

## Chapter One

If I hadn't gone to watch the comedy showcase at the People's Theater of Key West, I wouldn't have silenced my cell phone. If I hadn't silenced my cell, I would have answered Dick Walsh's first call at 1:10 A.M., and then things might not have gone so badly. *If* is a damn big word for only having two letters.

I unplugged the cell from its charger in the morning and the lighted screen reminded me it was on silent mode and that I had five messages.

Each of Dick's messages was more frantic and pleading than the last. He needed help, but didn't say for what. By the third message, he was cussing but still wanted me to call and that was at three-fifteen. He didn't sound drunk, like most three in the morning callers do, he sounded scared.

The fifth and final message came at five-thirty-six. He had calmed down, asked me to come by his house as soon as possible and gave me the address. His composed voice assured me I would understand the problem after I arrived and he would be in touch later.

"Mick, I need you to believe me, it isn't what it looks like. Please help me," his message ended with a quiet plea.

I dressed quickly in last night's clothing and swallowed cold water from a bottle out of the cooler. Before I got into my Jeep and drove to Dick's house on Von Phister Street, I called his cell but it went to voice mail and I left a message. We were playing phone tag.

Von Phister is a narrow, tree-lined street in a quiet neighborhood of old and new houses. Dick's was an old two-story house with a large gumbo-limbo tree in front and

two more in back. He actually had a decent-size backyard, something that is a premium in Key West.

The house was dark. It was almost six-thirty, about an hour since his last call. The sky was a light gray with a reddish-purple sunrise pushing the dawn westward. Only a large yellow tomcat crossed my path on the empty street.

I parked in front and noticed Dick's scooter was gone. I went up the steps to the wraparound porch, rang the bell, and then knocked. Nothing. I looked into the living room window. Nothing. I knocked again and when no one answered, I tried the door. It was unlocked so I went in.

The stench that greeted me in the hallway was familiar. The smell of death was strong and that told me somewhere in the house, death was very recent. Death, if left alone long enough cloaks all other odors, especially in the tropics – violent death even more so.

I called Dick's name but no one answered. I walked into the living room and it looked lived in – a big screen TV, stereo with CDs stacked next to it, a sectional sofa set. A hallway led to a kitchen, small dining room, and bathroom. The stairway on the right went upstairs to the bedrooms.

Dick used the dining room as his office – medium sized desk that was too big for the room, a computer, a printer, and a two-drawer file. I walked through into the kitchen. There was a table for two off to the side, dirty dishes in the sink and a woman's body on the floor.

She lay face down and a large part of her head was gone. Pieces of shattered skull, along with parts of her brain and blood, tarnished the otherwise clean kitchen wall.

Blood and human waste soaked the tile floor and stained her clothing.

The stench of death filled the kitchen. I didn't bother looking for a pulse.

A revolver with a silencer attached lay on the floor, her arm stretched out toward it as if reaching for the gun that had a small stream of brownish blood curled up next to it.

I ran upstairs to check the two bedrooms, calling Dick's name. Both rooms were neat and the beds made. Nothing broken or seemingly out of place. Dick's closet looked full with only a couple of empty hangers in the mix. The guestroom closet was empty.

*Dick shot this woman*, I thought as I looked down at her body. Whose gun was it on the floor? I didn't touch anything, though I wanted to. My curiosity was getting the best of me.

I'm Liam Murphy, a semi-retired journalist and fulltime sail bum, some say. Key West has been my home for almost eighteen years. Before that, I lived in Southern California and reported on Central American civil wars and when they ended I covered the drug wars for a weekly newsmagazine so a dead body wasn't something that frightened me, it intrigued me.

In Key West, I've made friends with all kinds of characters, including the chief of police, Richard Dowley. We have a two-sided relationship. One side is Richard the cop, the other is Richard the friend. He considered me a friend but always thought of me as a journalist. He says I only have one side. I called him on my cell, sure of catching him at home, and knew I'd be talking to his cop side.

I told him where I was and what I'd found.

"What are you doing at that nut's house?" I could hear him banging around in the kitchen.

Haskins/*Stairway to the Bottom*

When I explained about the messages and Dick's plea, he sighed loud enough for me to hear on the phone.

"Don't touch anything and I'll call it in," he said. "Best thing is go outside and wait for the first unit and I'll make it there too."

"Okay, Richard, but tell the ambulance it doesn't have to hurry," I said and he hung up without replying.

Outside, I sat and waited, thinking of Dick's last message telling me it wasn't what it looked like. It looked like murder, to me.

## Chapter 2

I sat on the front steps until the patrol car showed up. When Billy Wardlow arrived I knew it was his first assignment because the city's tight budget didn't allow for overtime. I showed him where the body was and he sent me outside.

When he came out, Billy told me he found no sign of a struggle inside. I already knew that so I nodded. Of course, we were not considering how the body got there, just that nothing else was out of place. He began inspecting the porch windows and then went into the backyard looking for signs of forced entry.

