

# **NOBODY WINS**

## **Chapter 1**

The February sun fought its way through a thin cloud cover and did its best to help Key West remain tropical, even while a north wind blanketed the island. A Canadian chill in the air did not bother the sun worshipers from colder parts of the country. Locals, including me, wore long-sleeved shirts. Some of us even wore jeans with our flip-flops. The wind wasn't cold enough to force us into sneakers and socks, but it was getting there.

Schooner Wharf Bar had its clear plastic windscreen in place, holding back the breeze, but it didn't interfere with the water view, as tourists sat on the pea rock patio and listened to Michael McCloud sing his island ballads. They sat in T-shirts and plaid shorts, sandals with socks, drank beer and rumrunners, immune to the chilly weather because it had to be colder wherever they came from and, for some, the rumrunners were good antifreeze for the body.

I nursed my second Kalik, a Bahamian beer, and talked to Vicki the bartender, while I waited for my friends Bob Lynds and Pauly Walworth to show. Charlie Mac's featured tacos on Tuesday and that's as much as I had planned for the rest of the day. Tacos and beer.

Josh Bonilla sat down next to me. He's an ex-druggie who has cleaned up his life and even quit alcohol. He lives on his forty-foot trawler, Bliss, and looks every bit the boat bum character he pretends to be to pick up women. A modern day Travis McGee. They seem to love his ponytail, almond eyes and lanky, scruffy appearance. Vicki brought Josh a Coke with a lime.

"I just got back from Stock Island." Josh sucked on the lime, put it back in the cup, and then sipped the cola. "You knew Chuy Padilla, right?"

The first thing that registered in my mind was Josh's using the past tense of knowing Chuy. This wasn't going to be a good conversation. "Yeah. The Cuban artist."

"They found him dead at his studio on Shrimp Road."

There was something missing from Josh's comment and as an ex-journalist, I had a compulsion to fill in the blanks.

"Who found him?" I stared at my beer.

"One of the boat people," he said, making it sound derogatory, forgetting he was a live-aboard boater. "Called the sheriff."

"Why were you out there?"

"I had lunch at the Rusty Anchor. Saw the flashing lights as I left the restaurant."

"Drawn to disaster, Josh?"

"Yeah," he said. "I know a lot of people along Shrimp Road."

"Drug dealers?" I wondered if he kept in touch with them, just in case he ever slipped.

"Working-class people, Mick." He sounded hurt by my comment.

"Worried about you, Josh," I lied. "I know how hard it can be."

"Thanks, Mick, but I'm clean and sober and plan to stay that way." He sounded as if he meant it.

"How'd he die?" It was the question I should've asked first.

"One of the EMS guys is a friend and he said Chuy had been shot." He finished his Coke and from the way he looked at the ice, I thought he wondered where the alcohol was to numb his concern.

"Suicide?" I felt guilty, but took a swallow of beer.

"Not unless he shot himself twice in the chest and once in the head and then hid the gun."

He grinned as I turned. Sometimes you needed gallows humor to get through a tragedy.

“He hasn’t been here long enough to make that kind of enemy.”

Chuy arrived legally from Cuba, I remembered that much about him. He cleared immigrations and then came directly to Key West, ignoring the Miami Cubans. His reputation as an artist well established months before, thanks to a show at the Gallery on Greene. He painted at night because, he said, in Cuba it was cooler then. So many of his paintings were filled with shadows and thought of as dark paintings. Dark as in sinister and he expertly exploited the American image of Cuban oppression. It helped sell his work.

“Why was he at the studio in the afternoon?” I hated unanswered questions, especially when they were mine.

“He’d been painting. He told me the light off the water excited him.” Josh pushed his empty glass away so Vicki would refill it. “Wanted to start painting in daylight.”

“Anything worth stealing at the studio?”

“Not that I know of. I don’t know the deputies that well to ask if it was a burglary,” he said and grinned. “Not personally, like you do and I thought you might find out what they know.” Josh’s experience with local law had them asking the questions and him asking for an attorney.

“Why?” Why is always a good question when you’ve got nothing else to say.

“He was a nice guy,” Josh said. “I’m curious, you know? I mean, if we got some crazy loose, I wanna know.”

