

Lens Flare

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Some people live to help others. Some people live only to help themselves. Then there are those who religiously follow their calling to make everyone else's existence a living hell. Carson Forbes knew his calling a little too well.

He took a taxi to work not because he had to; he could easily afford a car if he wanted one. He firmly believed that such menial tasks as driving were beneath him. Stoplights, pedestrians, traffic laws... there were better things, more important things to pay attention to--like lighting his cigarette. Also, he had to read the morning releases of all the major tabloids.

He started with *The Daily Fire*. The front page boasted the headline, "Tonya Lancaster's Scandalous Past: How She Really Spent Her College Years!" Carson gave the photo editor credit for a nicely done lead photo of a mostly naked woman at a frat party--her head replaced with the actress's for the sake of selling the paper. The picture was slightly blurred so as to hide the obvious edit, but anyone with half a brain and semi-decent eyesight could still have figured out the picture was completely fake. Luckily for the tabloid business, the average person barely possessed enough brainpower to figure out how to use a remote control.

The next tabloid Carson looked at, *The International Informer*, led with a story about Hollywood Couple #87521's "Heartbreaking Split." Sure this had happened over a month ago, but why not milk it for an extra issue or a dozen? It certainly would do no harm, so long as the headline kept selling. *Nothing* ever did *any* harm so long as it kept selling. Next week, Carson would not be surprised to see this tabloid run another story about Princess Diana's death or a similarly recycled event. *The International Informer* was like that lately; when new news actually came, the reporters hardly knew what to do with it anymore.

Last but definitely not least, Carson looked at the tabloid he worked for, *The Comet*. One of his pictures made the front page today. Carson smiled and took in a refreshingly toxic breath of cigarette smoke. The headline read, "Irons Prison Nightmare," and the picture showed a convicted celebrity bruised and beaten on the floor of his cell. The best part of the photo was that no editing marks could be found on it--no edits had been made. Carson may have been the last photographer in Hollywood who never resorted to fraud with his work... even if this meant he had to go to drastic lengths to get the photos he wanted. This prison picture, for example, was 100% real, and all it took to get it were two bribed cops and an inmate willing to make Dusty Irons's bruises look good enough for the camera. This was one of Carson's lighter jobs as of late.

So who's it gonna be today? Carson mused. *I could catch up on the prostitutes' ring and see if there are any opportunities... any celebrities having their fun on the side. Or perhaps the drug ring knows of a scandal. If not, then*

maybe there'll be something interesting on the billboard. His boss, Gerhart, usually left a few backup stories that anyone could use on the billboard in front of a minor editor's office. It was first-come-first-serve with these assignments. Other times, a story would be big enough that only a few of the more experienced reporters would be permitted to cover it. Carson was always among these, and he knew perfectly why: whereas the other tabloids would compromise the story by sending the lowest two-bit hack with a camera, *The Comet* had the best talent cover the best news. To get the other papers to care enough about a story to send talent, one almost had to convince them that such things mattered. In an age with digital photo editing, this all too often was not the case. It mattered to Carson, though--not because editing was dishonest, but because it took away from all the fun of being Paparazzi.

"Here we are," said the cab driver. "That'll be \$19.50."

Carson took a twenty out of his pocket and said, "Change, please."

"What, no tip?"

"Tip: shut the hell up and give me my change. I don't have time for this."

When Carson reached the offices on the twenty-fifth floor, most of the staff had already arrived. Oddly enough, they were not just sitting around in their cubicles and trying to think up interesting headlines this morning. They walked about, talking to each other, as if they had actual work to do. This confused Carson greatly; something was up, and he would soon find out what.

A small crowd gathered around the editor's office to read the stories posted. There were many more assignments than usual. If Carson did not think of something more exciting to do today, at least he would have no shortage of choice here. On closer inspection, though, he realized that each of the posted assignments had a name on it--they were all specifically made for one reporter or a team of two or three. This confused Carson even more. Sure, the lesser journalists had to be told what to do, but most got to pick their assignments by the time they rose above entry level. Even when Gerhart gave Carson a recommendation for a story, it remained that: a recommendation. Today, everyone, including the senior staff, seemed to take their assignments seriously. There had to be an explanation.