Detective Luis Morales showed up a little after seven. Cuban born, Luis came to the States as child on a leaky boat with his mother. That's how he remembers it, anyway. He was on the city's police bike patrol when I came to Key West. Now he's a lead detective and my nemesis because I've sailed to Cuba. Even as a patrol cop, he would turn boaters in to customs and immigration if he thought we'd been to the forbidden island. We don't get along and my friend the police chief thinks Luis is a talented cop. Luis considers himself God's gift to women and too often women seem to agree.

I walked him into the kitchen and wondered how he'd handle me finding the body.

"Do you know her?" He checked the blood smears and brain matter on the wall, careful not to step in the puddle of blood collected around the body and gun, as he talked to me. I wanted to ask him if he knew her, but kept my mouth shut.

The body was face down, her arms stretched out toward the gun. Luis took it all in as he waited for my answer.

"Not from this angle," I snapped harshly. I didn't know her.

Luis looked from the floor to the wall and back, ignoring my sarcasm. “She was shot in the face, hit the wall, and fell forward.” He was speaking to himself. “Probably close range.”

“Her gun?” I pointed toward the blood soaked automatic.

“We’ll test it, see if it’s the murder weapon and find out who owns it.”

Outside, I told him about the phone messages. He listened to them on my cell and had Billy take it to the station.

“I want copies of them,” Luis said. “I’ll get it back to you as soon as I can.”

I couldn’t win the argument, so I said nothing.

“The guy who lives here,” he checked his small notebook, “Dick Walsh. Tell me about him.”

We sat on the steps waiting for others to show up.

“He moved here about three years ago,” I said. “Bought this house and the water sports business on Simonton Beach. He said he’s from New Zealand.”

“How do you know him?” He took notes.

The sun was rising and it would soon bathe the street in heat and humidity, but the large tree in the front yard would keep Dick’s house shaded and cool. The morning breeze carried the scent of tropical flowers and brewing coffee.

I needed a *café con leche*, the caffeine jolt of the strong espresso, steamed milk and extra sugar mixture could make this early morning fiasco bearable.

Two police cars stopped out front and Sherlock Corcoran, the crime scene investigator, parked his van in the driveway. The nickname came with the job and few

knew his real first name, or cared to. The cops, Harry Sawyer and Charlie Bauer, nodded but didn't talk to me because of Luis.

"Hold that thought." Luis got up to meet them.

They gathered at the van and spoke softly. Sherlock pointed at me and Luis nodded. The two cops helped Sherlock with bags and went into the house without acknowledging me as they passed.

"How do you know Walsh?" Luis sat down.

"I'd see him around. Schooner, the Hog, one of the bars," I said. "After a while he was with someone I knew or I was with someone he knew and we were introduced."

"Simple as that," Luis smiled.

I hunched my shoulders and said nothing, but my breath I thought what an asshole he was.

"Yet when he kills this woman, you are the one person he calls." It was an accusation not a question. "Interesting," he said with a devious sneer.

"You don't know he shot her or if I'm the only one he called," I said harshly. "He could have found her or he might've been abducted by her killer. Think of some alternatives, Luis, don't be a shortsighted ass."

"Unlikely he found here," he said, ignoring my opinion with a toothy-smile.

"There's no sign of a struggle, so I wouldn't expect abduction." I could hear the frustration in his voice. "He would've called us if he walked in and found her, but he called you multiple times instead. Is there a reason he wouldn't call the police?"

"I've had drinks with the guy, I've rented Jet Skis from him, I'm not married to him," I said.

“He gave you a discount on the rental?” It was a question that he didn’t care about the answer to.

“He gives all locals a discount,” I sighed because Luis knew I wasn’t involved, he just wanted to make my life difficult. The Cuban twit is good at that. “What about the gun? Most people don’t run around with silencers.”

“It could be his, or do you know it isn’t?” He was challenging me, not believing what I’d told him.

“We never talked guns, so I don’t know if he even owns one.”

“We will find out,” he said as Sherlock walked out with the gun and silencer in an evidence bag.

“Six bullets in the chamber, the gun hasn’t been fired,” he growled. “Not the murder weapon.”

“What caliber was the murder weapon?” Luis looked up at Sherlock.

“I’d only be guessing.”

“Guess,” Luis said coldly.

“From the looks of the back of her head, I’d guess a forty-five,” he muttered.

“The ME called and he’s stuck in traffic at the light on Big Pine. He’ll have a better guess when he gets here.”

“Traffic,” Luis groaned. “He should drive in Miami. Anything else?”

“Yeah,” Sherlock smiled. “This is an old silencer. Screws onto the barrel and the Beretta has had the serial numbers burnt off, with acid would be my *guess*,” he said stressing *guess*. “You don’t see many of these old Berretas anymore, everyone wants the fancy forty-fives. They’re a pair.”