My cell was on the bar, I picked it up and called Deputy Becky Herrin, the sheriff department’s public information officer. I got her answering machine and left a message asking her to call me back.

“I’ll call you when I hear from her.” I finished my beer.

Vicki filled Josh’s cup and he sucked the juice out of the new lime. “He told me a week ago that people may be following him from Cuba.”

It was Josh’s turn to look away. He faced the windscreen, his back to the bar.

“He say why?” I got Vicki’s attention and waved the empty bottle. She brought me a new Kalik.

“No.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Josh?” After a lifetime of interviewing people, I’d developed a sixth sense and knew when people half answered a question or lied.

“Nothing, really.” He turned back to the bar and looked at me. “He said he’d pay me to take him to New Orleans for a couple of weeks.”

“On the Bliss?”

“Yeah.” He finished his coke. “Mick, he was nervous, maybe scared and wanted to leave today.”

“What happened?”

“He never showed up for lunch,” he said. “When I saw the cars and flashing lights . . .” Josh sucked on a piece of ice, his eyes open wide, his lips trembled, and he couldn’t finish the sentence.

## Chapter 2

February was mid-season in Key West and escaping northerners carpeted our narrow streets, bars and restaurants, while snow and cold blanketed their northern states. Business was good.

The tacos at Charlie Mac's were good, too. Not piled high with sour cream and guacamole like other places, just pulled pork with jalapeño-coleslaw and wrapped in a warm tortilla. Bob, Pauly and I sat at the patio bar. My last taco disappeared and I reached for the fries when my cell phone chirped, Deputy Becky Herrin returning my call. To avoid the loud chatter of the bar, I walked outside to Southard Street.

"You called?" Herrin said when I answered.

"Yeah, what can you tell me about the shooting on Shrimp Road this morning?"

The other end of the phone remained quiet. I waited.

"You have an interest in it, Mick?" Herrin said.

"Rumor is the Cuban painter Chuy got shot. I knew him and wondered what happened."

"It's an ongoing investigation. I can't talk about it."

"Okay," I said. "Are you issuing a press release?"

"Not in time for tomorrow's papers." Herrin kept her answers short.

"Will it mention if the death was a homicide?"

"No comment."

"Will it mention Chuy's name?"

"If you know the vic's name, why are you asking?"

That was two confirmations. The homicide, because she used vic, telling me Chuy was a victim of a crime without revealing his name. "Like I said, I knew the guy. He didn't have much

in the studio, so I wondered if the press release might mention it being a burglary gone bad?"

"No comment. I'm real busy, Mick," Herrin said.

"Any comment on the caliber of the weapon?" I threw out my last question.

"No comment, while the investigation is continuing," she said. No denial can often be confirmation. "Bill Becker should have the press release in time for his show tomorrow morning, if you need to know more, listen to him."

"Thanks for calling back. I'm sorry to bother you, Becky," I said.

"It's never a bother Mick. Call anytime. It's always good when you owe me lunch."

Herrin hung up, but she'd told me enough to pass on.

As Herrin suggested to me, I advised Josh to listen to Becker's radio program in the morning, if he wanted to know more. He thanked me for the call and an edgy silence followed.

"What if they know Chuy made plans with me?" Josh sounded scared.

"You might be worrying about nothing." I wanted to sound reassuring and at the same time wondered if he was frightened because he knew more than he had told me. "Stay onboard the Bliss today and see what Becker says in the morning."

"Then what?" I could feel his nervousness through the phone.

"If you don't like what's reported, take the Bliss up the Atlantic. Get lost with the boat traffic along the Intercostal."

"Will you listen to Becker and let me know what you think?"

There wasn't any indication that Josh was drinking. No slurping. No ice cubes against glass. No slurred speech. I didn't hear anything but nervousness in his tone. Any recovering alcoholic will admit anxiety had broken many dry spells, ending sobriety. "I'll call you after the eight o'clock news. Stay on the boat." I disconnected the call. No one can stop an alcoholic from

drinking. Josh had to want to stay clean and sober. I reminded myself of that and let it go.

“You missed the bill,” Bob said, as he and Pauly came outside, dissolving my thoughts of Josh and sobriety.

“You should’ve waited.” Drinks would be on me at the Smokin’ Tuna Saloon, no doubt about payback with my friends.

