

MICK MURPHY'S LAW/haskins

**MICK
MURPHY'S
LAW**

A Mick Murphy Key West Mystery

MICHAEL HASKINS

Also by Michael Haskins

Revenge

Tijuana Weekend

Chasin' the Wind

Free Range Institution

Car Wash Blues

Stairway to the Bottom

To Beat the Devil

Nobody Wins

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.

Oscar Wilde

The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.

Mark Twain

There is no hunting like the hunting of man, and those who have hunted armed men long enough and liked it, never care for anything else thereafter.

Ernest Hemingway

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ISBN-

ISBN-

Trade Paperback

Published in 2015

Fenian Bastard Press

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www.michaelhaskins.net

It Began to Go Bad With a Phone Call

Chapter ONE

No good comes from a phone call at three in the morning.

Kristofferson's *Shake Hands with the Devil*, the ringtone on my cellphone, woke me. The bedside clock radio displayed 3:07.

I sat up, unplugged the phone from its charger and saw **Richard** on the display screen.

"Yeah?" I'd expected it to be someone needing bail money.

"Mick, get down to the hospital. Right now!" Key West Police Chief Richard Dowley's voice sounded stressed.

"What's happening?" I came fully awake, concerned because Richard didn't call at that hour.

"You know Robin Church." It rushed out as one, long word.

"Richard, what's going on?" I stood and slipped into my cargo shorts.

Robin and I had been friends since we met at a rodeo in Southern California, a long time ago. Briefly, we'd been lovers. A fling she'd called it. She liked the bad boys. I wasn't one. She rode out of my life with a bull rider in an old pickup. A few years ago, she arrived in Key West. We rekindled our friendship, that's all. Old habits die hard and before long she hooked up with a pimple-charmer named Morgan Pryce.

"She's asking for you," he said. "I'd hurry." He hung up.

I arrived at the emergency room entrance on the backside of the hospital on College Road in fifteen minutes. Richard hadn't told me to go the ER, but I knew. Two Key West Police cars were parked near the entrance and the officers waited inside the reception area.

In my head, I saw Robin from our California days. Young, long raven hair in a ponytail swaying across her back, faded jeans stuck into scruffy cowboy boots and a man's western shirt

tied in a knot a little above her narrow waist. It somehow added to her sexy look, as she sauntered across the rodeo grounds missing piles of animal shit that others seemed not to.

Cowboys turned to watch her. I did, too.

Officer Billy Wardlow walked me past the nurses' station and into the ER. Richard stood in front of a draped off area talking to a doctor. He looked up as I walked in and excused himself.

"I'm sorry, Mick," he said quietly. "She's been asking for you."

"What happened?" The septic smell of the ER always bothered me. The quiet hum of machines, the loud pleads for help from patients and family mixed in a cacophony of sound that stayed with me for days.

"You knew she was pregnant?" He avoided my question by asking his own.

I nodded. "Something gone wrong?" He said, *was pregnant*.

Richard looked down at the floor and then at the doctor and nurse talking across from us.

"Morgan beat her." I'd never heard Richard's voice quiver before. "You'd better talk to her. It's not good."

He pulled aside the curtain and I went in. The curtain closed. Overhead, artificial light cast shadows in the sterile area.

I wouldn't have recognized the person lying in the bed as Robin. Monitors beeped above her, lines from medicine packets on an IV stand ran to needles stuck into her arm. Tape kept them in place.

Swollen, black, blue and red welts hid her sapphire eyes. A nose once straight as ruler, lay bent and flat against her gray skin. The shock stopped me for a moment. This wasn't Robin. There'd been a mistake. Ashamed of myself, I walked next to her and reached for her hand.

She moved. I looked toward the monitors, but no alarm went off. I stroked her hand.

Something much stronger than anger turned in my stomach and I realized tears seeped from my eyes.

“Mick?” My name fumbled out of her broken lips.

I bent down and kissed her forehead. “I’m here, Robin.”

“Baby girl.” Her words came softly, in unnatural, multiple syllables.

I bent closer.

Robin’s head turned toward me. Her eyes couldn’t open and a soft wince came as I saw the welts over them slightly stir. A tear from my cheek fell onto her face. I wiped it away, feeling the heat from her battered face.

“Take ... care ... of ... my ... baby.” Again, the words came out broken and hard to understand.

I nodded, then realized she couldn’t see. “I will,” I whispered into her ear. “Until you get better.”

A nurse pulled the curtain aside. “She needs her rest.” The nurse motioned for me to join Richard.

I kissed her forehead and lightly squeezed her hand. “I’m right outside, Robin.” I wiped my eyes as I left the room.

“They took the baby?” I said to the nurse.

She looked at Richard.

“The baby didn’t make it, Mick.” His voice soft and sad, very unlike him. “They didn’t want to tell her.”