Haskins/*Stairway to the Bottom*

“A pro’s gun?” Luis stood up and stared at the evidence bag.

“I’m done guessing,” Sherlock said as he turned to go back in the house. “We’re searching for the bullet, in case it’s intact, but I doubt it.”

### Chapter 3

Detectives Donny Barroso and Alfredo Vargas arrived. They nodded as they walked into the house. Everyone knew better than to talk with me because Luis was around.

Billy Wardlow returned about a half hour later.

“Chief is bringing your phone,” he said and went in without stopping.

I walked to the Jeep twice to have something to do. I found a weather-beaten copy of Dianne Emley’s “Cut to the Quick,” went back to the steps and picked up reading where I’d left off. I could hear muffled talk from inside and the medical examiner finally showed up around nine.

“Traffic?” I said to the tired looking Julian Diaz, the medical examiner, and Chris Fisco, his harried assistant.

“Victim isn’t in a hurry,” Julian grunted as he went in.

About fifteen minutes later Chris and Billy came out and took a gurney from the van. They returned a few minutes later rolling it with a closed body bag on top. The gurney’s legs folded-in at the stairs and they carried it the rest of the way. Even as dead weight, she wasn’t heavy.

“You have a cause of death, Julie?” I asked as the ME walked out. He didn’t like to be called Julie.

“You want me to *guess*, like that Cuban *cabrón*?” he snarled and meant Luis.

“Head trauma due to hitting the wall,” he yelled with a cold laugh and drove off.

“Billy,” I smiled as he climbed the steps. “What’s going on inside?”

“Luis pissed Julian off,” he said so faintly only I could hear. “Chief said he’d be here in five.”

Billy closed the door behind him.

I read two more chapters of “Cut to the Quick” before Richard Dowley showed up.

“Interesting messages,” he said, as he handed me my cell phone. “Why was he so frantic to get hold of you?” He stood next to me on the steps. “Well?”

“You’ll have to ask him,” I said. “Why’d you call him a nut?”

“You’re kidding, right? You know this guy?”

“Yeah, here and there, but he’s never seemed crazy. Maybe a little elusive. So why?”

Richard looked toward the house. “I need to get inside. But listen, he sent me a dozen emails in the last two weeks telling me agents were out to kill him and he needed police protection.”

“Agents?” I couldn’t recall seeing him in the past two weeks.

“Yeah, I took it to mean CIA.”

“Did you follow up?”

“Sent a car down after the third or fourth email,” he said. “According to the officer’s report, Walsh ranted and raved about *agents* wanting to kill him now that they’d found him. But he wouldn’t say what agents or how he knew them or why they wanted him dead.”

“What did the officer do?”

“Assured him a car would patrol his neighborhood on a regular schedule.”

“Did you have someone do it?”

“Oh yeah, we even sent a car by the Simonton Street shop twice in the morning and afternoon. Guess what?” He gave me one of his you-won’t-believe-this smiles.

“I’m waiting.”

“His last email stated that he knew I was working against him with the agents,” he sighed and shook his head. “I pulled the cars off three days ago. Now he’s killed someone.”

“You heard the last message,” I said quickly.

“When he said ‘it’s not what it looks like?’”

“Yeah, maybe we’re not seeing something.”

“He’s run, so what does that say?”

“He could be hiding, scared, not knowing who to trust,” I said.

“He’s hiding from us, that’s for sure.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“We sent a car to his business,” he said. “The officer talked to the employees. Walsh showed up before seven, fueled a Jet Ski and left. He told one of the employees that ‘they’re after me, I need to run.’”

I shook my head and laughed a little, mostly out of frustration. “I don’t know, Richard, I got the phone calls and I came here, found this mess and called you. That’s all I know. I hate to think he killed that woman but then I don’t like to think anyone’s capable of murder. I know better, but in Key West, it isn’t supposed to happen.”

“Why didn’t you come when he first called?” He looked toward the house, again.

I told him about silencing my phone.

“Luis talk to you yet?” He was being the serious cop because he knew how Luis and I felt about each other.

“A little,” I said with a cynical grin. “He asked me to wait and I am waiting, but, damn, I could use a *con leche*.”

“Me too.” He squeezed my shoulder. “Let me see what’s going on inside.”

“Julie’s taken the body,” I said.

“Lucky me,” he grumbled as he walked away.

The porch door opened and Sherlock stood there.

“You aren’t going to believe what we found, Chief,” Sherlock griped. “The guy is paranoid.”

Richard turned to me, shook his head without smiling “Stay here, Murphy,” he said and closed the door behind him.

I thought of the times Dick Walsh and I talked at a bar, maybe the Green Parrot, or a half dozen others along Duval Street, or along the waterfront, sharing hot wings or conch fritters and I never heard anything from him that would make me think he was paranoid. But in the big picture, I didn’t really know him that well. I laughed to myself when I thought, just because he’s paranoid doesn’t mean someone isn’t after him.