

## THE BAD JOKE

**N**ICKY MARCELLA WAS waiting to get into the guest john as Shane exited. They looked at each other like competing art thieves casing a Sotheby's auction.

"My God, Shane Scully," Nicky said. He was wearing a beautifully tailored, if somewhat gaudy, orangish-brown suit—or was it brownish-orange?—hard to tell because the colors strobed when he moved. Either way, it took some doing to pull off. Maybe the suit was helped by the fact that there wasn't all that much of it—Nicky being only five-foot-five, top to bottom, including his stacked Cuban heels. He was also rail thin—Mick Jagger thin. He had black hair, close-cut on the sides and slightly longer on the top. He was wearing an open-collared silk shirt with a few too many gold chains. His smile was warm, but he was narrow-faced and strangely ferretlike.

"Nicky, how you been?"

"Staying outta jail, I'll tell you that much."

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“Glad to hear it,” Shane said, and he was. He hadn’t seen Marcella in four years. Nicky was a Hollywood character. When Shane met him he was doing street-corner cons—green-goods hustles and pigeon drops. Shane had first busted him when he was still a rookie working vice in Hollywood. He’d rolled him up twice more in the Valley when he was riding around in a plain Jane doing a straight eight in uniform. Sometime in the mid-nineties Nicky had switched from short cons to running bets for bookmakers, then had taken a short fall and ended up doing a bullet in County. When he got out, he moved on to straight-up bookmaking, writing betting slips out of a porn shop on Little Melrose. Nicky Marcella had dabbled in the criminal arts for almost the whole fifteen years Shane had known him, and now here he was, in Farrell Champion’s house, rubbing shoulders with Hollywood’s elite.

“Whatta you up to? Or should I just count the silver?” Shane smiled.

“Can’t blame you for that, Shane. But I’m clean as the Board of Health these days. Just a minute, don’t go away, gotta tap a kidney.”

Nicky pushed past him into the bathroom while Shane stood outside wondering what on earth Nicky Marcella was doing at this party full of heavy-lifters. Even so, Shane had to admit that, over the years, he’d come to enjoy the guy. Nicky had an infectious personality and never took himself too seriously. Of course, he was shamefully easy to arrest, a wonderful quality in a criminal. No toe-to-toe scuffling or bruised ribs with Nicky. At five-foot-five, he was not the kind of perp who fried your nerves with adrenal overload. Nicky was also a fountain of gossip. Shane would sometimes put the word out on the street, with his C.I.’s and snitches, that he needed some particular piece of intelligence, and more times than he could remember, Nicky Marcella would be the one to call in and drop the science on him.

Another strange thing was that Nicky never wanted anything in return. It was almost as if he were trying to buy Shane’s friendship, not his gratitude. And slowly, over the years, Nicky had managed to do it. Shane had really come to like the little grifter in that strange way that cops can like criminals but still not respect them.

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The door opened and Nicky walked out smiling. "Man, you look great. You got a trainer?"

"Yeah, the P.T. instructor at the Academy."

Nicky nodded and shifted his weight. "Don't tell that to any of those silks out there," he said, pointing toward the room full of celebrities. "In this crowd, you gotta have a personal trainer and he's gotta have a shtick like the Tae Bo guy. Trainers around here interview the celebs, not the other way around."

There was a pause while both of them pondered the same question: What the hell are you doing here?

"Okay, you first," Shane finally said.

"I'm in showbiz now." Nicky smiled. "I guess I always was in the business of show. Hey, what's a street-corner hustle if it's not a good performance? I'm not selling bets on the nags anymore either. . . . My bets are all at the box office—on movies, which we bullshitters in the cinematic arts always refer to as 'film.' "

"You're in the movie business?" Shane said, finding that hard to believe.

"Yep, producer. Got my own company, Cine-Roma Productions. We're in preproduction on a film right now. I've also got a big development deal with Farrell over at Paramount, on a novel I bought called *Savages in the Midst*."

"The sequel to *Gorillas in the Mist*?"

"Midst . . . Midst, with a *d*, Shane. Like in our midst . . . like that. It's about the meat-eaters in showbiz, and a girl from Illinois who's looking to be a star, and about savages in suits who ravage her body and, eventually, her soul. We could cast the fucking thing off this party's guest list. Farrell is talking Gwyneth, but I'm not so sure. I'm thinking more like J-Lo. Do it a little harder edged. Make the statement seem integral . . . amp up the verisimilitude."

"The what?"

"Verisimilitude—means the appearance of truth. You have to learn these words, and some Yiddish, if you wanna be a player." He put his hands in the pockets of his ridiculous multicolored suit, rocked back on his Cuban heels, and regarded Shane. "Now you."

"Huh? Oh . . . Just Alexa and Farrell's fiancée, Nora Bishop, are

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old friends. Nora used to be Alexa's baby-sitter when she was a kid."

"I like mine better." Nicky smiled.

