

**THE ROCK PRINCESS  
AND  
THE THRILLER WRITER**

**by Matthew Reilly**

They met in a hotel in New York City. She was a hip young rock star from LA—newly discovered and heavily promoted—on a sixteen-city tour of the States selling her new album.

He was also on tour, but it was a wholly different kind of promotional trip.

She went on Letterman.

He did interviews on local cable channels.

She went on Howard Stern.

He did a syndicated late-night radio show—a midnight-till-dawn sit-in.

She had stretch limos to take her around.

He took cabs.

She had an army of publicists and managers and record company execs who insisted on doing everything for her.

He had a chain-smoking in-house publicist from his publishing house.

Her songs were all Rock-the-System, Rage-Against-Capitalism stuff. She wrote them herself. Her image was petite girl-genius: lead guitar, baggy jeans, and big doe eyes.

He was published around the world by a gigantic publishing conglomerate.

She did a lunchtime in-store appearance at the Virgin Megastore on Times Squares. The 3,000-strong crowd flowed out onto the street, causing a traffic jam.

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His in-store gig that day attracted 76 people. His publicist (cigarette in mouth) was absolutely thrilled. ‘Mark, this is awesome! When Grisham did this place the first time, only four people turned up!’

At the Radisson on Lexington, she was in the top-floor Grand Executive Suite.

He was in a room overlooking a back alley.

She was a rock princess.

He was a thriller writer.

They met in the restaurant of the hotel.

It was late. Each had had a long day. Except for the two of them, the restaurant was empty.

He was seated alone in a corner booth, eating a club sandwich with one hand and reading a book with the other, like he always did.

She was also sitting by herself, but not by choice.

She was dressed up, made up: lipstick, eye shadow, blush. The whole catastrophe.

And a catastrophe it surely was.

Her boyfriend hadn’t shown for dinner. He was sold as the classic Serious Young Musician, but in reality he was just another wannabe Kurt Cobain clone. Their relationship—rock princess and Serious Music Dude—was something that he and his army of publicists never failed to exploit.

Her cell phone rang. It was Serious Music Dude. Cancelling. ‘Sorry, babe, but there’s a party on at the Blackwater and Chad says I just *have* to be seen there.’

She hung up, and alone at her table she softly started to cry.

The quiet sobbing made him glance up from his book.

He saw her sitting two tables away, all dressed up, dabbing

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at her eyes with a handkerchief.

‘Excuse me, miss. But are you okay?’

She looked up.

It was obvious from his earnest expression that (a) he had no idea who she was, and (b) his concern was genuine.

And so in that darkened restaurant, they started talking.

Music wasn’t his strong suit.

He didn’t know the Foo Fighters from the Goo Goo Dolls. But he knew what he liked.

And while at first he didn’t know who she was, he’d heard her latest single on the radio. ‘That’s yours? Hey, I like that song. Good fast drumbeat.’

She asked him what other music he listened to.

‘These days, mainly singles. I don’t buy albums much anymore. I just like songs I can tap my toes to—like Robbie Williams’ *Rock DJ*, or anything by Smash Mouth. You know, “*Hey now, you’re a rock star...*”’

In other circumstances, this would have been like telling an anti-globalisation protestor that you adored McDonald’s, but she could see that he was—truly, really, totally unselfconsciously—speaking honestly.

And she liked that.

‘So, do you have an album out?’ he asked.

It was currently No.4 on Billboard.

‘Er, yes.’

‘Cool. I’ll buy it. I always bring my Discman with me when I’m touring and now that I’ve met you in person, I’ll definitely check out your other songs.’

‘Great,’ she said. ‘So what do you do that brings you to New York?’

‘Oh, I write books. I’m here on an author tour. Do the East Coast first, then hopscotch across the country to LA. Then

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back to Australia.’

‘What kind of books?’ He looked kind of young to be a novelist.