On the billboard, there was no story posted specifically for Carson, but there was a small note pinned in the lower left corner of the board. The words read, "Forbes, to my office. --G."

If Gerhart really wanted to be conspicuous about this, he would not have left the note there, but instead, on the door of Carson's office. No, this message was not meant to be hidden compared to the rest of the board; the old man had meant for all the other reporters to see exactly who was getting the special assignment while the rest of them got crap. Carson smiled and left the note where it was as he turned toward the boss's office.

Editor-in-chief, Walter Gerhart, kept his own office as far away as possible from those of the lesser editors. Furthermore, although the billboard was by the lesser editors' doors, Carson knew there was really only one authority figure who mattered around here, and as such, only one person responsible for the assignments. Carson could not even remember the other editors' names--not that it made any difference.

Past the cubicles, across the hall, up three flights via the elevator, down another hall, and to the left... Carson opened the door without knocking or asking permission from the secretary. She did not seem to object, anyway.

"Glad you could make it," said the old man from behind his desk. "You realize you're late."

Gerhart's office reflected his personality well: dusty, old, dark, but perfectly organized, with an emphasis on practical function at the cost of utter disregard for aesthetics. Bookshelves lined both walls; the journals on them had not been touched for years, and their pages cracked and yellowed even with closed covers. Yet, the issues were perfectly sorted by date, and not a single one was missing. On the far wall, two windows loomed over the whole room, their shades drawn shut but their presence enormous nonetheless. There were only two lights in the room: an insufficient fluorescent light overhead, and a simple desk lamp next to the computer. The desk itself was huge, as it spanned half the office's width. More importantly, the desk was pulled up so that most of the large office lay behind it. The point of this was to make anyone on the near side of the room feel small and cramped and intimidated. Carson did not mind it so much, though. He walked right past the desk and made Gerhart turn around in his swivel chair to talk with him.

"So what's the deal?" Carson asked.

"Got a job for you. Quite possibly something we can milk for months if you can pull it off."

"Go on." Carson looked with feigned interest at the bookshelves. He knew the old man did not like it when people looked him in the eyes during conversation.

"Jenna Pierce is getting married. You heard her engagement announcement last week, right?"

"Had no idea and don't care. Send someone to take wedding photos. That doesn't sound so hard."

"But there's no groom, Forbes."

"Yeah, that could be a problem."

"I'm serious. She showed off the engagement ring, but she's not telling anyone who she's engaged to. Family aren't talking, friends claim to know nothing, and she'll probably insist on a secret wedding."

Carson lit another cigarette and said, "Why would she announce an engagement to the press if she wants to be secretive about it?"

"Good question!" Gerhart said. "I want you to find out. Get me everything you can on this. You may have to follow her for a while. If I had to bet, I'd say she's trying some publicity stunt to get the better of us, and she wants to rub it in our faces that she can pull off a wedding without us knowing anything. She's cocky enough to try it. I'm hoping you can do some quality journalism and put the bitch in her place. What say you?"

"Now you're speaking my language." Carson grinned. "But don't we already have someone covering Jenna?"

"Only a photographer covering her major events. His name is Riley, and he's useless except when it comes to adjusting the lens. We need someone with actual investigative ability on this one. Someone who's underhanded enough to

get the dirt and come out clean. And you're just the scumbag for the job."

"No one's scummier." The grin grew wider. Carson had always been a sucker for flattery.

"This will easily be your biggest assignment since last year's Oscars. If you succeed, you'll receive three times your normal pay, plus bonuses for every wedding photo you can get. Double the total amount if we're the only paper to get the story."

"Wow, you really want this, don't you?"

"I do," said Gerhart. "It's more than that, though. I get the feeling up 'til now you've never really had a chance to show your true skill. The 'major' assignments you've done have been, I suspect, some of the most boring for you. You didn't really like working those Oscars, did you? All you did was sit in a camera pit and hope someone would trip on stage so you'd have a story."

"The tripwire worked, you know."

"Haha, yeah... And I gave you a bonus for that, right?"

"Still waiting for it."

