

The Naked Clone: A Nick Nolte Mystery

Chapter 1

Thirty-one years to the day after *People Magazine* named me Sexiest Man Alive, your buddy ol' Nick woke up on the floor of my office.

It felt like someone had handed one of those peg-legged fellas who dances for nickels a fistful and told them to go to work on my head. And not one of the high-class, carved oak pegleggers that dance down by the barge canal lock, like Pegleg Dan or Pegleg Willie. I'm talkin' an alley peglegger, like Pegleg Hrabosky. When he woke up without a right leg after passin' out on the train tracks after we'd shared a bottle of isopropyl on Canadian Thanksgiving, he just wedged a knotty old shillelagh up there and went about his day. Oh, he'll dance for your nickel, but his eyes'll be dead the whole time. At least, the one that ain't covered by an eyepatch will.

Now, my head throbbin', I understood. Throwin' back Sterno under the bleachers of the abandoned minor league baseball stadium til 3am was a young man's game. But this morning my left hand felt like it was on fire, and I'd be damned if I could remember why.

Hoistin' myself up onto an elbow, I took a look around my office. A toppled can of paint thinner was dripping down my desk. Next to it, there was a pile of cardboard gatherin' dust, a lotto scratcher forgin' scheme from a few weeks back that was still waitin' for me to dive back in, and Christopher Plummer's Oscar proppin' up a wobbly file cabinet, at least until the heat dies down and I can fence it without suspicion. An eviction letter had been slipped under the door: FINAL NOTICE. Yep, everything seemed in order.

It clicked when I saw the layer of old newspaper laid out in the corner. That was a failed housebreakin' project. No, I ain't talkin' about me, dammit! A few days back, I wrassled an old mutt for a bag of day-old beef-n-cheddars in the alley behind the Arby's. He had more fight in him than looks let on, and I figured ol' Nick could use a new best friend, so I brought him back to the office, named him Zeke, and tried to paper train him. But when I got back to the office last night, with the clarity that only a gut full of Sterno can provide, it was pretty darn obvious that Zeke was a big ol' wharf rat. Didn't matter, it seemed like he was taking to the paper training. But when he found out I'd been holdin' out on him, stashin' the last half of beef-n-cheddar my back pocket, he bit my middle finger and took off out the window.

Now I can't afford to lose another finger, let alone one that can do all the talkin' when Sterno done rendered you unintelligible the way that one particular finger can. Fortunately, I've got a Rat Guy. In this line of work, you've got to have a Rat Guy.

I took off out the window, shimmyin' down the drain pipe. That's how I come and go these days. My landlord and I, we ain't on the best terms. It ain't personal, just a difference of opinion about whether me payin' rent in catalytic converters is as good as cash. I say, "Listen, Pop-o-matic, you take this down to the barge canal, this sucker'll fetch you twice what I owe you!" And he just replies "Is that why my car didn't start this morning?" and then changes the lock on my office door. It's no matter. Shimmyin's a good skill for a PI to have.

My Rat Guy stakes out the alley over on 5th and Sullivan. A few hours more, and this bite probably would've warranted a trip to the doctor. But Doc lost his license after that doping scandal where he prescribed jai alai players a banned camel tranquilizer, and now he operates from under the Van Buren Bridge. That's all the way across town and it's a hell of a slog gettin' down there and back, but if you know a better place to get hump tranqs, I'm all ears, Monchhichi.

Besides, a Rat Guy can be just as good as a doctor. Plus, they can get you rats.

I shuffled down the alley. You don't want to make any sudden movements--Rat Guys are always packin'.

"Nico! Wake your ass up, Sarsaparilla! I got a bite on my middle finger!" Tryin' to make small talk with your Rat Guy is a youngblood mistake. Cut to the chase. They appreciate it. They've got places to be. Mostly alleys.