“Why isn’t she in ICU?” My words sounded harsh, even to me.

Richard motioned a doctor over. He stood six foot and looked skinny under his white smock.

His black skin shiny from sweat, even though the room felt chilly.

“We tried to save the baby,” the doctor said as he looked at the papers on his clipboard. “We couldn’t, the child was already dead.”

He paused and looked at more papers. “This is unusual,” he said, and I guessed he meant talking to me. “Because it’s a criminal case, I can give you the details. You’re Murphy?” He glanced at me.

I nodded.

“Mr. Murphy the patient asked for you upon arrival,” he read from the clipboard. “Chief Dowley said he’d contact you and we took the patient to the OR for a cesarean procedure.”

“Her name is Robin Church!” Anger, hurt and helplessness built inside and the pressure pounded in my head.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor said.

Richard grabbed my arm. “Let the doctor do his job, Mick. No one likes this.”

“Bottom line, Mr. Murphy, is Robin wasn’t expected to live through the cesarean. We tried to save the baby. Whoever beat her left Robin with massive internal bleeding, a damaged kidney, liver, broken ribs that tore into her lungs and we have no idea of what damage has occurred in her . . . I mean, Robin’s brain. I can only say that Robin’s will to live until you got here, kept her alive.”

“She talked to me! She told me about a baby girl.”

“Yes.” The doctor looked toward Richard. “I thought it best to keep the news from her. We are making her . . . Robin as comfortable as possible.”

I turned to Richard. “You know Morgan did this?”

“We have the first responders and two officers that asked her who did this and Robin said

Morgan," Richard said. "The crime lab people are at her house, there'll be other evidence, too. We've got a BOLO on him and the sheriff has it. He won't get out of the Keys, Mick."

"Have you been to the club?"

"Detectives and officers are there now. They're interviewing the strippers and staff and going through his office. We'll get him."

I turned to the doctor. "Can I sit with Robin?"

"Of course," he said. "When the time comes . . ."

"I'll leave, doctor."

He forced a smile. "There was little we could do. We've made her as comfortable as possible and she isn't feeling any pain."

"Thank you doctor," I said.

"It's only a matter of time, Mick, before we've got Morgan." Richard opened the curtain for me.

"Hope so," I said. "Because when I leave here, I'm going looking for him too."

I pulled a chair over to the bed, sat down and took Robin's hand in mine. In my head, I tried to remember the fun we had in California and even being on the water in Key West, but my eyes couldn't move from Robin's battered face, and whatever it was that stirred inside me grew angrier and pounded in my head.

Promises Made

Chapter TWO

When Robin's heart monitor straight-lined, I kissed her good-bye and let go of her hand. It was still warm. Nurses began to enter the room and asked me to leave. Of course, they had patients' monitors at the nurses' station. They could read the changing numbers and knew what they meant and what was about to happen, before I did.

The doctor came in and shook his head as he went to verify his prediction.

I left hoping Robin somehow sensed I stayed until the end. Having made her promises, I'd said all I had to say. I wiped my eyes and didn't look back.

Richard had gone. Other nurses and doctors rushed about and read clipboards of information as patients moaned from behind curtained-off rooms.

My head pounded but the medicine I needed couldn't be found in the ER.

Outside, the sun had come up. How could the day look so perfect? Maybe the universe didn't care about Robin as I did. It probably didn't care about any of us and that's why the sun comes up each morning. I looked at my wristwatch. It was a few minutes past eight. Five hours ago, my life began to shatter because of a phone call. It only got worse from there. For a person who couldn't remember crying since childhood, my tear ducts were on overdrive. There had been things in my life that should've made me cry, but hadn't. I didn't understand the effect Robin's death held over me. I'd lost control of a part of me and that feeling was new.

I stood beside my old white Jeep and had no idea of what to do next. Cars moved along College Road, hidden from sight by shrubbery, but I could hear them. Florida Keys Community College had its Key West campus around the bend, across from the hospital's main entrance. Further on, the Monroe County jail and sheriff's office dwelled next to the Gulf of Mexico.

I asked, *Why Robin*, to a God I wasn't sure listened or cared. I asked myself why smart women get mixed up with abusive men; why do they stay in the relationship? I did know that abusive people were bullies and cowards, man or woman. In most cases, they were no better than rabid animals.

I stood by the Jeep repeating *rabid animals* to myself.

Would the police have changed the BOLO to be on the lookout for a murder suspect? I should have asked Richard if the charge would be two murders because of the baby.

For one last time, I wiped my eyes on a dirty rag from the backseat of the Jeep, and knew I needed to go to the Silver Slipper Saloon, the strip club on Duval Street that Morgan managed.

Early Saturday morning and Duval Street had little traffic. I expected to see police cars outside the club, but didn't. Could the police have interviewed the club's strippers and staff already?