As we headed to our next destination, we passed the Green Parrot Bar and someone called my name.

Three-thirty in the afternoon and most of the seats around the square bar were occupied. had customers in them. Inside, the lighting was shadowy at best, since most of the bar’s illumination filtered in through the open doors and the glassless windows. I didn’t recognize anyone and then I heard my name again. I thought I knew the voice, but he couldn’t be here. Last I heard, Bill Shaughnessy motored around the Antilles, trying to waste his million-dollar windfall, a fee we shared for recovery of a misplaced Picasso painting.

**Comment [OU1]:** Heree, it would be better to simply write; most of the seats around the square bar were occupied.

“Shaughnessy?” I called into the shadows.

Bob and Pauly stopped a couple of steps away and looked between the bar and me, puzzled at my outburst.

“Ah Murphy, the immoral stepson of the wonderful city of Boston!” Bill Shaughnessy, larger than life, stood up at the far end of the bar after shouting his greeting. He had everyone’s attention as he walked to me. He greeted me with a bear hug, laughing.

“I think you mean the wonderful son of the immoral city . . .” The hug sucked the air out of me. I pushed myself free.

“You know how many bars I’ve been sent to looking for you, Mick?” Bill let me step back.

“What are you doing here?”

The last time I saw Bill, he walked away from my boat at the marina, and knew what Caribbean island he wanted to go to, with a million-dollar-account bankbook in his pocket. Back then, his skin shone white as snow from the lack of sun, and now he had a tan Tarzan would've been jealous of.

“We need to talk.” Bill looked toward Bob and Pauly. “Alone.” His tone had gone from boisterous to serious.

“I'll meet you at the Tuna,” I said to Bob and Pauly.

They looked at me and sized up Bill. He didn't act threatening, he didn't appear passive, and that made him a possible danger in their minds. SEALs and ex-drug smugglers always looked for danger in the simplest of things. It's how they survived to grow old.

“Bill's an old friend from Boston and LA.” After introductions, I assured my pals it was okay. The men finally shook hands.

“Old, personal business,” Bill said.

“You'll be joining us, later?” Pauly asked.

Bill grinned. “Been a while since Mick and I spent quality time together.”

“He's all about quality time these days,” Bob called back as he and Pauly turned onto Whitehead Street.

Bill pointed to the bar and I followed. He walked through to the small back bar. No bartender yet, but he took a seat.

“You heard from your cousin Cecil recently?” Bill's tone returned to serious.

“First, tell me why you're here and not on a boat in the islands.”

Bill relaxed a little and leaned against the bar. “Got bored.” He laughed. “Believe that? A

million dollars, a yacht and all those island women, and I was bored.”

“Know that feeling.” He had more to say, so I waited.

“A small art museum in Fort Lauderdale advertised for a security director. I applied, got interviewed and took the job,” he said quickly, mixing the words together. “My boat’s at the marina where I live and I was real happy with life up until a few days ago.”

“We’ll have to talk about your bad decision-making.” I looked toward the crowded room and wondered why Bill went back into museum security. “What’s all that have to do with Cecil and your being here?”

Bill looked uncomfortable. “You need to know that if I could think of another way, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Another way to what?” This reunion was not going in the direction I expected.

“The museum is supported by patrons,” Bill began his story and I assumed it would lead to answering my question. “Lot of money in Fort Lauderdale. There are three to four exhibits a year plus the works purchased by the museum are always on display. Sometimes the money people show off their art collections with a members’ show.” Bill’s speech slowed down. He wasn’t in a hurry for whatever came next. He never liked delivering bad news.

### Chapter 3

Bill carried two Coronas from the main bar and sat down. After half an hour of listening to his reasons for returning to the mainland, he still hadn't got around to mentioning why he came to Key West. Specifically, he hadn't mentioned Cousin Cecil.

"There's a show going up in the museum in a few weeks, a members' exhibit." He took a long swallow of beer. "I've been receiving the art and I've got a problem." He squirmed around on the barstool. "One of the museum's members is an alleged drug dealer, with a not so good reputation."

"Compared to the many drug dealers out there with good reps, right?" I said.

Bill looked at me, understood my snide comment, forced a smile and said, "Get to the point?"