"No joke! Well, here's your chance to earn it, and a lot more. Let's see what you've got. You start immediately. Pierce is finishing a concert tour in London today. She comes home to her Beverly Hills mansion tomorrow. She'll travel via private jet and limousine only. Her plans after that are unclear.

"Find out where and when the wedding is. It'll have to happen soon. I don't know if you'll want Riley's help or not. If you don't need him, I've got other stars he can follow."

"Guess I'll know when I meet him." A lie. No way in hell Carson would not work alone. "Is that all?"

"Keep in touch. This will take several days at the very least, and I don't want you disappearing on me. Give me progress reports daily."

Carson's voice imitated that of a spoiled child sent to bed. "Yes, sir."

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Only a few reporters showed up at the airport to take pictures of Jenna Pierce coming off the plane. They kept a respectful distance, not for Jenna's sake, but because of the bodyguards by the limo and barbed wire fence between this car and the cameras.

Riley was late in arriving, but he would not miss the show. He received a message through voicemail that he would no longer be assigned to Jenna after that day. This message reached him while he drove to LAX that morning.

Riley wondered what he had done wrong; he knew his photos were of standard if not good quality, and he loved his job very much. He returned home a day early from London as per Gerhart's instructions and spent the night fighting off jet lag at his apartment. The airport photos, he now knew, would be his last chance probably for a while to get Jenna on film, so he decided he had better make the most of it. He held his favorite camera and waited with the other reporters at the fence.

The airplane came on time, which was better than Riley could say for most of his personal experiences in air travel. Reporters usually had the worst of luck.

Well, at least Riley's last day on the current job would be a good one...

Meanwhile, Carson watched the small mob of reporters and had to use all of his self control not to laugh or gloat over them. He looked to his right, where two of Pierce's bodyguards stood. They were saying something to each other in a serious and almost paranoid tone of voice, so Carson would have to remain serious himself if he wanted to fit in.

"Could happen to anybody," said the bodyguard known as Rick.

"Huh," said the other, whose name Carson had not yet learned. "Well, how long's he gonna be in the hospital for? A week? Two?"

"For food poisoning? Oh, he could get out in a day," said Carson. "I shouldn't have to fill in for long." Just long enough.

The bodyguards did not have to go to Jenna's private plane when she exited it; she already had enough of an entourage as it was. Carson scanned them thoroughly. Among her traveling cohorts were four more bodyguards, all four other members of her band, at least five stage crewmembers, and--worst of all--a person so close to her and so much a sycophant, he could only be her agent.

The first words Carson could hear Jenna say were, "And tell that man he can bite me." Evidently Carson had missed out on the first half of a conversation he frankly would not have minded being in on. Celebrity anger was great for film... But now was not the time for pictures.

"Absolutely," said her agent. Carson had done his homework; this man's name was Palmer. First name did not matter. "I will tell him personally that you are upset."

"Upset!" Jenna yelled. "That man portrayed women horribly in that book! How am I supposed to count that as my autobiography, hm?"

"A very good question." They were almost to the bottom of the stairs leading out of the airplane. "You are completely right as always."

"When I say I want to write an autobiography, I don't want to make all women look like man-hating, feminist, anger-filled freaks! I mean, look at me! I NEVER GET ANGRY! Ooh, it's stuff like this that makes me so angry sometimes."

"I... couldn't agree more."

They reached the limousine. Jenna calmed down instantly and said, "Hi, Rick. Hi, Phil. Hi... Whoever you are. Hey, where's Alfonso?"

"Al's sick today, Miss Pierce," said Carson as he tipped his chauffeur cap in greeting. "My name is Lloyd, and I'll be filling in for him today."

"Whatever. Just drive me home. And could you do me a favor and *not* drive straight into the Paparazzi, unless you plan on doing it at eighty miles per hour?"

Carson smiled. "As you wish, Miss."

Airport security guards opened the gate to let the limo through. They did their best to keep the press out, but of course this was only partially successful. The only thing that made the cameras move out of the way in the end was the roar of the limousine's engine. Jenna's entourage, except for a few bodyguards and Carson, went in separate vans behind the limo.

Jenna screamed when Carson slammed on the gas and broke out of the gate at an alarming speed for the vehicle's size. Carson, in the back of his mind, hoped he might actually hit one or two of the cameramen from competing

tabloids, but no such luck. Everyone dove out of the way in the nick of time. Oh well, at least they hit the asphalt pretty hard.

