

The Princess and the King

By David C. Daniel

I mostly lied to the cops. I didn't know what else to do. I was scared but had sense enough to know the truth wasn't going to set my ass free. I also knew the cops wanted somebody in jail *mui prontito*. They had the body of a white female in the L.A. County morgue. The coroner ruled her demise a genuine homicide and my number was in her cell phone.

Detective Diaz interviewed me. He looked to be 30-something. He had a flattop haircut and bad breath. He didn't like me from second one. He wanted to know why a 45-year-old balding loser was presuming to even talk to a beautiful 25 year-old woman from angel town.

His cell phone rang and Diaz stepped out of the interview room to talk. So I sat there, alone for the first time since I'd been 'invited' down to West Bureau. Diaz wouldn't give me any details about Carla's death. He had a different name for her: Stacy Williams, late of Echo Park - but she didn't look like a Stacy. She was definitely a Carla.

I knew it was her when Diaz showed me the morgue photo. She hadn't been dead long and whatever killed her didn't show on her face. But her lips were blue and whatever it is that makes us alive was very gone. I don't pretend to have a clue about where we go when we die, but what we leave behind is supremely creepy. It wasn't even noon yet and my day was irreversibly fucked up.

I wondered if I'd been set up. But that didn't make any sense. I hardly knew the woman. I'd only slept with her a few times. The last time was six days ago. And now a new wave of creepiness went up my spine: I'd had sex with a woman young enough to be my daughter, who's now filling an L.A. County body bag.

I figured Diaz was getting the bad news. I didn't have a rap sheet. I was arrested once as a minor - I was a passenger in a stolen car. But those records were sealed. I was clean and I was sure Diaz was pissed about it. If he'd had a good lead he wouldn't be talking to me.

He came back in, snapped his cell phone shut, and closed the door. He perched himself on the table to my right and leaned in. I got a new blast of bad breath when he said, "We need you to ID the body."

My heart went into high gear. I pointed to the picture on the table but Diaz didn't give me a chance to say anything. He said, "We need an ID on the body, not a picture of the body."

He stood up. I didn't. My legs felt quivery and my mouth was dry. Diaz said, "Her father's dead. Her mother disappeared four years ago. She didn't have any other family. Let's go Mr. Rossi."

The way he said, 'Mister', sounded like 'Perp Asshole'.

I said, "Please, call me Ray."

The morgue was cold. I can't describe the smell but it left a greasy feeling in my nose and throat. Carla wasn't in a drawer. A morgue guy wheeled her in on a gurney and unzipped the bag. I stepped back but Diaz urged me forward as the morgue guy pulled the bag open far enough for me to see her face and chest. A 'Y' shaped gash had

been closed with staples. I didn't have to ask Diaz what killed her. I could see what didn't show in the picture: a deep purple-black bruise around her throat.

I managed to say, "That's Carla," and started to hyperventilate.

Diaz walked me to my car. I noticed my hands were shaking when I opened the door. I plopped into the driver's seat and stared through the windshield. I heard Diaz ask me something. When I looked up, he was looking down. I guess my face made it obvious. He asked again, "What kind of car is this?"

I get asked that a lot. I spied off the answer I always give: it's an Austin Healey 3000 Mark III built in England in 1967. It was my grandfather's.

Diaz squatted down to bring his face to my level. The Austin's top was down and the dry breeze carried his bad breath away before it got to me. He said, "I bet Miss Williams was real impressed. Look Ray, I know you've got more to tell me about her. You should just tell me everything now because I'll find out anyway. And if I find out things later you should have told me today..."

My hands had stopped shaking. I started my car and said I'd call if I thought of anything else.

My house is off Beachwood Drive, only three blocks from the gateway to old Hollywoodland. I stay there because it's quiet and the house isn't mortgaged. The taxes are insane, but the garage is big and I like it quiet, so I stay. I sat in the Austin while its cooling manifolds made tic-tic-tic sounds. I wanted a shower but my legs weighed 300 pounds each.

"Are you Ray?"

It was a female voice but I jumped like a bomb went off. She stood just outside the open garage door. The October sun against the gloom of the garage made her a talking silhouette. The adrenaline lightened my legs. I hopped out of the car and squinted at the doorway. She stepped in a few feet when I said, "Yeah."

"I need to talk to you about Carla."

My eyes adjusted enough to make her out. She was around 30 with long blonde-brown hair, maybe five-feet-five. She wore standard issue L.A. flip-flops with beads, a belly blouse, and a way-short skirt that rested on her hips. A thin strap across her shoulder held a small purse at the end. She was very tan and pretty all over but I didn't want to talk about Carla to anybody. I said, "Been there, done that."

