

Caught Blue Handed

By Lee Stoddart

The roadster sat gleaming in the warm sun. With her soft-top roof stowed away, she looked like a shark basking in the driveway. Built in the same year as me. A forty-eight-year old classic, still sleek and dangerous. Her polar paintwork transformed from a cold-grey in shadow, to a shimmering silver-blue as the sunlight flashed across her bonnet.

The full-leather interior was a dark navy.

Or rather, it should have been. Over the years, the sun had bleached the colour from the cracked-leather seats and dashboard and faded them to the dark, off-green of the sea on a stormy day.

I tried to keep it in top shape, and did as much as I could myself. I even had my own pit in the garage, so I could work on the engine and underbody, although I hadn't been able to use it for a while because it was fully utilised storing some old shit I really should have dumped by now. Some jobs just get away from us, don't they?

There was no doubting it though, she was in superb shape. Worth a tidy sum, too. Not many 280 SLs out there in her condition. So, the less-than-perfect state of the inside really irked me and I'd decided it was high-time to do something about it. All morning, I'd been attacking the seats with a leather colour restorer, very much like shoe polish except it was gloopier, less of a hard wax. Its light chemical-perfume pervaded the air as it dried on both the seating and my hands. I'd forgotten to put protective gloves on, *again*, and the gunk had stained me as happily as it stained the interior of the car.

“Oh, shit. It's on my tee-shirt, too.” My new, white tee, ruined. The black outline cartoon-image of *Futurama's* Dr Zoidberg dressed as that guy from *Breaking Bad*, smeared

with a blue streak running across his tentacled face and pork pie hat. My daughter had bought it for me as a birthday present just a few weeks ago. She was going to be pissed at me. Love her as I do, she can be a pain in the arse when she's got the hump.

“Like I need that,” I muttered.

“Like you need what?”

I turned. Tabatha, had snuck up behind me whilst my head was down in the car. She was fifteen years my junior and, at thirty-three, she carried her years lightly, whereas I was beginning to settle into the comfortable spread of middle age despite her efforts to keep me trim.

I extended my arms, sticky blue hands high above my head then zeroed down to point at the offending stain.

“Oh, that. Boy, you *are* in trouble.” She wagged her finger and smirked, even as she said it.

I lunged at her, playfully making out to smear her yellow, summer top across her boobs, but she stepped back and deftly evaded my clumsy efforts.

“Lucky for you, Rhianna isn't about.” I must have looked quizzically at her. “She's up the road, playing with her friends on their bikes,” she elucidated. “Why don't you strip that shirt off and I'll see if I can get it washed out before she sees it, whilst you finish off here? I've got some of that pink stuff somewhere...”

She gave me a look that said *you wouldn't dare* and then reached out and took hold of the bottom of my shirt, indicating with an upward nod that I should raise my arms again. I allowed her to lift it over my head, my arms stretched high so that she had to reach up to her full extent on tip-toes, pushing her hips and chest forward.

“I’m quite partial to *your* pink stuff...” I sleazed. There were advantages to being off the main road, including a big, secluded private drive down the side of the house, know what I mean?

“Steady, tiger. She’ll be home soon, and I’ve got no time for your hankie-pankie, Roger Malkovich. Besides, you better hurry up and finish the car off, it looks like rain.”

She was right, but I gave her my best puppy-dog eyes anyway and she relented enough to sidle close in as she clutched the obviously ruined shirt protectively to her chest.

“Guess I’d better order another,” I said. “That stuff’s designed not to come out once it’s dry. You’ll never wash it out. Do you know where she got it from?”

“Roger, honestly. Your daughter’s eight.” *Your* daughter, not *our* daughter. Rhianna had never *quite* taken to her new mum, always a *daddy’s girl*. “Who do you think bought it? Might as well go for an extra X as well, this one looks like it was a bit... snug. I’ll get onto Amazon.”

I grunted, not wanting to admit I might be needing an XL rather than my usual L. I planted a kiss on her lips and she responded just enough to get me interested before she unwound herself from my arms and spiralled away, giggling.