Carson slowed down when they reached the freeway. He had to. Traffic never went quickly there. An accident up the road meant that if there had been any reporters still following them, those people could have *walked* and still kept up with the limo and vans.

In due time, though, Carson brought Jenna home to her Beverly Hills mansion. The singer thanked her guest chauffeur for the fun and asked how long he would be replacing Alfonso.

“As long as he’s in the hospital, Miss,” said Carson. “He should probably be fine by tomorrow.”

“Oh, screw that. He’s fired. You’re hired. Park this thing in the garage and make whatever arrangements you need to stay here.”

Later, in the mansion’s large garage, Carson surveyed the limo. There were all sorts of marks from where he had gone over curbs, but other than that, he could not see too much damage--not bad for someone who had never driven a limousine in his life and actually had not driven anything in over a year. Also, Jenna had been distracted for most of the ride because she was talking on her cell phone and did not notice the curbs any more than the potholes on the road.

Palmer, who did not ride in the limo, went from the airport to his office to file away some things from the concert tour. Carson was glad to have that man out of the way. Nobody could steal a celebrity’s attention from the cameras like an agent. Sure, they were weasels and shameless brown-nosers, but they usually knew damn well what they were doing and how to keep their celebrity from embarrassment on film. No reporter would ever consider this a good thing. In Carson’s case particularly, if this wedding turned out to be as private as the singer hoped, and if in the end Carson failed, it would be because of Palmer, no doubt. All the better Palmer did not know who Carson really was. Secrecy, as usual, was his best hope for success. Only the very heavily bribed could be trusted with his identity, and sometimes not even then. So far Carson had not bribed anyone; good pickpocketing skills last night, plus some salmonella poisoning in Alfonso’s restaurant dinner, were all it took to get the limo and keys. For a uniform, Carson bought his own hat and used an old black suit from his closet.

Carson noticed he was starting to shake, so he pulled out a cigarette to calm his nerves. So what if it was unhealthy? In Hollywood, there was only one rule: if it felt good and was not crack or heroin, nobody could blame you for doing it. Once he had relaxed a bit, he assessed the situation. He had infiltrated Jenna’s servant ranks; that was step one. He still did not know where the wedding would be or when, and he had not begun any real investigation. The reason he wanted to get inside, if even for one day, was simply because only those closest to Jenna would have been informed of the wedding plans. Perhaps relatives had been invited, but they would be too respectful of Jenna’s wishes to give away any decent information unless for a steeper price than Carson was willing to pay. Servants, on the other hand, as well as the closest sycophants like Palmer, had to know. No way Jenna would have her wedding without letting her agent plan it. And servants always knew more than their masters thought was revealed to them. At the very least, Carson could learn pretty quickly who the groom was. That

would be something worth sending Gerhart.

Carson had not planned on being hired as a chauffeur permanently, but then, he was not about to complain. With this good an identity, he might be able to secure a wedding invitation... He considered all this, along with possible scenarios, for a full hour while he chain-smoked. Then he realized he was putting the cart before the horse and decided to call Gerhart on his cell phone. Carson then briefed his editor-in-chief on the surprisingly good news.

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Gerhart received the call at 3:00pm. His smile grew so wide, it looked as if it would burst through the sides of his face. This could not have come with better timing. Riley was in the office now, and he was demanding to know why he had been taken off his assignment.

Gerhart put down the phone and said, "Alright, now... Where were we?"

"My last photos of Jenna."

"Ah, yes." The pictures had just been developed. "They look good. I like how you were able to get her full face in most of them."

"So why are you replacing me?"

"Oh, I'm just shuffling things around a bit. We do that from time to time. It's really just that we like to give people new assignments and let them give us some variety on the shots we get. Your style, for example, is very distinctive. I think it would be most useful in tracking any number of celebrities. And yet you've only done Jenna Pierce since you got here--what was that, two years ago? It's time for you to tread new water. Eventually, I'll take you off that person too, and then you'll have someone else to follow. This is quite common, I assure you, and it's not meant to be punishment. Think of it as a new beginning in your career."

