.”

“First, you said you own the house outright. You didn’t put a mortgage on it to finance your improvements?”

“That’s right.”

“And you said your uncle gave you the house. Is he on title?”

“No. I think he should have been, though. My parents owned the house, but it wasn’t paid for when my mother died. My father hasn’t been seen since my mom ... most people think he killed her and that

realtor ... and that after, he ran off.

“My uncle was close to our family; he was executor of the estate and my godfather. He took me in and has been like a father to me ever since. I didn’t know he was doing it, but he kept paying the mortgage until he paid it off, and he got my father off the title — had him declared dead or something after so many years — so I became the sole owner.

“He could have told me to sell it and pay him back for all those years of house payments and taxes — I think that would have been fair — but Uncle Jake is a great guy; he turned the house over to me. He said I should live here, be happy here, and keep the house in the family. He said that was the best way to handle the past: to not let it win.

“So that’s what I did, at least the first part of it, until that seminar. Since then it’s been a struggle to keep up with all I owe; I’m getting tired of trying so hard.”

“Have you tried asking your uncle for a loan?”

“I won’t ask Uncle Jake for any more help. I’m almost thirty; it’s time for me to stand on my own two feet.”

Josh bit his lower lip and looked away from Regan. “Besides ...”

She waited for him to go on. When he spoke again his voice was barely more than a whisper.

“They tell me I found the bodies. I was old enough to understand, but I had no memory of it; I blocked everything out.” The color in his face drained. “Only now that I’m living here, I’m starting ... to remember ... things, see things ... my father covered in blood so thick I could barely recognize him.”

The hair on the back of Regan’s neck stood on end. Josh righted his shoulders and deliberately shivered, as if movement of any kind might break the spell of his memories and chase his visions away. He sat up very straight and continued in a stronger voice. “Uncle Jake is wrong. It’s not a good idea for me to live here. I need to sell and get away from this place.

“Okay, Regan, if you want to, you can run out now. You wouldn’t be the first,” Josh jested lightheartedly, but he remained pale.

“I’ll stick around a little longer if you want me to.” She wanted to put her arms around him and say, “there, there,” but knew if she did it would embarrass him, so she maintained her professional demeanor instead.

“I think there’s only one chance to sell your house for what it would be worth if it were any other house. It’s counterintuitive and risky, but it just might work.”

He put his elbows on the kitchen table and propped up his chin on his hands. “What’s your plan?”

“We have to play up your house’s past. I’ll advertise the house as the scene of a crime and hold a nighttime open house, preferably on a night with a full moon. There’s a local group, The Santa Cruz Ghost Hunters, who do readings. I’ll ask if they’d be willing to take a look at the house.

“Several of your neighbors have said they’ve seen something in the woods and at least one neighbor even thinks she’s seen a ghost in an upstairs window. I’ll use that — maybe even say the house may have a ghost or two — not that I believe in them.

“I know a real estate agent who has a blog about haunted houses who will let me post the listing on it, and I can try to find some paranormal fan sites that will let me advertise the house. The market of potential buyers will be limited, but if I reach the right person or, better yet, people, we may not only find a buyer, but start a bidding war.”

He clasped his hands together and rested them on the kitchen table. Regan touched his hands gently, wondering if she had gone too far. “Would you be all right with me doing that, Josh?”

He started to smile again, tentatively at first, but with growing enthusiasm, “I think my research has paid off. You have a reputation, Regan. The story is you’re a good realtor who does her job creatively and well. I like your ideas.”

Regan returned a small smile, "I do work hard for my clients ..."

"There's more, though," he interrupted. "I know you're the perfect agent to sell this house. I know that because I've also heard you've been involved with murder before."