

# Free Range Institution

## A Mad Mick Murphy Mystery

### ONE

Tita and I walked the short block from Key West Island Books to Duval Street, wandering between tourists as they window-shopped, drank beer from plastic cups, and ignored traffic lights. It was nice to have her back from Boston and talking to me.

The conch-shell pink, six-story Hotel Key West filled one corner block at Duval and Fleming Streets, its color faded to a dull white. A yuppie coffee shop took up most of the street side of the hotel's first floor and the Chalice Room, once the hotel's trendy restaurant and bar, had its windows covered with brown wrapping paper; it would reopen soon with a new name and menu. Key West could hold back change for only so long.

Tita stopped to look at the clothing displays in the large windows of Excess. I wanted to get to Jack Flat's, a half block down the street, for a late lunch.

"I love this outfit." She pointed at a mannequin dressed in designer jeans and white blouse.

I turned to look and caught the window reflection of a body falling through the air like a clumsy bird, with only the traffic on a crowded street to stop it. I turned and looked, as the body crashed onto a car's roof.

A wide-brimmed straw hat, with a bright red bandana wrapped around it, hung high in the air for a moment and then continued its swaying decent toward the street. It was the style of hat that workers along the waterfront wear, because the wide brim offers protection from the sun. I knew a guy who had added a red bandana to his hat but I didn't think he was suicidal.

Hotel Key West is one of the tallest buildings in Key West and, historically, has been the spot for jumpers, but that didn't happen too often.

People and traffic stopped, intrigued, and shaken, as their minds computed what they had seen. The hat hit the street and skidded across to the curb. Then an impatient driver beeped a horn and, as if it were a sign, people began screaming.

The women driving the lead car in on-coming traffic stepped outside, pointed at the crumpled body, and screamed. She had witnessed the deadly collision.

The body's impact bent the car's roof and the man driving couldn't get either door open. I watched him try. He panicked as blood from the victim began to trickle down the windshield.

Tita turned when the pandemonium started and looked for the cause.

"What happened?" She stared at the stalled traffic.

I pointed toward the car stopped by the door of the Chalice Room. She grabbed my arm, squeezed it hard, and looked toward the roof of the hotel. I removed her hand, walked to the curb, and picked up the hat.

Jay Bruehl, the guy I knew from the waterfront, kept a fifty-dollar bill pinned inside the red bandana of his hat. I found the bill and a half-smoked roach that I tossed aside and walked back to Tita. People began to stir on the sidewalk, but traffic was at a standstill.

Then things really turned strange.

Marked and unmarked Key West Police and Monroe County Sheriff cars came from all directions, lights flashing, and sirens wailing. One police car raced down Fleming Street the wrong way, two blocked the hotel's driveway entrance, while others stopped wherever they wanted to, encircling the hotel.

An unmarked police van pulled into the middle of the intersection of Duval and Fleming and SWAT officers in black, bulky jumpsuits got out.

This was more than a suicide.

Key West Police Chief Richard Dowley came out of one car next to Fast Buck Freddie's department store, cater-corner from where I stood.

Richard and I went back ten years. I'm Liam Murphy and when I am not sailing, I'm a freelance journalist. I live on my 40-foot sloop, *Fenian Bastard*, and during the years, I've picked up the moniker Mad Mick Murphy. Mad because of the crazy stunts I pulled in college and Mick due to my Boston-Irish heritage; the name has nothing to do with being insane, though if you are insane, and live in Key West, it made many things seem sensible.

Tita Toledo, a green-eyed Puerto Rican, and younger sister of my college classmate Paco, practiced law in Key West. We have an on-again, off-again romance that we were in the process of turning on-again, when Jay's body tumbled from the roof of the hotel.

Sheriff Chance Wagner, in full uniform, walked from the hotel's driveway.

This added to the strangeness, because Monroe County Sheriffs do not patrol Key West, the local cops do, and here were both.

The SWAT team waited for Richard and Chance to come to them.

Two men in street clothes, wearing windbreakers with DEA stenciled on the back, walked to the damaged car, and stared down at the body, before calling two uniformed officers to help them force open the car's doors. The two cops helped the emotional driver to the sidewalk.

Police closed off Duval at Eaton and Southard Streets, which stopped traffic from moving up or down the main street, and then directed vehicles stuck in the traffic to turn onto Fleming, to move away. Fleming was blocked at Whitehead Street, stopping cross traffic. As the street cleared of vehicles, an ambulance pulled next to the damaged car. There was so much going on, I couldn't take it all in.

Cops began moving people along, clearing the sidewalk. Onlookers snapped quick cell-phone photos of the body. When they arrived home, the photo would fit in with the shots of free-range chickens, dogs wearing sunglasses while riding scooters and drunks painted silver, pretending to be twitching statues; a photo safari of Key Weird.

"Let's go," Tita whispered, as a cop approached.

People hurried past us, some turning for one last look at the body, as they told the story on their phone.

“Something’s going on.” I turned to her. “This isn’t because of a jumper.”

“You think they’re going to tell you?”

“Richard might.”

“Isn’t that Chance Wagner?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s not a big fan of yours.” She ran her words together.