Riley slouched back in the chair across from Gerhart. Gerhart could not figure out why the young cameraman would look so upset. It was only a routine assignment change, which would not affect the man's status or pay. Why should he be sad?

"So who do I follow now?" Riley asked.

"I'm going to put you on Derek Mahler."

Riley looked as though the world were coming to an end. "Derek Mahler? But the man's fifty and ugly and--" He seemed to check himself for some reason. "--And he won't show up well on camera."

"Nonsense," said Gerhart. "He's been an actor for three decades. He shows up great on film. So time has not been kind to him and he's had some botched plastic surgery. Good! Try to exploit that. Sometimes that type of thing makes for a great story. We ran stuff on him for a good three weeks last year after the last attempt a doctor made at fixing his chin."

Riley shuddered.

"Tell you what, Riley. Do this assignment for me for three months, and if you don't like working that job anymore, I'll assign you to someone else. Deal?"

"I guess."

"You look tired... Must be all that jet lag from traveling. Go ahead and take

the rest of the day off. Start following Mahler tomorrow. I think he's going to announce something about his latest movie..."

Marty Riley went home in his dirty old Corolla. He had a townhouse on the outskirts of Los Angeles. The building was in total disrepair, and it was not a good neighborhood by any standard measure, but at least he owned his own home. It may not have been much, but it was his.

He had always been the type of person to be known only by surname; he never had enough friends growing up, and not even his mother called him 'Marty' after his thirteenth birthday. Now she would say, 'Sweetheart' or the like, which was really only an excuse so she would not have to call him 'Riley' herself. Now that he was finally living on his own, the only companion Riley had was a four-year-old gray cat named Jenna.

Riley parked his car on the street, stepped out, and locked the doors. It was unlikely anyone would try to steal the car or anything inside it, but one could never be too careful. He unlocked the front door to his townhouse and walked in. Aside from the kitchen and bathrooms, the only places important to Riley were his bedroom and the living room. He used the bedroom for pretty much everything, even as a home office. The living room was always his first stop after coming home, though. There a broken recliner faced a small projection television in the corner, while the rest of the room contained only a bookshelf and, across from that, a fireplace. The bookshelf contained no books; only photographs Riley had taken, framed. Every single one of these photographs showed only one person: Jenna Pierce. Other larger Jenna pictures and posters, some of which were his work and some of which were not, hung on the walls of the room. The largest of these hung over the fireplace.

Riley threw his sport coat and tie on the chair, and then he walked over to this fireplace. He used one of the matches sitting on the mantle to light some candles and complete the shrine.

His cat wandered into the room and meowed. Riley turned away from the shrine and said, "I forgot to feed you, didn't I? Here, Jenna. I'll get you something."

He walked into the kitchen and picked the cat's bowl up from the floor. He said, "It's been a rough day, Jenna."

Riley filled the bowl before continuing; he always had a problem doing two things at once. "You don't know how hard I've worked, how hard I've slaved for that woman... how many places I've been, long nights spent, rolls of film used to the last picture..."

He laid the bowl before the cat. Then he walked back into the living room to gaze at the shrine--or, more accurately, the pinup poster above the mantle--but he kept talking to Jenna.

"I remember the first time I saw her... like it was yesterday. A ten-years-ago yesterday. I remember the concert... It was like she sang only for me, beckoned me with succulent lips to come to her and take her away so we could discover paradise together..."

"Then, two years ago when I finally got legal permission to get within fifty feet of her again, when the paper put me on the job of capturing her--on camera

this time--oh, Jenna, I was on Cloud Nine... No, Cloud Nine Thousand!”

His voice devolved to a whisper, but a strong one between deep breaths. “Two years, two blessed, blessed years, I strove to examine every inch of that body, every one of the infinite curves on that skin.”

He closed his eyes and rubbed his hands over his chest. “Ooh, and you taunted me, didn’t you, Jenna? Oh yes. Yes. You would make love to the camera every time you took the stage. You would *twist* and *dance*, and you would *sing*. Oh, would you sing! Even in these still photographs, that body sings to me now. Jenna...”

The cat, uninterested, kept eating in silence. It was used to this type of behavior from its master.