"Me too," Shane admitted.

"Listen, bubee, seeing you here might be fortuitous."

"Yeah?" Shane looked puzzled. "How's that?"

"I was thinking of calling you last week. Isn't that a *mitzva*? Haven't seen you in four years, thinking about calling you . . . ka-boom, here you are. That's what we in the biz call—"

"Verisimilitude?"

"With a dose of righteous karma." He smiled. "Shane, I'm looking for a girl who's dropped out of sight. This is silly really, but I bet you could pull this off for me. Her name is Carol White. She's perfect for a part in this movie I'm casting."

"*Savages in the Midst*."

"No, the other one, the one I'm doing at my shop . . . at Cine-Roma. This film I'm talking about already has a green light—what we call a firm go. The girl I'm looking for, Carol White, is perfect for the part of Cherri, which is a showy little role . . . the lead character's best friend. Carol has this ethereal quality, which is a word we use in film meaning translucent, delicate, refined . . . very hard to find these qualities in a young actress. Okay, so here's my problem. She used to do some low-budget stuff around town and some TV, shit like that, and then she kinda disappeared. I checked with SAG, and they got no current address on her. I think she may have even dropped out of the business altogether. I don't know who her current agent is."

"I can promise you, I'm not representing her," Shane said.

"I was thinking you could maybe go into the police computer. Carol White . . . ten little keys that spell 'Big Break.' If she's had a traffic ticket or owns a car, you could get her address, then I give her the part that kick-starts and totally redefines a career. When they do the 'E' Celebrity Profile on her five years from now, she's gonna be up there saying, 'I owe it all to an L.A. cop, and a helluva guy, Shane Scully.'"

"Listen, Nicky. You probably haven't heard, but I've been on a

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medical leave of absence for almost a year. I don't go back on the job until next week. So I don't really have any way into the police computer right now. They change the access codes all the time. So mine's not even current anymore. I mean, as much as I'd like to help and all that . . ."

"Right." Nicky smiled but stopped tipping back on his stacked heels. "Hey, listen, I was probably way outta line there anyway. I mean, the police computer isn't exactly dial-a-job."

"Right."

"Hey, well, it was just a thought. You're looking good, man. Stay healthy and God bless. You're on my prayer list."

"Your what?"

"Found Jesus. A lot happens in four years. Go figure. Spent twenty years living a bullshit life before I discover the Big Guy is my savior. Now I got Jesus and Louie."

"And just who the hell is Louie?" Shane was grinning.

"Louie is the god of all moviemaking. If Louie smiles on you, you get big stars, big grosses, and it never rains on your beach shoot. In the film business we learn these things. Take care, Shane."

Nicky turned to walk down the corridor, and Shane felt instantly bad about brushing off the favor. How hard would it be to help little Nicky? Nicky, who had helped Shane with dozens of useful tips and never asked for anything in return.

"Hey, hold on," Shane called out, and Nicky turned to look back. "I changed my mind. I gotta go down to my old homicide table tomorrow to pick up my duty jacket anyway. I'll get somebody to run her. Gimme your card."

"You always were my favorite copper, even when you had the cuffs on too tight." Nicky grinned and pulled out an alligator wallet, removed some expensive-looking cards, then handed one to Shane. There was a logo of the Roman Coliseum embossed in gold. Under that it said:

CINE-ROMA—NICHOLAS MARCELLA, C.E.O.

"Carol White," Nicky said, "spelled just like it sounds."

"Okay. I'll call you tomorrow if I get anything."

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They separated and Shane prowled around. He was really having a good time now. He had a second scotch on the rocks, spent some time talking to Catherine Zeta-Jones, and then later, Alexa was back at his side.

"Hi. Where'd you go off to?" Shane asked.

"Just meeting the other bridesmaids and looking at pictures of the dresses Nora ordered for us. I can't believe they're getting married in ten days."

"Right, right . . . I was just saying the same thing to Catherine Zeta-Jones," Shane said, a smile twitching the corner of his mouth.

"Get outta town. . . . Where?"

Shane pointed to the beautiful actress, who was wearing capri pants and a crop-top. She caught Shane's eye as he pointed her out to Alexa and waved at him.

"Down, girl," Alexa growled, then her expression changed. Now it was her no-nonsense look, the one she wore downtown at Parker Center.

"I've gotta go. We got a one eighty-seven out in Sunland that the CRASH unit is worried about. They want me to roll on it." She held up her cell phone. "Just got the call."

"Really? Who died?"

"They think it's Kevin Cordell, but the D.B. took so much lead that they're gonna have to do the I.D. with dentistry."

"Sometimes good old street justice works," Shane said, thinking it was about time somebody put Kevin Cordell on the ark. Kevin's street name was Stone, and he'd been a Crip O.G. for over twenty-five years. Stone ran the Front Street Crips, who pretty much controlled the major drug action throughout South Central L.A. Except for a nickel jolt at Soledad for accessory to second-degree murder, up to now he'd largely escaped justice.