She stepped a little closer, "You've seen her?"

She sounded truly relieved, and I felt a new dread work its way up the back of my neck.

I stalled, "You know my name..."

She stepped closer and put out her hand, "Sorry. I'm Chase."

Her hand was cold. I figured she was pretty nervous, but hiding it well. I also figured she could be a cop. I remember hoping she was a cop because otherwise I was going to have to break the bad news to this woman calling herself, Chase.

I decided to use the present tense test, "You know Carla?"

"She's a good friend and I haven't been able to get a hold of her for days."

Chase had made her way to the Austin. She leaned her bare thigh against the rear quarter panel and crossed her arms.

“I was kinda worried, so I’m glad you’ve seen her because-”

“I’ve seen her but not like you think, I mean...”

I remember getting that far and seeing Chase looking at me. She didn’t look relieved any more and I was fighting a really strong urge to hyperventilate again. I muttered something about having a number she could call and headed into the house. I’d decided Chase-or-whomever wasn’t a cop. I wouldn’t have admitted it then, but I was beginning to grieve. I liked Carla. I still couldn’t think of her as Stacy. It wouldn’t have hit me so hard if I hadn’t had to ID her body. That was more than my already weakened limbic system could handle.

I ended up standing in the middle of my living room like an idiot not remembering what I was looking for.

Chase had followed me inside, “Is she okay?”

“All I know is what the cops told me.”

“Oh shit. She’s in jail?”

Chase sat on the edge of the couch, pulled out a cell phone from her tiny purse, and scrolled through her phone book. “I can raise bail money if she needs it.”

She looked at me. I looked at her, still in idiot mode.

“You said you had a number?”

I remembered I had Diaz’s card in my pocket. I fished it out and offered it to her. “She’s not in jail.”

Chase took the card. I figured I’d let Diaz break the news. Then I remembered what it said under Diaz’s name: West Bureau Homicide. She looked up at me after scanning the card. I noticed her eyes were green-blue-gray, the kind that change in different light. I realized she was waiting for me to explain the card, “Something bad happened.”

I was going to rephrase my half-brained sentence but I didn’t have to. I watched Chase’s face as she added it up. Then I watched her deflate, sink back into the couch, and silently cry.

I did what I always do when confronted with a grief-stricken woman I don’t want to join in a tear fest: I went into tough-guy mode.

“I told Diaz everything I know which is nothing. You need to call him pronto. Her name is...wasn’t Carla by the way. It was Stacy something. But Diaz - it’s his case, and he’s an asshole, and he wants to make an arrest like yesterday.”

Chase kept crying and wiping her face with her hands. I kept blathering while I went to the kitchen and grabbed a handful of napkins. I thought of a really good question while Chase was blowing her nose.

“How did you know where I live?”

“Carla told me.”

“When did you see her last?”

“I talked to her on the phone five days ago.”

I knew I had to keep my story straight. I told Diaz I hadn’t seen Carla for six days, which was true. I also told him she’d never been to my house and I never slept with her—two fibs in a row. So, if Chase-or-whomever was telling the truth, then Carla

was alive the next day after she was with me. I knew that fact wouldn't clear me with Diaz, but if Ms. Chase-&-Sandborn was telling the truth and we could figure out who Carla was with...

"Was she alone?"

"I think so."

"Who else was she seeing?"

Chase buried her face in the napkins and shook her head. I felt myself getting extra frustrated.

"Look, Chase-or-whatever-your-name-is, I didn't have anything to do with her death and I need the cops to fully understand that fact because until they do they're going to fuck with me non-stop."

Chase emerged from behind the napkins. "I can't talk to the police."

"Fucking great. What? You have warrants?"

"No."

"How did you know Carla?"

"We worked together."

Carla she said she was a dancer and did some acting. I had a feeling something else was going on but never felt the need to pry. Then it hit me. "Escort services. Right? Incall, outcall, etcetera?"

Chase looked straight ahead. "Was she strangled?"

"Yeah. But what's-"

"I know who killed her."

She'd stopped crying. I watched her face change expression to angry-scared but the thousand-yard stare stayed.

"Then you need to tell the cops."

"He's a pimp and he knows most of the cops in Hollywood."

That was the worst news I could have heard. That meant Mr. Pimp's cops were either banging his stable or taking his dollars, or both. I plopped down on the couch. My sphincter was tight and my gut felt like I'd eaten rocks. "You need to leave town."

"That fucking bastard isn't making me go anywhere. Maybe you should leave."

That idea was very attractive for about three seconds. But if I left town now, Diaz would have a warrant issued before I got out of the county. Besides, I didn't do anything!

Chase got up while I was pondering. "I'm really sorry for the hassle."