‘I write thrillers. Big blockbuster action adventure novels.’

She read a little. Perhaps she’d heard of him. ‘Titles?’ she asked.

‘The first was called *Ice Mission*. It was the one that got me my break. Then *The Curse of the Incan Temple*.’

She shook her head. ‘Sorry. I haven’t heard of them. Besides, they don’t really sound like my kind of book.’

‘It’s okay,’ he said, shrugging. ‘Different people read different books. Some people like romances, others like prize-winners. Different worlds for different tastes. Sometimes inhabitants of one world never even know the other worlds exist.’

She liked the way he talked.

He seemed relaxed, content, happy with who he was. Which was rare in her world. She thought of Serious Music Dude. If he met someone who hadn’t heard of him, he would simply turn away, ending the conversation.

But then suddenly, to her dismay, he said that he had to go. ‘I’m really sorry, but I have to be up early in the morning. Got to catch the 5 a.m. train to Philadelphia.’

She was also heading off the next day. But at the more civilised hour of 10 a.m., flying first-class to Chicago.

He wished her well on her tour and said good night. And then he was gone.

She looked at her watch.

It was 2.30 a.m. They’d been talking for four hours.

The next morning, as she was waiting in the foyer for her people to settle the bill and take her bags to the waiting limo, she overheard one of the desk girls talking to the female

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concierge.

‘I’d heard he was young, but I didn’t know he was so cute,’ the desk girl was saying. ‘That’s the funny thing about authors, you never know what they look like. Anyway, I recognised his name on the computer when he checked out and asked if he was Mark Ridley, the author. He said yes he was, and I said that I was huge fan. Then I just stammered and stuttered and I felt like such a doofus, but he was so sweet. He even had a spare book in his bag and he gave it to me. Signed it and everything. Look!’

What struck the Rock Princess most of all was that this was a *girl* talking. When she’d chatted with Author Guy the previous evening, his novels had sounded like boys’ books, and (she had to admit) she’d dismissed them as stories for Rambo-loving men.

As she headed for the limo, she was joined by one of her back-up singers, a voluptuous sort named Vanessa—all big hips, short skirts and a whole lot of Wonderbra.

‘Did you hear about that writer who was staying here?’ Vanessa said.

‘What about him?’

‘Young honey from Australia. Get this. Seven million books sold around the world, in 15 different languages. Movie version of his first book comes out next summer—he sold it to Paramount for a bomb. Starring Brad Pitt. Just signed a new book deal worth 14 million dollars. They say he’s on tour, too, parallelling us across the country.’ Vanessa adjusted her bra, positioned her breasts for maximum impact. ‘Have to make sure I’m ready in case we bump into that young fella again.’

They headed for the airport.

Separate tours.

Bouncing across the United States.

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For her: a blur of hotel suites, limos at airports and screaming crowds at in-store and studio gigs.

For him: a blur of hotel rooms, departure lounges, airport check-in counters.

In his mind, hotels began to blend into each other. In Cincinnati, he mistakenly went to room 405—he was actually in 715; 405 had been his room number in the previous city.

His bookstore appearances were solid if unspectacular. Fifty people here. One hundred people there. Good showings for a ‘foreign author’ on his first US tour.

For her part, she began to notice something in airport terminals.

In every single one of them, in the newspaper/book kiosks near the gates, she saw his books. Constantly saw his name. Over and over and over. She’d never even noticed them before.

*Different worlds*, she thought.

And strangely, in quiet moments, she found herself thinking about his smile.

Their tours crossed paths again in Dallas. They were staying at the same hotel: the Magnolia.

The thing was, *they* themselves didn’t actually meet.

It was afternoon, and she was out doing a TV interview. He was in the hotel’s library, working on some notes for a new novel.

It was Vanessa who noticed him sitting there.

‘Hi there,’ she said, coming over, eyes predatory, hips deadly. ‘Mind if I join—wait a second. I know you. You’re that author. You’re *Mark Ridley*.’