I nodded, and didn't like that it was taking him so long to explain his visit.

"Drug dealer and trust, they don't share the same room and I wondered what angle he was playing." Bill twisted the barstool he sat on in quarter circles. "He delivered the three paintings. I gave him the museum's receipt for them."

"But." There was going to be a but coming, I knew it.

"I got the bellyache. As hard as I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong, so I went back to the three paintings after the museum closed and studied them. I checked the frames to make sure they weren't hollowed out and full of coke. I checked and rechecked the back of the canvas, looking for I-don't-know-what. Nothing seemed out of place, but my belly ached."

Bill started as a beat cop in Quincy and then moved to the Boston PD as detective. He credited bellyaches for warning him whenever something wasn't right and, from what he was

saying, he still believed they had meaning. I listened but said nothing.

“The paintings are abstracts.” He grinned at my blank expression. “You still don’t know shit from shinola about art, do you?”

“I know what I like.” We’d had this conversation before and I still didn’t understand art any better than when we first talked and that was twenty-something years ago.

“Maybe that’s the best way.” Bill fidgeted with his beer bottle. “So, I spend hours with the paintings, go outside to have a smoke for a break, make coffee, drink it black and keep looking at these abstracts. I don’t suppose Pollock, Kline or Hofmann mean anything to you.”

“Jackson Pollock, I know the name but could run across one of his paintings at a garage sale and wouldn’t know it. Not even sure why I know the name.”

Bill shook his head. Art and being a cop had been his whole life. That’s why he took the museum job in Los Angeles and left the Boston police.

“I start looking up these artists’ works on the Internet,” he said. “Google, find anything on any subject.”

“If it’s on the Internet, it must be true.” I quoted the verbiage of the Internet-age babble.

Bill nodded and said, “I wasn’t looking for opinions or reviews of the artists. I wanted to know where their paintings were exhibited. Anyway, I’ll cut to the chase. I found all three artists’ work on various museum sites. Three different museums and each had one of the paintings the drug dealer put into the members’ show on its inventory.”

The promise of a muddled mess grabbed my attention. Drug dealers and million dollar art, I was intrigued, but couldn’t see how Bill connected me, or Cousin Cecil to this. Cecil wouldn’t do drugs. And I doubted he knew anything about art unless it was a nude drawn on a bar napkin.

“So, what you have is three paintings in different places at the same time.” I had my ideas of how that could happen, but kept them to myself.

Bill nodded. “Forgeries! After six hours of pounding my head against the keyboard and drinking too much coffee, I came to that conclusion.” Bill stopped talking, finished his beer and put the empty bottle on the bar.

Without Bill’s story to focus on, the noise in the Green Parrot caught my attention. I saw people two deep standing around the main bar and across from us a couple played pool. A bar-back filled the beer chests behind us with ice.

“Getting crowded.” I hoped mentioning it would speed him along. It was almost a funny story because of the drug dealer. “Different artists? Three forgeries? What are the odds?”

“None.” Bill sighed. “The director didn’t believe me when I brought it to him. Didn’t want to believe me. He didn’t believe abstracts could be copied well enough to pass as originals, but in half an hour, I convinced him otherwise. When I mentioned the three museums that had the same paintings in inventory, he admitted the possibility. He got the drug dealer to explain how he came by them, by saying the information was needed for the press release.”

“The drug dealer had no idea they’re forgeries? It was not some scam he was pulling?”

“No,” Bill answered. “He bought them through an art gallery in New York that has an affiliate office in Miami. The gallery’s rep is okay. The director checked with the gallery in New York and, between small talk, asked about the three paintings. Wondered how he came upon them. You’re not going to like this.”

“Cousin Cecil?” I shook my head. “He knows less about art than me. Who’s gonna trust him with millions of dollars’ worth of art? How the hell could he explain anything about the paintings?”

“Three years ago, and I’m quoting, Cecil Fahey approached the New York Gallery owner, representing an art collector in Los Angeles, who wanted these painting discreetly put out for sale.” Bill let out a deep breath as if he’d been holding in the whole time. “Discreetly, would have red-flagged me.”

“Cecil showing up would’ve flagged you! Why discreetly?”

“The story Cecil told was that the owner was ill and in financial difficulties and wanted to keep this sale private. He gave references in L.A.”