“Tease,” I called after her, laughingly, unable to tear my eyes from her playfully exaggerated, gyrating derriere.

I suppose I couldn’t really blame her.

When Tabatha pulled that t-shirt up I could feel my belly drop forward a little until it hung ever so slightly over my belt. Age was catching up on me but she was still in her prime. She’d never had kids to worry about ruining her perfect figure.

And, I ask you, why wouldn’t she stray?

I kind of always thought there was a chance she might, right from day one.

If she'd let herself go, and started spreading, *I'd* be looking for a new model, no question. You'd do the same, right? Why should I expect her to act any different?

How did we come together?

Well, you can laugh, but it was a total cliché: classic secretary snags boss when he's on the rebound. We were working long hours together and I was going through the whole divorce thing with Sandra, my whore-wife at the time, before she unexpectedly took off, not to be seen again.

That's not to say I wasn't grateful for Tab's attention. A celebration dinner after we nailed a particularly large contract quickly turned into a regular event, then bed. When, late one evening, we were caught in the office by the cleaner, *in flagrante delicto*, we both had to leave the business. It wasn't *appropriate*.

To be honest, that couldn't have worked out better if I'd planned it. I'd been a director at McKinnon's Asset & Wealth Management long enough to know where *all* the skeletons were buried. I left with a tidy compromise agreement, enough to ensure I didn't have to worry about work again before my rather generous pension kicked in. And it was quite convenient that Sandra disappeared before she had a chance to take me to the cleaners in a big divorce, no doubt with a hoard of money-grabbing solicitors in tow.

At least with the old cow out the way, it meant Tabs could move in. That was nearly two years ago.

Anyway, despite all my experience with contracts, I'd never quite got around to writing any kind of prenup, not that we were married. What do they call them? A *cohabitation agreement*? I simply hadn't expected it to last long enough for it to matter. I suppose I couldn't believe my luck. She was beautiful, smart and funny. She ran my life for me, like she was still my PA. With *benefits*.

Then, one night in our local pub, just after we'd been caught red-handed in the office, I confided in George, my best pal—he was like the younger brother I'd never had, and he supported me right from the off. I asked him whether I should let her move in and what would my mates think?

“They'd think *lucky bastard*. That's what they'd think,” he'd said, grinning.

“Sure, but what would they *say*? That I was robbing the cradle?” I challenged.

“Honestly, mate,” he replied, “Who gives a fuck what they say *or* think when you've got *her* waiting at home? I'd do her in a moment. Bollocks to 'em.”

I always listened to George; a bit *new-lad*, liked to play the field, but I valued his opinion, especially when I agreed with him. Even with a bit of hindsight, he seemed a bit too keen on Tabatha.

Move forward a year, and I found myself back in the Frog and Calculator, confiding in George again, a few pints worse-for-wear.

“I'm worried mate, it's been nearly twelve-months since she moved in. She must have *rights* by now, hasn't she? Rights to the house, my pension, *the car*... and now, it feels too long to go back and demand an agreement. It wasn't supposed to last even this long.” After all, it was just meant to be a bit of fun, you know?

Ever the pragmatist, George responded. “Do you love her, or is it just lust? Would you care if she upped and left.”

“Sure, I would. And it's love, I guess. Maybe. Oh, I don't know. Lust. Whatever. But, she's going to get bored with this old fart soon enough, isn't she? She's still young...”

“So, marry her. Lock her in.”

“Really? But that gives her even more rights doesn't it? If she's just a gold-digger, I might... *Rhianna* might lose the lot, if I snuff it.”

Besides, Sandra was still missing and the divorce petition hadn't been served because the court couldn't find her, which was a right royal pain in the arse, I can tell you.

"You could still get engaged. Show's intent... without any real commitment. Pending the divorce coming through, or you Ever the pragmatist, George responded. "Do you love her, or is it just lust? Would you care if she upped and left?"

"Sure, I would. And it's love, I guess. Maybe. Oh, I don't know. Lust. Whatever. But, she's going to get bored with this old fart soon enough, isn't she? She's still young..."

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Besides, Sandra was still missing and the divorce petition hadn't been getting bored..."