“I was living my dream!” Riley yelled suddenly. “And now they take it away, right after she announced to the world that she was getting married. I could have been a cameraman covering her on the happiest day of her life! But no... *Gerhart*, that old scrooge, took me off the job to put someone else in... And whoever he is, he probably won’t appreciate Jenna... won’t worship Jenna for all Jenna is. No. He will only take pictures as if they mean nothing, as if she were nothing more than just another untalented teeny bop singer whose music the industry shoves down people’s throats on mass radio.

“Oh, Jenna, I know you better, though. I’ve seen the way your lips quiver every time you sing...” His breathing quickened. “...I’ve watched your breasts heave as you draw more air for the high notes...” He closed his eyes. “I can’t let them take you away from me, Jenna. I mustn’t!”

With this, he ran upstairs to his bedroom and grabbed from the closet a warmer sport coat than he had worn to work that day. January had been mild this year, but it could still be cold in the evenings, and it might be late by the time he got home again.

He had to get back to the office. He had to find out who had taken his assignment. He had to beg for a trade. He had to do *something*.

When Riley arrived back at *The Comet’s* offices, Gerhart was too busy talking with others and did not have any more openings in his schedule for the rest of the day. Also, none of the other reporters or cameramen knew who had taken the Pierce job. Everybody had been reassigned, though, according to notices on the board outside the lesser editors’ offices. Riley could look on that board and see if anyone there was assigned to Jenna. When he discovered this, he immediately went to look.

There were at least fifty notices, but nothing had Jenna’s name anywhere on it. In the lower left corner was a message for Forbes to see Gerhart in his office, but that could have been for any number of reasons not having to do with Jenna. Thus discouraged, Riley went across the hall to his own cubicle so he could think things over. His pictures, the ones he took at the airport a few hours ago, were waiting on his desk. All the photographs there--as well as the hundreds that adorned the cubicle walls--contained Jenna in them somewhere. Today’s shots were, as Gerhart had rightly said, pretty good as pictures came. Riley captured her face several times, and it was always perfectly centered. Riley would not have it any other way. Some of the pictures were close-ups, and some showed a wider

view with other people in them.

Riley envied those people, all of the ones in these pictures, who got to travel with Jenna. The bodyguards looked so smug... the agent so insincere, the band tired and for some reason not even talking to Jenna after they left the plane. Jenna was not smiling, but Riley still viewed her as the most attractive personality there. In fact, in all the pictures, the only person who seemed happy was the chauffeur. Riley had a picture of the man tipping his cap to Jenna. Riley remembered that this man had almost run over him with the limousine.

Then Riley thought for a second... That chauffeur looked very familiar... Where had Riley seen him before? Certainly not as chauffeur...

Wait, he thought. Isn't this man a reporter? One of the big shots around here who has an office instead of a cubicle? Yeah, he looks just like that man-- what's his name... Forbes...

It took fifteen seconds for Riley to figure out what was going on.

"He's going to secure a spot at the wedding," Riley said out loud. No. This could not be. "But if he can get in, then surely I..."

A hundred thoughts flooded his mind at once. He simply had to be there. He had to witness this wedding, even if she were marrying someone other than Riley himself. Oh, or better yet, maybe he could charge the altar when the preacher said, "If there is anyone here who can say why this couple should not be joined in holy matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace..."

Even as he imagined that scene, though, he knew it could never happen. She was too good for him, and he would have to be satisfied with being happy for her. He could do that if he had to. Besides, by keeping his cool at her wedding, he could prove to her that he was not a total basket case. He wanted her to know that he had changed since the last time...

I must get to Forbes, he thought. He can get me into the wedding. He's got to know how. He looked to the side of his computer monitor, where one of his favorite Jenna portraits rested in a cheap plastic frame. Don't worry, Jenna, he mouthed, afraid someone might overhear him in his cubicle if he spoke out loud. Daddy's coming for you, baby. Daddy's gonna be there on your big day. And he's not gonna let you down.

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Carson took a taxi home that night. Even in a limo, he could not stand driving. He told Jenna that he needed to bring a few things from his current home so that he could move into the servants' quarters at the mansion. She understood and would not need him tonight, anyway. He brought some extra rolls of film and his box of cigarettes. On his cab ride back to the mansion, he thought about who he would ask about the wedding. Asking servants could be useful, but if he asked too many, it might blow his cover simply by gaining him too much attention.