“What was his connection to all this?” I couldn’t get my mind around Cecil and millions of dollars of art, even if it was forged and worthless.

“According to the affidavit, Cecil was the personal aide to the owner of the art.”

“Wouldn’t the gallery want proof of ownership, of how the owner got them? How Cecil got to represent him?” The improbability of all this kept growing.

“Any idea of the value of the paintings, Mick?” Bill asked as if he expected me to answer. “The owner of the gallery knew he could retire on the sale’s commission, if he found a buyer. Cecil delivered the paintings, a year ago. The gallery found the drug dealer through its Miami affiliate and greed sealed the deal.”

“How’d Cecil get his hands on them? If these are forgeries, this is a major scam and he’s no con man,” I said, still puzzled by it all. “No one’s gonna spend millions of dollars on art, or land, or any investment without proof of ownership and authenticity. So, who verified they were authentic?”

Bill Blue and his band set up for the Green Parrot’s Sound Check show at five, as we talked. The noise and crowd were too much and we moved outside and sat on the bench across Southard Street, in front of the closed Courthouse Deli.

“Outside of museums the art world is very private, an exclusive club, when people have the kind of money these pieces sell for,” Bill said while cars and scooters whizzed by. “I know you’ve read about the theft of art from museums, especially the Gardner Museum in Boston.”

“Yeah, the FBI says it solved the Gardner heist, but the statute of limitations has passed so they can’t arrest anyone.” I held back my laugh. “Read it in the Boston Globe.”

“Art theft of that nature is done by professional thieves for a client,” Bill said. “You pay a million dollars for a ten-million-dollar stolen Picasso that you can never show or brag about. That’s one side of the art world, insanity and money. Forgery is another.”

“Sounds crazy to me. Why pay for something you can’t show off? If I had a first edition Hemingway, in mint condition with the desk jacket, I’d brag.”

“I guess the filthy rich are different.” Bill grinned at his misquote of Scott Fitzgerald. “Forgeries, Mick, are out there in museums and private collections. Sometimes, it’s better not to know you’re hanging a forgery. Someone, an art authority, approved it as an original for a gallery or a museum, so that person’s rep is on the line and so is the gallery’s.”

“And most people are like me and wouldn’t know an original from a forgery?”

“Yes, kind of like that,” Bill said. “Most patrons of art look for the beauty, for the structure and style of a painting and thinking forgery is not even on their mind.”

“So, if it’s beautiful and the right style . . .”

“It’s art.” Bill finished my thought. “Welcome to my world.”

“No thanks,” I said. “I’ll stay in Key West. So, tell me, how does a deal like this go down, with or without Cecil.”

Bill nodded. “The gallery in Miami knew the buyer wouldn’t go bragging about his art collection. The seller, Cecil or whoever knew the gallery owner in New York would be tempted

by the commission involved.”

“The gallery didn’t have the art verified? They had a hint something was off?”

“All they would tell the director is that an expert had given them a certificate of authenticity and they passed it along to the buyer. Remember, it’s a secretive club, so they’re tight-lipped. With the certificate, it would be hard to point to the gallery as having done anything wrong.”

You can always buy an expert’s opinion, no matter what the subject. I’d seen it done in L.A., almost daily. “Why is the drug dealer exhibiting the artwork?”

“You’re asking me to explain why a drug dealer does anything, Mick? Maybe he wants to look legitimate or impress a woman. Remember, he doesn’t know they’re forgeries.”

“Forged art and Cecil is the broker,” I said. “Who gave Cecil authority to sell millions of dollars of art? How’d Cecil get involved?”

“The deal calls for confidentiality, but Hollywood and an actor’s name keep coming up. The paperwork, I’m told, was official. I can’t ask to see it without raising suspicion. The actor is dead, anyway. So who else is there for me to go to?”

“There has to be a paper trail leading to people involved,” I said, thinking like a journalist. “But Cecil? Come on. If he overheard this con being planned in the bar he’d gossip about it for the next month.” I knew how my cousin liked to spin tales and he always added something to them. “The other thing, even I can guess that forging these three paintings wasn’t done with finger paints. Paint, canvas and even framing can be dated, not to mention the time for each painting to be copied. That’s not Cecil.”