"If it's really Stone, it could create a power vacuum and we could end up with Crips and Bloods shooting each other and anybody else who gets in the way," Alexa said.

"You need the car. . . . I can drive you."

"No. Nora will be really upset if we both leave early. The Sheriff's Department is doing us a favor and sending a unit over from the substation here. They'll taxi me over the hill."

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"You really think they need the head of the entire Detective Services Group standing at a crime scene, looking down at the vic while a bunch of lab techs roll the body?"

"Hey, they're my detectives. I go whenever I'm asked. Besides, I'm only the *acting* head of DSG, so I try harder. I'm just holding that post till the chief appoints a captain to the job."

"Honey, Filosianni isn't going to replace you. You're acting head only because you're still a lieutenant and, technically, they can't put a lou in that slot. But I can read that guy—you got the job." He grinned. "You is da man, woman."

"Well, de man-woman gotta take her sorry ass to work."

"I'll stick around here for another hour until they do the steak fry, then drive over the hill and pick you up. You got an address?"

She handed him a slip of paper, then kissed him on the lips. "Only one more thing before I leave . . ."

"Say good-bye to Nora?"

"No, that's done. I gotta run this bitch in the pedal-pushers off my guy."

"Come on . . . she's happily married."

"Maybe, but in Hollywood, marriage is an eight-letter condition with the half-life of a chocolate-chip cookie."

Alexa moved off, stopped next to Catherine Zeta-Jones and said something to her. The two stood there for another moment before the actress threw back her head and roared with laughter.

Alexa turned and smiled at Shane, then went out the front door to the entry hall to wait for the sheriff's car.

That would have been all that was noteworthy, except for one last thing that happened just before he left the party.

He said good-bye to Nora and was heading up from the beach, when he decided to cut through the pool house to save the longer walk around the side of the estate. He went in the beach entrance and was immediately greeted by a heavy cloud of cigar smoke and male laughter coming from the front room. Shane walked down the hallway toward the sound, listening to Farrell's voice. He was telling some kind of story when Shane reached the back of the main room.

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The pool house was large—about the size of Shane’s entire house in Venice. It had windows on the west that overlooked the ocean. The windows on the other side fronted Farrell’s Olympic-size pool. Nora had decorated the pool house in a quasi-African theme: lots of bamboo, grass rugs, and native art. There were ten or twelve men in the room with Farrell, all smoking Cuban Cohibas. Nobody was paying any attention to Shane.

“So, Farrell, you get Kenny to draw you up a prenup like I advised?” one of the guests asked.

Farrell lit the man’s cigar with a large gold lighter. “Listen, that kinda shit’s good for you guys who can’t take care of business, but I don’t need no stinking prenup.” He did that last part like the Mexican bandit in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*.

“Everybody needs a prenup. Ask Johnny Carson or Burt Reynolds. It’s the law west of Sunset,” the man persisted.

“Not me.” Farrell seemed a little loaded. “Didn’t need one with my last two wives. When I got tired of those ladies, they both got some bad shellfish and died of food poisoning.” There was some nervous laughter, not much but some. Then Farrell swung his eyes around the room until his gaze ended up on Shane.

It’s hard to explain to a civilian how a cop’s hunches work, because they live in some intellectual and emotional no-man’s-land somewhere between a guess and a feeling. In the end, they’re not really hunches at all. They’re based on keen instinct mixed with physical and emotional observations. In this case, the physical part was in Farrell Champion’s dark eyes when they found Shane in the back of the room. They hardened momentarily. Even from twenty feet away Shane could see it: a tightening of the skin around the sockets, a shadow on the cornea that came and went so quickly it would have been easy to miss if you weren’t trained to spot it. Suddenly the look was gone and the smiling Farrell was back.

“Hey, Shane, that was just a bad joke. Don’t get the handcuffs out.”

“No sweat.” Shane smiled. “Why pay for a divorce if you can knock ’em off with bad shrimp?”

Farrell laughed. “Exactly.”



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Now Shane was feeling awkward, sort of on the spot, as everyone in the room had turned to stare at him. "Thanks for the great time. Thanks for having us."

"You bet. Good you could come."

As Shane left, he could feel Farrell's eyes on him, tracking his exit across the pool deck and into the house.

The valet delivered the dusty Acura. He pulled out of the Colony wondering what he should do about Farrell's bad joke.

*Hey, Shane, don't go over the falls in a barrel here*, he lectured himself. *It was just a joke*. But he had seen the look in Farrell's eyes, the shadow. He'd caught a partial glimpse into Farrell Champion's soul.

It could have been embarrassment at making a morbid joke, but something told Shane that there really were two women in Farrell's past who died of food poisoning.

It was a terrible dilemma because if he did anything to screw up this wedding, he had a hunch his beautiful wife would kill him.