"Yeah, maybe."

Pause. "There's only one thing you can do..." He left a second, longer pause. Perfect timing is one of George's strong points. "You'll have to kill her. That's all there is to it."

I looked at him incredulously, and then we both burst out laughing before taking another huge gulp of our pints.

"Tracherous, fucking bastard!"

It wasn't more than a month or two after we'd been in the pub that second time, I'd agreed, against my better judgement, to do a spot of consultancy for a friend who was setting up a new business in Manchester. All a bit dodgy, given the non-compete clauses in my exit contract from McKinnon, but it was cash-in-hand and *very* lucrative. Exactly the kind of thing I needed to top up the coffers and keep my hand in the game.

I'd been away for a couple of nights. It had been good to see Andrew. We'd spent the days working hard and the evenings playing harder. On the last day, we'd finished a little quicker than expected, so I caught an earlier train, intending to take the girls out to make up for me being away.

As the taxi swung into the driveway, I could hardly miss the red Porsche parked across my garage. I'd always told him that it wasn't subtle. Not like my Merc. Too noticeable, too *in your face*. The number plate didn't help either: G304 GEP spaced out as G304GE P. Vulgar little shit.

I should have known. Now I look back, I can see all those coy little looks.

What did he say? 'I'd do her in a moment.' Fucker.

I threw a twenty at the driver and told him to keep the change, dragged my case out the car and left it lying in a puddle on the gravel. Fumbling for my keys I ran to the door and stabbed them at the lock, desperate to get the door open. I'd catch the pair of them at it.

As I repeatedly missed the keyhole, I heard feet running up on the other side of the door. Suddenly, the handle lurched down and the door was thrown open. I was ready to defend myself from his inevitable assault when, rather than confronting George, Rhianna threw herself into my arms, her chubby face beaming.

“Daddeeee—you're home early! Uncle George is here. He's going to take me to ballet tonight in his *PORSCHE* because Tabbie's car is 'a piece of old crap and broken... *again*'.” She emphasised the 'again' exactly how Tabatha would have, all exasperation and despair. “Perhaps you should buy Tabbie a nice red sports car so we don't have to rely on Uncle George all the time.”

As she spoke, George emerged from the lounge into the hall, Tabatha trailing him.

“What—” I ejaculated, but George interrupted.

“Sorry, maaate. I popped around to see you, to ask your advice on something. Forgot you weren’t about. Anyway, seems Tabbie’s old Evoke has thrown its toys out the pram, and I was just hanging on to give Rhianna a lift to her class in the *Turbo*.” I’d never noticed before, but he sounds just like Jeremy Clarkson sometimes. Crass twat.

“It’s *much* faster than your old blue thing, daddy.”

“Hmmm... yes, well, it’s much *newer*. And speed isn’t everything...” Besides, the Merc was worth more.

He’d completely wrong-footed me with his little speech. He damn well knew I was off for a few days. “Couldn’t you have just got a taxi?” I stared accusingly at Tabatha.

“Oh, but dear, George offered, and Rhianna was so excited to go out in the Porsche. She’s really a little bit of a speed-freak, I think.” She’s all smiles. Nothing wrong in the world. *Conniving, duplicitous whore*.

“Well, you’re home now, Roger. I can get out of your way—I’m sure you’ll want to *say hello* properly.” George picked up his keys from the consul table in the hall.

“Oh, but Uncle George...” Rhianna wailed.

“Maybe another time, Rhianna. Your dad’s home now... unless he *wants* me to take you?”

Nice. Keep up the pretence. Arsehole.

“No, that’s fine. *Thanks*, George. I’ll take it from here.” I stepped out of his way and let him slip past into the driveway. He climbed into the car and fired it up with the unruliest roar—it was no stealth car designed for clandestine assignments, to be sure.

Before he’d left the drive, I’d closed the door behind me. Tabatha seemed to be craning her beautiful, long neck, to see the last of him off; but maybe I imagined it.

“Right, who wants pizza?” I suggested.