“You have listened a little.” Bill grinned. “You’re right. Even if each painting was done by a different artist, it would take a year or more to set this all up, and lots of money is my guess.

But all three artists are modern enough that needing that kind of dating would be questionable. I don't believe anyone authenticating them would go to that trouble without a reason. The artists are dead, so no one can approach them with questions."

"And, if the art dealer was more interested in the commission, he might ask his expert the simple questions," I guessed aloud.

"Yeah, you get what you ask for," Bill said. "Mick, he's your cousin, but you had to know he hung out with a tough crowd. I wouldn't say they were bank robbers, but willing and able to try a con, yes."

"Okay, Cecil had some questionable friends, but I'd argue that none I met knew enough about art forgery to pull this off."

"I agree, but whoever the mastermind is, he or she needed someone out front. Think about it, clean Cecil up, dress him right and his brogue might just make someone think he's English and with the right coaching . . ."

Bill didn't have to finish. Cecil liked to dress down, but I'd seen him at funerals and weddings and when cleaned up he was more than presentable and had a memory like a computer.

"Where's this leave you?" I wondered what he thought I could do.

"Neither the director nor I want to approach the drug dealer and tell him his three multi-million-dollar art pieces are forgeries and worthless." Bill's expression mirrored the angst in his voice.

"What's your solution? Say nothing, do nothing?" I knew it wasn't, otherwise he wouldn't be here, but I wasn't about to offer my services in approaching a drug dealer with that news. Too often the messenger is blamed and punished. I wanted Bill to have a solution.

"I need to talk to Cecil, to know who put this in motion." Bill looked at me and his

anxiety switched to determination. He wanted to find the person responsible and give the whole package to the drug dealer. Wash his hands of it before the drug dealer settled scores. “You can find Cecil and get him to talk to me. I need that paper trail you mentioned.”

I fought a laugh, unsuccessfully. “I haven’t seen Cecil in years. Just before I left L.A., I said good-bye. He was behind the bar at McGinty’s, shook my hand, wished me luck and when I went to leave, he had me pay for the drinks we toasted to my future with. I have no idea where he is.”

Bill ignored my answer. “The museum will pay your expenses, give you two hundred per diem and when we get to talk with Cecil, you’ll receive ten thousand dollars.”

The offer made me angry. He was asking me to betray family for money, a trait that had almost destroyed the Irish. Even today, an informer is the lowest manner of life in Irish eyes. Anger tainted my words. “I wouldn’t accept money to betray my cousin. He’s family and I’m not an informer! I don’t want your pieces of gold.”

Bill whistled and held up his hands. “Whoa, Mick. I’m Irish too. Too many informers in our history. I’m not asking you to do that. We aren’t turning Cecil in for the forgeries. What we need to know is if this whole thing was directed toward the drug dealer or a big con that swooped him up. Hell, right now his paintings are going on display. Nobody notices, fine. But, I don’t want his wrath on me, if he finds out they’re forgeries from someone else. Let him find and kill the dead actor in Hollywood.”

“What’s the chances someone at the show will know where the originals are?” I let my anger subside. Having dealt with drug dealers and their ilk, I understood Bill’s concern and desire to be out from beneath the problem. I couldn’t fault him for that.

“Small, but possible and that’s part of my concern. Many of our members visit museums

when they travel.” He handed me a sealed white envelope. It felt like money. “A week’s per diem and a plane ticket to L.A. for tomorrow morning.”

“You’re damn sure of yourself.” After folding the envelope, I put it in my pocket.

“Not sure of myself, Mick. Hopeful that we’re still friends because I know you don’t let friends down.”

“There’s always a first time.” We stood and when the traffic light changed, we crossed Southard Street and walked toward the Smokin’ Tuna Saloon. “I’m not making you any promises.”

“Mick, maybe someone stole Cecil’s identity and it’s not your cousin we’re looking for.”

“Hell, Cecil doesn’t want his own identity, he’d give it away so who’d steal it?”

“Go to L.A. and find the answers. Someone had this all planned out and he involved Cecil and others. I need the answers,” Bill said, the worry back in his voice.

“If there are answers, they won’t come easily.”

Cecil, the front man for a multi-million dollar art swindle, it almost made me want to laugh.