“Go to Jack Flat’s and have Susan put your lunch on my tab.” I looked around for Richard. “I’ll be there in a little while.”

“I’ve lost my appetite, Mick.” She couldn’t hide the distress in her words. “But I could use a drink.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I am leaving after one drink.” She walked away.

Tita and I were almost on-again, but if I didn’t hurry, it would be off-again. People pushed by me, stumbling, not wanting to go, but cops kept yelling at them.

“You too,” the young rookie said.

“I’m with the press.”

“Good for you,” he smiled, enjoying his moment of control. “Be a member of the press from behind the police lines.”

“Chief Dowley is expecting me.” I lied and looked toward the SWAT team.

“Wait here.” He walked across the street, while other cops moved the last stragglers across Fleming toward Southard.

The rookie held off approaching Richard until the SWAT team began to disperse. After speaking to him, Richard turned in my direction and motioned for me to come over.

“What are you doing here, Mick?” He is a big man, six-four and a good two-hundred-fifty pounds. Richard’s cop’s eyes told me he had enough trouble without me hanging around. “Tell me it’s a coincidence that you’re standing on the corner.”

“Honest to God, Richard.”

“Neither of us believes in coincidence.” I followed as he walked toward the body. “Do you know him?”

Two medics stood outside their ambulance, smoking. There was no need to verify the person was dead. Jay lay on his back, his arms and legs twisted at unnatural angles; blood caked around his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth and it formed a narrow stream that ran off the car’s roof and down the front windshield.

“I think its Jay Bruehl.” I waved the hat at him. “This is his hat. It came down after the body hit.”

“So you’re tampering with evidence?”

“If I hadn’t picked it up, it would’ve been stomped on.” I handed it to him. “Jay always kept a \$50 bill pinned inside the bandana.”

Richard turned the bandana and saw the bill. “You left it.”

“Smart ass.”

“How’d you know to be here, Mick?” His tone was that of a cop, not a friend.

Jay spent a lot of time working on boats, all kinds of boats. His skin had burned a furrowed reddish-copper long ago and it was quickly fading to a pasty brown while he lay on the car’s roof. He didn’t smell too good either. He was also a snitch who liked to play undercover cop and that, I guessed, was how he ended up dead.

“I talked to Jay yesterday.” It wasn’t a lie, I had run into him at Schooner Wharf Bar.

“And?” Richard held Jay’s hat and led me back to in front of Excess.

The three young employees stared out from behind the large windows and looked like they were giggling.

“He didn’t tell me much, but suggested I be here around this time.” I lied, but kept eye contact, and tried to sound sincere.

“He wanted you to witness his suicide?” He motioned toward the car with Jay’s hat.

“He wasn’t suicidal,” I said without thinking. I looked toward hotel’s roof. “I think it was a drug deal gone bad and he was pushed.”

Richard’s hard expression told me he was hiding something, so I figured I might as well play for bigger stakes.

“It must have been some kind of drug deal to have you and the sheriff here. Maybe a big shot was involved or a politician?”

Richard shook his head in disgust or maybe disappointment, I’m not sure, but his expression indicated impatience.

“You’re a piece of work.” He growled the words, walked to his car, and tossed Jay’s hat through the window. He went to Sheriff Wagner, after turning to make sure I was still there.

The sheriff looked in my direction and, while I couldn’t hear, it was obvious he was disagreeing with Richard. When Richard signaled, I walked across the street, now filled with Key West cops, DEA agents, and Monroe County deputy sheriffs.

“I don’t want you here, Murphy.” The sheriff greeted me without a smile.

He’s a lean man, a little short of six-foot, probably early sixties, with thinning brown hair and hard brown eyes. He wore his Smokey Bear hat. The sheriff still held a grudge because, a few years back I covered a corruption trial that involved his deputies, and he thought I reported more than was necessary. The weekly newsmagazine hired me because I could add color and background to the piece, since I lived in Key West. Some things die hard in the Keys.

“He knows what’s going on,” Richard said, as an explanation.

I wasn’t sure what it was he thought I knew, but guessed my bluff had worked and now I had to keep it up.

“How? Did you tell him, Chief?” Chance stared at Richard.

“The jumper told him.”

Chance turned his stare toward me. “What’d he tell you?”

“To be here at this time.”

“That it?”

I hesitated, knowing it would anger the sheriff. “Jay always acted like an undercover cop, and most of us knew he wasn’t, but we knew he was a snitch.”

“Can you speed this fairy tale along, I have things to do,” Chance half yelled.

“He told me about a drug deal going down, big shots, a lot of agencies involved.” I rushed the words. “I didn’t really believe him. That is, until I saw him falling out of the sky.”

“You saw him jump?”

“No, I saw him falling. He just tumbled like a bird with no control.”

“He screaming?” Now the sheriff seemed interested in what I had to say.

“No.”

“You sure?”

“I didn’t hear any screaming. Why?”

“Nothin’.” He turned to Richard. “You’re responsible for him,” he said, and he walked toward the hotel.

“We lost touch with our undercover agent.” Richard grabbed my shoulder and moved me toward the hotel. “She’s one of Chance’s.”

“Who else is in the hotel?”

“Colombians.”