I heard a grunt, and Nico emerged from behind a pile of old box springs. He was smokin' an unfiltered cigarette, which set my mouth waterin', but I resisted the urge to ask to bum one. Ol' Nick's been off the cancer sticks for two days now, amigo. Plus, it's tacky to bum from your Rat Guy. Another youngblood mistake.

I extended my middle finger, a gesture I've made to many a Rat Guy in many an alley over the course of several of my careers. But I could tell that Nico knew what I meant. He's a total professional. After pokin' and proddin' ol' Tall Man for a few seconds, he held up one finger. That was good news. I was worried this one wasn't gonna come cheap.

I pointed to my left cheek, steeled my jaw, and the last thing I remember seeing was Nico rearing back to deliver a full-on, open-palm slap.

When I regained consciousness for the second time this morning, the throbbing in my middle finger had jumped the turnstile, hopped the train uptown, and made the transfer to my cheek. Looking at my finger, the only evidence of my previous malady was the faded fang marks Zeke had left behind. No redness, no swelling. Nico worked wonders. It didn't seem to warrant being put under, but I'd long ago learned not to question the slaps. I was pretty sure the slaps were just a sex thing. With your Rat Guy, there's always a sex thing.

My day was lookin' up, and I thought I'd head down to the switchyard to see if any of the boys had done any oyster poachin' last night. If they hit a midnight motherlode at one of them aquafarms, they'll usually be grillin' up breakfast on an old car hood, and I've found a PI can eat pretty well tradin' information for bivalves. But I realized I'd left my lucky blackjack back at the office, and if there's one piece of advice I can impart to you, Drexell's Class, it's to never go down to the switchyard to eat oysters off a car hood without some sort of blunt instrument to defend yourself in your back pocket. So I headed back to the office.

I'm not gonna lie; at my age it's a lot easier shimmyin' down a drainpipe than it is shimmyin' up one. Even when it's a pipe I know like the back of my hand, I was still huffin' and puffin' as I threw a leg over the windowsill and ducked into my office.

And that's when I saw the dame. She was pokin' around the stash of pemmican that I keep in a rusty old Wilkins Coffee can. I had to stifle the instinctive snarl that comes when you see someone rustlin' your pemmican. I knew that's not what she was after. If she was the rare type of dame that wanted pemmican, there are easier ways to get it than shimmyin' up a drainpipe. Pegleg Willie runs a side business selling this stuff, for instance.

The dame opened her mouth, distractin' me from the intrusive thoughts I'd started to have about rustlin' Willie's pemmican.

"Mr. Nolte? I'm Carla Forsythe. I hope you don't mind me letting myself in. I need your help."

Chapter 2

Now listen tight, honchos: I wouldn't be shootin' straight if I didn't tell you this little nugget. A long time ago, back when milk was cheap enough that it was easier to *buy* than to drink from the carton just out of camera range at the Pump 'N' Munch, me and Ray Sharkey were swiping commercial window panels off the back of stopped trucks and selling 'em to a contractor who had crashed on my couch for two weeks after he burned his place down draining the gas tank on his Kawasaki road bike. One time some patrol cops got curious as to why we was hefting a 10'x8' double-pane down Myrtle Street at 11:30 pm and gave chase. We dropped the window in the parking lot of a Del Taco and hightailed it out of there, but Downey, California's finest were right on us so we lost ourselves in a tent city off Alameda.

We split up, Ray into a story-and-a-half plywood thing, and me into a tent made of blue painting tarps. And that's when I saw her. The prettiest thing that ever slipped on a pair of tattered half gloves. She was heating Vienna sausages over a butane stove when I surprised her, and, letting out a little gasp, she started in fear. One of those little meat fingers fell into the flame.

"I'm sorry!" I stage whispered, "The cops are after me. Please don't give me away."

She composed herself and said firmly, "You interrupted my dinner." But then she smiled coyly. I don't mind tellin' you, ol' Nick felt his blood pulse for the first time since that Native American fella up near Sanborn had given me a mug with hot water and what looked like grass clippings in it and told me to drink it down.