“Pizza, pizza, PIZZA!” Rhianna bounced up and down, grinning like a loon. Pizza had been a no-no since Tabatha came on the scene. She said it was too dangerous for her figure and constant take-aways weren’t doing the child any good, let alone me.

“But Rhianna’s got classes,” Tabatha unsubtly reminded me, as if I didn’t know.

“And your car’s broken, so she can’t get there.”

“There’s always a taxi, or the Merc.”

“You know the Merc’s not a run-around.”

“Pizzzzzaaaaa!” Rhianna yelled, full volume.

“Pizza it is then,” Tabatha capitulated. “Anything for a quiet life.”

That night, with Rhianna in bed, complaining of stomach ache after too much pizza, ice cream and coke, Tabatha and I had our first *really* significant row.

I downed a couple of stiff whiskies whilst I accused her of flirting with George—she *knew* what a player he was, and he’s just that bit younger than me and a bit fitter. No kids hanging about either. Flash car too. Everything she’d want in an *upgrade*. I stopped just short of accusing her of sleeping with him. I guess there was just a corner of my mind that didn’t want to believe it and maybe, just maybe, she hadn’t.

It was like I was talking to Sandra all over again: Tabatha was all denials and recriminations—demanding to know what I’d been doing in Manchester with Andrew. She knew full-well what a muff-hound the old bugger was, from when she was my PA. He’d even tried it on with her once or twice—although she always insisted: *unsuccessfully*. She actually managed to name two of the clubs we’d gone back to visit for old time’s sake, from old expense claims she’d processed. Both notorious strip joints. And when I say strip joints, I mean knocking shops.

Then it was drink-fuelled anger from me and tears from her as she stormed off to bed in the spare room whilst I finished the bottle.

The next morning, when I walked bleary eyed into the kitchen, it was to find a note propped up against the teapot:

Roger,

I can't take any more of your jealousy bullshit. Every time someone even passes me a compliment, you get all aggressive and throw your weight around. Yesterday, with George, was the last straw. He's your best friend, for God's sake. Give Rihanna my love, I shall miss her.

Tabatha

A single star shaped splash had made a pale blue halo in the ink, highlighting the middle of 'aggressive'.

"What the hell's she going on about?" Given the circumstances, I thought I had behaved like the *perfect* gentleman. Something would have to be done. No one walks out on *me*.

Fortunately, it was Rhianna's turn to get picked up for school by her best friend's mum. I don't think there was any way I should be driving, I was still pissed.

Jasmine, I noticed, had a real *yummy mummy*. You know the type? Legs way up to *here* as she climbed out her brand-new Range Rover Sport, top boob-job (no way *those* were real). I'd heard from Tabatha that her marriage was on the rocks six months ago. Maybe I should've helped her get over the trauma.

Rhianna grimaced at me as she slunk past, her eyes red-rimmed with blubbing. I guess she was still suffering from stuffing her fat, little face the previous night. Jasmine's mum ushered Rhianna into the back seat of the car, scowling at me all the while, before roaring off.

What the hell's got her all riled-up? I thought. But, who can tell with girls, eh? Almost as trying as when they grow up.

With the kid out of the way, I'd intended to spend the rest of the morning finishing off the interior on the Merc, to distract myself from Tabatha's little spat. She'd inevitably repent and find her way back, then there'd be the make-up sex. After that, I planned to tell her she was dumped. But, saddled with the mother of all hangovers, I instead spent the next few hours nursing my head on the sofa, accompanied by some *hair of the dog*, and didn't get to the car until mid-afternoon.

Eventually, I dragged myself out to the garage. It always made me smile to see her sitting there. In the harsh glare of the triple garage's neon strip-lighting, she really shone. But, as I bent to unlock the car door, I noticed the deep gouge in her perfect paintwork. A jagged white line, scored down to the metal, from one end of the car to the other. I followed it as it circumnavigated the boot and continued its journey up the passenger side, across the bonnet, to re-join itself, like the world-serpent biting its own tail.

"Oh, no. No, no, no..." my litany of denial echoed around the garage. I stood there, staring at the ruined bodywork, clenching and unclenching my fists. "No fucking way!"