After considering, he settled on the following plan: first he would ask a servant--an incompetent one who would not be able to spot him as a reporter. The question would be simple and casual, in the context of some larger conversation, in which Carson would not ask too many questions. If that did not

work for any reason, Carson would ask Jenna herself sometime. Again, it would be casual, no pressure. The only problem with this part of the plan was that in order to carry it out, he would need the right moment, alone, with Jenna Pierce. That might not be easy.

One step at a time, he reminded himself. *One step at a time*.

Then he decided on which questions to ask, and in what order. If at all possible, he would want to keep his list to only a few simple questions as opposed to lots of lengthy ones. First, he could ask the servant whether or not all of Jenna's servants were invited to the wedding. If the answer would be yes, then there would be no need for further inquiry. In the likely case that things would not be so simple, this was at least a decent starting point from which he could improvise the rest of the way. If he could have the opportunity to speak with Jenna on the subject, he could ease his way into the conversation and bring up, in order: the wedding (where and when), the guests (who), and any other secrets (if he could get that far)...

"You got a friend there?"

Carson, confused, met the taxi driver's gaze in the rear-view mirror.

"What?"

The driver explained, "Car behind us has been following all the way from your street. That someone you know?"

Carson looked through the back window and saw a grungy gray 80's Corolla. It was difficult to see more than that now that the sun had gone down, but thanks to street and car lights, he could somewhat see the driver's face behind the cracked windshield. This driver looked somewhat familiar, though Carson could not say why it would... especially considering that he was sure he had never seen the car before in his life.

"I have no idea who that is..." Carson squinted and tried to get a better view by shutting out some of the headlight glare, but this did not work very well, so he gave up and turned his head forward again. "Pull over for a second and let's see what he does."

The cab driver smiled and obeyed--smiled because his fare meter was running by time and not distance right now. They were on the freeway, so there was no logical reason why anyone would pull over except for a flat. Yet the Corolla pulled over when they did. Carson looked briefly at his watch. 7:51pm.

"I'm going to talk with him. Be right back," said Carson.

The man in the Corolla stepped out at the same moment Carson did. The man was unarmed (which in press terms meant that he had no camera), so if Carson's cover had been blown, at least it was not a competing newspaper that had discovered him. Carson looked him over in the street lamp's beam and decided this person was harmless. People who were not harmless usually had better, more discrete methods of following the press and would not walk up to a reporter this willingly. Also, they tended to drive better cars (assuming they drove themselves at all), and they did not tend to wear sport coats with such high polyester content that they shimmered even at night.

They also did not tend to start the conversation. But this man did.

"Hi, Mr. Forbes? Carson?"

Carson put his hands on his hips and did not answer. He was undercover

and would not fall for any cheap tricks.

“Hi, yeah. You might not know me, but I don’t know if Gerhart told you anything about me. I’m Riley; I was covering Jenna Pierce before you took over this morning.”

Carson remembered the name but not much else. At least this explained why the man looked familiar; Carson had probably seen him quite a few times around the office and cubicle area and just had not noticed him. If Gerhart’s description could be trusted, and Carson now believed it could, then that would explain the man’s incompetence in following.

Riley seemed confused at the lack of response from Carson, who in turn grew more and more amused with each passing second. Riley continued, “Yeah... I was placed on a new assignment, but I kinda wanted to complete my old one first. That and I think I could help you on this one if you want me to. I mean, I’ve been covering her for two years; you could probably use that experience on such a major assignment.”

Carson thought he was beginning to see Riley’s motive: the kid wanted to get a big story for once, because it would be good for his career. Carson could not blame him if that was true, since all novice reporters dreamed of getting their “big break,” so to speak. Still, it was clear Riley had a lot to learn if he ever wanted to get that far.

Carson broke his silence. “Tell ya what, man. You can drive me over to her place, and we’ll talk along the way.”

Riley’s entire body relaxed in an instant.

“Just let me pay the cab here, and I’ll be right back.”