"I'm real sorry, miss," I stammered. "I'll snag you a fresh can of sausages," I promised.

"I look forward to sharing them with you," was all she said.

Well, dammit, right about then the cop's flashlight beams started shining through the gaps in the tarp and their voices started getting louder.

"I'll take a rain check on that dinner date," I said, and lifted the tent wall, preparing to make a break for it. I turned back, "What's your name?"

In the faint flickering light of the butane her face looked like that of an angel. "Bullfrog," she said plainly.

Anyway, I escaped without being pinched and last I heard Ray was making his way by stealing wallets under the bleachers at the drag strip in Victorville.

The point is, muttonheads, that same feeling I had when I first laid eyes across Bullfrog was happening again, thanks to Carla Forsythe.

“M-Mister Nolte?” she repeated. Maybe I’d blanked out for a moment or something, I don’t know.

Hell, I won’t tell you any tales, I *had* blacked out. I know that for sure because I was flat out on the floor and the Forsythe dame was attempting to revive me by pouring into my face the warm remains of a 2-liter bottle of Diet Slice I’d had in my office since last June in case someone important stopped by.

“Mister Nolte, are you all right?”

I sputtered a bit, sat half upright and barked, “Hell, yeah, I’m all right!” She looked chagrined and that look just melted my heart like it was the plastic casing of the ATM that me and Johnny Five-Toes threw onto that stack of burning pallets behind the loading docks.

“What I mean to say, ma’am,” I said, in a much softer tone, “is Nick Nolte, private eye, at your service.” And then I passed out again, but this time a kind of micro-faint that I don’t even think she noticed, on account of the fact that she restrained from pouring any further liquids onto my head.

After I’d struggled to my feet and gotten her seated in my only chair, I perched comfortably on a peach crate and we got down to business.

“How can I help you, Mrs. Forsythe?”

“Miss, if you please,” she cooed.

“You don’t say...” I replied, leaning toward her, causing my peach crate to tip and then give way at the corners, collapsing until it was nothing but a heap of splintered pine and jutting 8-penny nails.

“Good heavens!” she exclaimed.

“No, it’s fine. Happens all the time,” I lied with as much dignity as I could muster. But as I attempted to stand and brush myself off, I stepped directly on an angled piece of crate causing an exposed nail to spring up and bury itself deeply into the meat of my thigh.

“Mister Nolte!” she cried, shooting from her seat, “Let’s get you to the emergency room!”

“Nah,” I said, waving a hand in objection. “It went right into the spot where there was already another nail hole. Let’s just leave it where it is and get on with business.”

“Well,” she said timidly, “if you’re sure?”

“Yes,” I said, keeping the majority of my weight on my non-pierced leg.

“Mister Nolte,” she began confidently, “I hear you’re the best.”

“Some would say that,” I said smoothly, while reaching for the Marlboros I keep in my breast pocket. Oddly though, instead of cigarettes, my hand met only skin, chest hair, and the outer perimeter of my own nipple. It was then I remembered that I was shirtless, as three days before it had been torn from my body while I was scrounging for old rebar at that collapsed bridge. Hurriedly, I grabbed a spare novelty t-shirt from my bottom desk drawer and slipped it on: “2:00 pm Wine Bitch!” read the pink letters across the front. Damn! A woman’s shirt. No wonder it covered almost none of my abdomen and restricted the blood flow to my arms.

“Go on, Miss Forsythe,” I finally managed.

“Well,” she began, “your background is in Hollywood?”

“I have scrounged the occasional dumpster in Santa Monica, yes,” I agreed with some little pride.

“Then you must have heard that someone is systematically kidnapping the heads of all the major studios?”

“Of course,” I said, though it was news to me. I hadn’t had a TV since they’d canceled *Trapper John, M.D.* and the last newspaper I read was a section of the classified ads I’d stuffed in my pant legs for warmth.

“Well,” she announced dramatically, “I believe my father is responsible and I want you to prove it and put him behind bars *forever!*”