It wasn’t often that he was recognised. Sometimes people recognised his name on a computer or when he used his credit card, but rarely did anyone spot him just by looking at him.

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It got his attention.

She sat down opposite him and started talking.

At first, Vanessa spoke about him. She'd read his books (this was true: she had bought one at the airport on the way out of New York), and *loved* them, she said. They were so...so manly.

He thought they were simply escapist entertainment.

She gushingly professed her lifelong love of reading (this was not true) and the importance of books on young people's minds (also not true).

He listened politely.

And then she started talking about herself.

About how this back-up stuff was just the beginning, how her first solo recording would soon be produced by somebody named P-Diddy, how the Rock Princess was overestimated, and let's be frank, a little overhyped. So she'd sold three million CDs. It wasn't like she'd sold seven million books. That sort of thing made a *difference*.

In the end, he had to go—to do some newspaper interviews in the hotel foyer. He was courteous to the last, and as he left, he wished her well with her career.

Vanessa asked the desk clerk when he was checking out and tried to catch him when he departed the next morning, but she missed him. He'd left early.

On the plane to San Francisco, he saw Her picture on the cover of *People* magazine.

Serious Musician Dude had been photographed canoodling with a model in a nightclub in LA that week. There was a picture of Her being whisked into a limousine, her eyes clearly tear-stained.

He shook his head. Her world was a strange one.

He hoped she was okay.

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And then, that night, they found themselves at the same hotel again.

This time she found him.

He was sitting in a corner of the restaurant, reading a book, nursing a coffee, when a shadow fell across his table.

He looked up. And an enormous smile spread across his face.

‘Mind if I join you?’ she asked.

‘I bought your CD,’ he said later. ‘It’s, er, different to what I normally listen to. *Very socially aware*. I think I like the current single the best, so I just play it all the time.’

She nodded at that. She did that with her favourite songs, too. ‘I bought one of your books.’

‘And?’

‘I’m halfway through. It’s not Austen, but then again it’s damn hard to put down.’

‘That’s what I like to hear.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were some bigshot world-famous author in New York?’ she asked.

‘I’m not that big. And authors aren’t famous. You’re famous.’

‘But why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Would it have made a difference?’

‘It might have.’

‘Then that’s why I didn’t tell you. It shouldn’t make a difference, but it does make a difference to some people. Like your friend, Vanessa.’

‘Ah, yes, but I’m not like Vanessa.’

‘No. No, you are definitely not like Vanessa.’

There was a pause. He wasn’t sure how to say this.



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‘I read about your boyfriend.’

‘Oh. Yes. That.’

‘He looked to me like a guy who enjoys the parties, not the work.’

‘That’s exactly what he was like. Do you have people like that in the book industry?’

‘Yeah, a few. Especially with the movie stuff. But the way I see it, at the end of even the greatest party, all the guests go home. It’s what’s at home that matters.’

She fell silent, nodding her agreement.

She wanted him to ask her.

He wanted to ask her.

But he wasn’t sure if he should.

Wasn’t sure if their worlds were compatible. Wasn’t sure if a rock princess—with all her hangers-on and magazine articles and meaningful songs—would care for a quiet guy who wrote action thrillers.

He could walk away.

That would be painless. He could never ask. And never know, and maybe never see her again.

Or he could ask...

So he asked her.

To dinner. In Australia. Two weeks from then.

And so a fortnight later, they dined in Port Douglas, Queensland, and they talked and they laughed and two years on, they were still together.

She was still rocking, singing her songs. He was still writing, about action and adventure. Their subject matter never matched, but that didn’t concern them at all. It was what was at home that mattered.

The music and gossip magazines didn’t care for their relationship, because authors occupy a different orbit to rock

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stars and stories about them don't sell magazines.

Which was fine by him and even finer by her.

And so they lived happily ever after.

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