I felt panic. I had to assume Diaz was either a client or a payee and that I was the guy slated to take Super Pimp's spot in prison. Ms. Chase Manhattan was my only remotely viable link to getting my tit out of the proverbial wringer.

"Look. You just got some really bad news. Stay here until your head clears a little."

She looked down at me and I could almost hear the gears spinning behind her eyes.

"She liked you. A lot."

It sounded like she left off the end of her sentence. Something like, "But I can't imagine why."

I was going to stand up but the couch held me down somehow. I heard the sound the zipper made again. The blue I'd seen on Carla's lips in the photo had looked like lipstick. But when the rubberized bag opened I could see the blue was inside her lips and glowing out against the fluorescent lights. I saw the blue-black bruise on her throat again and now it looked like the death hiding inside her was trying to get out. The Carla I knew was gone and if I lived another million years I would never see her again.

I was going to say I liked her too, but my throat had closed up. Then I heard myself sob: so much for tough-guy mode. I buried my face in my hands and cried. Chase sat down again - just close enough to let me know she was there. I was glad she didn't leave.

Chase stayed. We ate Chinese and finished a half bottle of Vodka orphaned from a July 4th party I hosted. We talked about Carla. I told Chase what I'd told Diaz: I'd met Carla at one of my King of Klean Laundromats, also inherited from my grandfather. I was paged one afternoon with a trouble call at the Sunset location. Carla was there when I arrived. Her washer had drained backwards and we talked while I cleared the drain line. Chase told me about Ted 'The Head Case'. He ran an operation based in Hollywood: one of the oldest in the Town. He was a coker most of the time, but he liked to snort crank on special occasions. He was tweaking the night Carla died. Chase was certain he'd killed her doing his favorite kink: breath play. Chase had played the game with Ted once and went unconscious. When she came to, he was gone. She had to take a week off because she was sore and bruised everywhere it counted. Ted thought it was funny.

I learned that Ted and I were in a similar business. I laundered clothes, Ted laundered money. He cleaned a lot of it through a little place called Club Sinistra. I'd heard of it but never been. It was more than a little out of my league.

I've tried to remember the way we got The Plan. It wasn't mine, but I don't think Chase thought it up either. It was like we finally noticed the third person in the room.

The Plan was simple:

- 1) Record a confession from Ted.
- 2) Use the previously obtained confession to either make Ted call off his cops or ideally, use the recording to send the prick to prison.

I fished out my digital recorder. It was a birthday present from a smartass friend so could record my important thoughts. It was very small and the box said it had thirty minutes of record time. Please bear in mind that we truly liked The Plan at the time.

Looking back on it, taking a nap in the garage with the Austin idling would have been a better idea.

Chase decided she could hide the recorder in her bra with the microphone nestled in her cleavage. We tested it. Yes, I talked to her chest, and the mic picked up normal conversation perfectly.

Chase had already decided where she planned to work Ted over. He had office space at Club Sinistra and liked to 'play' there most nights. Chase decided the *vino la verità* (truth in the wine), as my grandfather used to say, would win out. I wasn't so sure.

I wanted to let her go alone, but I couldn't. I ended up changing into good jeans and a silk shirt and we piled into the Austin.

The club didn't look like much from the curb. It sits on the Boulevard but the entrance is off a side street. I didn't let the valet take my car. We found parking a block away. I hoped it was a good sign.

The doorman knew Chase. He gave me the up-and-down as he waved us in. The place was big inside and very busy. A woman wearing a red latex dress handed me a drink. It was sweetened and tasted like licorice. I needed more alcohol so I drank it quick and grabbed another. Thumping trance music came from everywhere.

Chase made her way upstairs and I followed. The day was catching up with me fast and the drink hit me faster. I decided I'd like nothing better than to meet the big hero named Ted. I smelled booze and weed mixed with perfume and new leather.

The second floor must have been 4000 square feet. It was divided up into semi-private booths surrounded by heavy red curtains on brass rings. The music wasn't as loud up here - you could actually have a conversation, but most of the people I saw inhabiting the booths weren't talking too much. Chase took my hand and led me toward the back corner. Several of the denizens recognized my 'date'. Two men stood and left as we entered. That's when I saw Ted for the first time.

He didn't look like I thought he would. He looked like a 40-ish banker: banker-style haircut, banker-style too-even tan, and a banker-style Rolex. He didn't talk like a banker though, "Princess! Where the flaming fuck have you been?"

Chase pushed me into a seat across from Ted. He patted his lap and Chase calmly planted herself on his thigh. That's when I realized how tall the guy was - at least six feet four and dense. He put his hand between her legs, glanced at me, and spoke into Chase's ear. She replied in his. Ted pointed to someone behind me and a petite blond wearing a corset and little else draped herself across my shoulders. I scanned the room for exit signs, found two, and turned my gaze back in Ted's direction. Blondie put her hand on my crotch and said something I didn't catch.