Using my Jeep's emergency flashers, I pulled over and parked.

As I thought about it, I realized the questioning of people at the club would be for information on where Morgan could've gone, nothing else. I crossed the street and checked the door. It was locked. I looked through the glass panel and only the security lights in back were on. I banged on the door. I banged again. I looked down the side alley where I knew the strippers had an entrance. No one came out. I ran down the alley and banged on the side door harder than necessary. No one came. The solid-wood door had no window to look through.

Officer Julio Arael leaned against my Jeep, the red and blue lights of his police car flashing. I walked across the street.

"Julio," I said as I approached.

"We were done in there more than an hour ago," he said. "We'll get Morgan. Didn't know the woman, but all the cops know him. We're called here enough."

"The sooner the better." I shut off the Jeep's emergency flashers.

"The Chief wants to see you," Julio said. "He thought you might be here, eventually."

"He's at the station?" I got in the Jeep and wondered what Richard wanted. "Why didn't he call?"

"You don't answer your cell," he said.

I checked my phone and it was off. When I entered the ER I must have shut it off, but I didn't remember. I turned it on and listened to Richard's first message.

"Harpoon Harry's?" I said.

"He needs his *con leche*, we called him at one-thirty this morning," Julio said. "The responding officers and medics knew it was bad, Mick. You know the unwritten rule is you don't kill a police officer, pregnant woman or child. We solve those cases, no matter how long it takes. This shit doesn't happen in Key West."

"I hope you find him, Julio." I drove to Harpoon Harry's. Breakfast was not my priority.

Richard's unmarked police car took up part of the loading zone. I pulled in behind it.

Ron Heck, the owner, handed me a large *café con leche*, an espresso and steamed milk, and pointed toward the back of the diner. "Richard said you'd want this. Three sugars."

I took the cup and found Richard in the back, alone. I sat down.

"What were you going to do at the club?" He wasn't smiling.

"I thought the girls would talk to me."

Kathy took our order. I realized no one had heard about Robin. Her death had happened too early, but the news might make Bill Becker's radio broadcast Monday morning. Then again, it might not. It depended on what Richard wanted to release and when.

"We already talked to them."

“Yeah, but you’re cops. They might say something to me they wouldn’t want to say to you.”

“They’re not involved.” Richard finished his *con leche*.

“No,” I said, “but they might know where Morgan’s gone. Or have an idea.”

“And if they did, you’d call, right?” He looked at me hard like a cop, not a friend.

“Definitely,” I lied and he knew it. “Is it two murders?”

“Catherine is writing up the arrest warrant for the judge,” he said. “But the final decision is hers, when it comes to trial.”

Catherine Vogel is the State Attorney in Key West for the 16th Judicial Circuit Florida.

“You have her working on Saturday?”

“I briefed her on the phone and a detective is meeting her to go over the evidence we’ve got,” he said. “We have enough for a warrant and she’s going to make sure it’s done right. We don’t want evidence tossed because of the way the warrant is written.”

Our breakfast came and we ate slowly, without talking.

“I don’t want you going after Morgan.” Richard said when Kathy took our plates.

“I don’t want to either,” I said. “So get him.”

Richard smiled, but it was not a happy one. “FDLE has the BOLO, so Morgan won’t get out of Florida, if he somehow gets off the Keys.”

Florida Department of Law Enforcement is a state police agency.

“Why am I here?”

“I probably should know better, but I thought if you knew what we’re doing, you might stay out of it,” he said.

I waited quietly.

“Okay,” Richard said. “Robin’s car is at home, so Morgan is on his motorcycle or someone’s

driving him. We've got his DMV photo with all law enforcement between here and the bordering states. His license indicates he's six-four, two-hundred and eight-five pounds. He can't hide, he's big as a horse."

"He could be holed up in the Keys," I said. "Waiting."

"A possibility, but he's only delaying capture, because when he goes to leave, we've got him. We also checked the morning flights, and he wasn't on one," Richard recited what his department had done. "No one his size bought a ticket this morning and there were only a couple of early morning flights."

"Private plane, boat," I said.

"No private planes flew out before sunrise," he said. "Boat's a possibility but the Marine Patrol has the BOLO and is hitting the Florida marinas as best they can."

"Sounds like you've got it covered," I said. "Will you call me when you get him?"

"As soon as I know, you're the first person I'll call. Promise. Now make me a promise."

It was my turn to try a tired smile. "Anything."

"Go home, get some sleep and wait for my call," he said in his cop's voice. "It's coming."

"Good advice," I said. "I am tired."

"Stay away from the Silver Slipper."

"Haven't been inside since Chuck left as the manager. No reason to go inside now," I continued to lie.

Richard watched as I left and his callous look assured me he knew I lied.