I threw the driver's door open and inelegantly wedged myself behind the wheel. Maybe it wouldn't look so bad in the sunshine, but, even then, I knew it was a forlorn hope. The original paintwork was destroyed forever.

As my arse hit the seat cushion, I felt an unpleasant squishy sensation, like I'd just sat in a pile of shit. Simultaneously, my foot kicked something hollow and plastic on the

floor. My only thought was to get the car out in the open air, to inspect every inch, in the sunlight. I turned the key, and knocked the car into gear. I put my foot on the gas too hard and my heel slipped on the goo that covered the floor, compressing the accelerator further still. The Mercedes inline-6 roared as I over-revved her, and the car screeched forward.

Too distracted to respond, the car rocketed forward. I desperately hit the brakes, but the near-empty pot of leather treatment had skittered under the pedal, propelled there by my errant foot, and we continued our journey out the garage virtually unabated until we collided with the ancient oak tree on the other side of the drive.

The bonnet crumpled and, unseatbelted, I continued my journey forward, smashing my head against the windscreen.

Vision blurred, I lifted myself off the steering wheel and strained to suck in air—my chest hurt like hell as I sat slumped in the seat. You know how it is? I thought I was having a heart attack, but I was just bruised from the impact on the steering wheel. I lifted my hand to an enormous, throbbing lump on my head. Sticky fingers came away navy-blue, with traces of red on the tips.

Panicking a little, my slippery digits pulled ineffectively at the door handle until it finally sprang open, and I half-fell, half-slithered out of the wreck of my beautiful car, my formally near-perfect pride and joy.

In the sunlight I could see the interior had been liberally coated in great dollops of the navy-blue leather treatment, smooshed in where I'd sat on it and spread it about. But, no amount of dye could camouflage the deep scissor-cuts in the leather.

“Bitch... she's gonna get what she deserves.”

Rhianna was watching me from the end of the driveway where Jasmine's mum had dropped her and driven off without coming in. The kid looked like she was in shock, taking tentative steps towards me, sobbing.

“Oh, daddy. I—”

To my amazement, I didn't fly off the handle at her. “Be quiet and go inside. I'll be back later,” was all I said.

Bawling, she hesitated until I took a step towards her, then she shot past me and disappeared into the house. I could still see her peeking through the letter box, until I stared hard at the eyes looking out. Slowly, the flap descended. She'd got the message.

With Rhianna out the way, I went back into the garage, grabbed a crowbar from the toolbox and used it to pry the front bumper out into a serviceable shape, then threw the metal rod onto the passenger seat. The driver's side front-wheel arch needed a few hearty tugs to get it off the wheel.

I gave her a quick once over, jumped into the driver's seat, turned the engine over and threw her into reverse. With the wheel on full lock the wing still ground on the wheel making one hell of a racket, and the rad was properly knackered, dripping coolant across the drive, but I didn't care. I was off, flying up the road and heading for George's.

George's place had an in-out drive that, if it's possible, was even more impressive than mine; the joy of not having any hangers-on to weigh your bank balance down, I suppose.

I swung into it fast, wheel squealing then gravel flying everywhere as I hit the brakes. Sitting in front of the house, bold as brass, was her bloody Evoke and his *in-your-face* red fucking Turbo.

Before I could think, I was out the Merc, crowbar in hand.

Smash... one new windscreen required.

Smash, smash... two new headlights.

Smash, smash, smash... bonnet dented like he'd hit a deer.

Ha, ha! Bet they're not cheap on a fucking Porsche.

I stood breathless in front of the car, yelling at the house. "Where are the pair of you? Come on, let's have it out, right here and now!"

A few moments passed, pregnant with suspense, before the heavy, oak, front door opened and George emerged. Tabatha cowered behind him. She looked like she'd been crying and clutched a wodge of tissues in her hand. In *his* hands he cradled a double-barrelled shotgun he used for clay shooting. Un-cowed I strode up to them, intent on a confrontation.

"What the fuck, Roger? My car!" he yelled as I approached, the barrel lowering towards me. "You've gone too far this time. You drove Sandra out and now you've done the same with Tabatha. She's distraught and just wants to get away from you."