Princess Chase got up and left the booth. Ted watched her go and flashed a smile at her ass. I hid behind the blond who now straddled my legs and pushed her corset-amplified cleavage into my face. The Princess had gone to the ladies room. That was part of The Plan. She was setting up the recorder.

A waitress handed me another licorice drink. I found out later it was Absinthe. I sucked the straw and felt calmed instantly. Blondie opened my zipper and I looked at her for the first time. She looked like a Maxim girl.

The princess had returned when I glanced again in Ted's direction. She was on her knees between Ted's legs. He seemed very happy. Ted wrapped his silk-trousered legs around Princess Bobble Head's thighs. Her skirt had hiked up to her waist. Ted tightened his leg hold and grabbed two handfuls of her hair. I've seen my share of adult entertainment but I'd never seen a face fucking like Ted put out. I expected to see the back of the fair princess's head blow open in a mixture of seamen and blood.

I felt Blondie slip a condom on the erection I wasn't aware I had. I noticed Ted didn't use one - a privilege of rank, I figured. Ted came. Chase pulled back but Ted didn't let her do what she was going to do. He put his hand over her wet mouth until she swallowed.

Chase closed Ted's pants and climbed up next to him. He gave her a glass of Absinthe to wash out her mouth. I could see them talking while Blondie started a rhythmic pelvic dance on my lap. Blondie blocked my view of Chase and Ted intermittently while Blondie rode me like a pony. The phrase, "It was like sex in a train wreck," went through my head.

I'd lost site of Ted and Chase for a few seconds when I heard Ted yell and then a table turned over. I pushed Blondie aside in time to see Ted backhand Chase to the floor. He had something in his right hand when he turned towards me. It appeared that The Plan had failed.

Blondie was trying to see what was going on behind her. I was trying to get my ass out of the seat. Ted lunged at me but Blondie was in the way. She slammed into me and I felt her gasp. I was still trying to get up when Ted pulled Blondie off my lap by her hair. I saw blood on my shirt. I figured I was dead.

Ted came at me again but I was able to plant my right foot on his chest. I pushed as hard as I could, but the fucker wasn't phased. He grabbed my ankle and pulled me out of the chair. I landed hard on my back and my lungs emptied.

I saw Blondie lying next to me. She was bleeding and I realized the blood on my shirt was hers. Chase got to her knees behind Ted. He was standing over me while I tried to breathe. That's when I saw the knife.

Chase screamed. I saw the blood coming from her mouth and then Ted put her on her back with a nasty kick to the chest. He turned back to me. My bladder let go. I curled up and prepared to die. I wasn't scared by then. I felt sorry I couldn't help Chase. I knew she was going to die too and I knew Ted would walk away from the whole mess. I remembered that the Austin would be towed in the morning if I didn't move it by seven. I wondered if I would see my grandfather and how I would explain his beloved Austin ending up at the impound lot. Then I heard someone yell and firecrackers went off.

The music had stopped and I was still alive. People ran into the booth. Someone grabbed me and pulled me into the aisle. When I looked up I saw Diaz. He was looking at Ted. Ted was on the floor staring up at the ceiling. He didn't react when Diaz kicked the knife out of his hand. Another cop was kneeling over Chase. She was coughing and moaning. Blondie was crying. I saw where Ted had stabbed her, just below her collarbone on the left side. I smelled urine and remembered why. I felt like an idiot again.

I didn't see Diaz again until the coroner's inquest. He was the only officer to discharge his weapon that night. One of Diaz's rounds split Ted's aorta in two and another blew his pulmonary artery to shreds. The shooting was ruled 'clean.'

Diaz had been parked outside my house when Chase and I left for the club. He decided to follow us. I owe him my life. It's a creepy feeling.

Diaz asked me about Janet - Chase's real name. She was back in school and about ready to take the paralegal test. We'd visited Carla's grave the week before. We went out to lunch after and I heard her laugh for the first time. That's when I knew she was going to be fine.

Mr. Daniel writes screenplays, articles, and short fiction. His article titled, Arab Films, Broken Glass appeared in the CinemaMinima web site in 2003. His short story titled, A Life on Earth appears in Slouch Magazine's September 2006 issue. Mr. Daniel's latest screenplay is a comedy titled, FALSE SECURITY. It took 2nd place in the Raindance Institute's contest for the third quarter of 2005. He wrote, produced, and directed a short film titled, Memoir. It was released in October of 2006. Mr. Daniel writes in Los Angeles, California.