I couldn't stand any more of his lies. "How dare you... you're supposed to be my best mate. How long have you been fucking her, George? And *you*, why the hell take it out on *my* car? Bitch!"

Tabatha looked back at me blankly, feigning she didn't know what I was talking about. George looked confused. Quite the pair of innocents.

"I've never touched her, Rog. We're mates, I wouldn't do that—"

"Don't lie to me!" I thrust the crowbar at him, angrily waving it about like an extension of an angry, wagging finger. Slick with greasy blue dye, it slipped out of my hand at the end of one particularly forceful gesticulation. It flew towards George, chisel edge first, hitting him square in the eye. He keeled backwards, shotgun raised. His head struck the front step with a resounding crack. Traumatized from the shock of my unintended assault, I

stood motionless. Tabatha screamed and knelt beside him, cradling his broken skull, blood oozing over her hands as his right foot twitched.

Suddenly, George convulsed, finger still on the trigger.

The shotgun fired in a great crack as he gave one final spasm. Tabatha looked down at her stomach, bemused. In disbelief, she dipped her finger into the oozing, charred-edge, crimson hole in her stomach. Blood soaked her white sweater, spread rapidly across her chest. She looked up at me one last time, like I might be able to save her, then collapsed across George's body.

I think I was in shock, standing there, rubbernecking like it was a traffic accident—mute and untouchable. I must have been in shock from witnessing such a horrible accident. Then, it was as though I had been thrown back into my body. My gorge rose and I threw up bile onto the gravel.

“So, that’s my story, doc. The sad tale of how I ended up here, in Broadmoor just under six months ago. Betrayed by the woman I loved and my best friend. The bitch even turned my daughter against me.

“A total miscarriage of justice. I never meant either of them to die. An accident. Still, my trial’s coming up. You’ll support me, eh?”

The interview room is the same cold, blue-grey the SL went in shadow. His cheap suit the same navy as the car’s interior. I can do without the reminder, to be frank.

I *really* miss that car.

“I’m sorry, Roger. I think you misunderstand my role. I’m not here to support you. I’m just here to report my findings to the court. Objectively. And, I find your account of events extraordinary when compared to the evidence.”

“Really? Not sure what you mean.”

“The CCTV at the house clearly shows you swinging the crowbar at Mr Lawrence, killing him with a deliberate, single blow. You then grabbed the gun and shot Miss Osmund point blank in the gut, fatally wounding her, leaving her to bleed out. Then, you completely omit how you returned home and... well, I can barely bring myself to say what you did to your daughter.”

The shrink shakes his head and breathes out heavily, as though freeing himself of an unpleasant image.

“That’s not true. I never touched the gun. Why are you making this stuff up? Jesus, everyone’s against me,” I tell him.

“Then why did the stock have traces of the same blue dye your car was covered in? The same blue dye that, weeks on, still darkens your hands?” He looks down at the table between us.

I unclasp my hands. I hadn’t realised I was wringing them. And he doesn’t need to remind me about the stain. I’d washed them as often as the awful regime in here allowed, but, months after, I still can’t get the discolouration out.

Out damned spot! Out I say!

“I... don’t know. The police must have set me up.”

“Why? Why would they do that, Roger?”

“Who cares? To meet their conviction targets? It was an accident.”

“And, what about your daughter—”

“We were gonna skip the country; but, she wouldn’t come with me. So, I sent her off to be with her mum.”

“You certainly did.”

“There you are then. She might be only eight, but she can tell you what was going on. *If* you can find the pair of them.”

“Roger, the police *did* find her—you *know* that.

“Brutalised, in the pit under *your* garage floor, because she took her frustration and anger out on your car. She was screaming her head off because you left her down there on top of the rotting corpse of her mother; whilst you polished the wreck of your fucking Mercedes parked over the top of them.”

He gets up and walks to the door, banging on it to be allowed out. Before he goes, he turns to face me once more. “Roger... I wouldn’t plan on going out for a drive for a very long time.”

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