Riley nodded, got back in his car, and waited. Carson may have been a jerk, but he always remembered to pay the taxi drivers--even if he refused to tip them. Refusing to tip was one thing, but Carson relied too much on the taxi service to risk not paying entirely. There was simply too great a chance Carson would see the same driver in the future and might be denied a ride because of it.

When Carson entered Riley’s car, the first thing he noticed was the smell. “Oof. It’s like some kind of perfume in here,” he said.

“Oh yeah, that,” said Riley. “Last May, they came out with this new line of Jenna Brand Beauty Products. All the reporters got free samples. Mine spilled, and the car’s been like this ever since. Sorry.”

Carson doubted this story for some reason... perhaps because some of the smell came from Riley himself. Not that Riley would admit it. When they started traveling on the freeway again, Carson looked through the glove compartment without asking permission. Yep, perfume bottle was still there, half full, sitting atop five CDs: all of Jenna’s albums to date. As far as Carson could tell, there were no other albums in the car. Riley noticed that Carson was looking through his things, but he made no objection. Instead, he picked up from where their conversation had left off.

“Okay,” said Riley. “I’m not going to lie to you. I really liked working with the Paparazzi following Jenna. And now Gerhart wants me to follow Derek Mahler instead, and I don’t like that one bit. Look, I know this is your assignment, and I know that since you’re working undercover and all, you may not want my help. But I thought I might as well offer it, since I have nothing

better to do, and you might be able to put my knowledge to use. I mean, I'm sure I know something that could come in handy..."

"Take this exit up ahead." Riley took it. Other than street directions, Carson said nothing for the entire trip. Riley went on about how many little things he knew about Jenna: her favorite restaurants, cuisines, jewelry, etc.

When they arrived in front of the gate to Jenna's driveway, Carson said, "Damn, man. It's almost like you *are* her. Next thing you're going to tell me is her shower routine."

Riley actually considered this for a moment and had to stop himself. "That's not the point," he said.

"Look," said Carson. "They're not going to let you in here, so you may as well drop me off. I appreciate that you want to help, and I see you have... uh... extensive knowledge of the subject matter here, but I really don't see how it's going to be possible for us to work together."

He stepped out of the car and said, "Have fun covering Mahler. Hey, if he goes into surgery again, you could get some pretty good stories that way.

"Anyway, thanks for the ride."

With that, Carson left for the gate. He smirked at having gotten a free cab ride from Riley, but other than that, he did not think much of the exchange. He certainly did not feel sorry for Riley...

He's young, Carson thought. Give him time, and he'll get over it.

Riley, however, did not know how he would ever recover. He drove home on the verge of tears. He played his favorite Jenna tracks on the CD player and tried to sing along, but that only made him sadder.

--

Riley's mood had not improved much by the next day, when he had to start covering Mahler. Riley stood with the other tabloids' cameramen outside the old man's mansion. The actor was supposed to make an announcement today about his next movie, a horror film about people who were able to possess others and contort their faces.

It was unclear as of yet whether Mahler would play the villain, the hero, or the entire cast, for that matter.

Some servants came out onto the lawn, where all the press members waited. Once a podium and red carpet had been laid out, Mahler came out of his mansion. Almost all the reporters cringed at the sight of him, and the few pictures taken were only the bare minimum of what would be needed to run the story later on.

Riley tried to take his usual quality photos, but everything about the job seemed awkward to him. For example, he could not say his trademark phrases now, like, "Yes, that's it, make love to the camera!" or, "Dance for me baby. Dance for me."

It was way too weird that he could not say that while taking photographs.

Mahler took his place at the podium and smiled, for all the world looking like a very ugly king addressing a crowd of well-wishing peasants. He acted like that, too. With youth and good looks gone, Riley reflected, ego was the one thing

this man had left--well, that and millions upon millions of dollars, of course.

“Thank you, thank you all for that warm welcome,” said Mahler, his grin so wide that his cheeks rose and hid his eyes from view for a second. “I am here today to unveil my latest movie, set to come out this summer. It is called, *Rage of the Face Changers*. It will star me in the lead role, so in answer to the question that I know is on all your minds, *yes*, you have good reason to be excited.” Mahler stopped and laughed. “Oh, go ahead, take your pictures!” he said. “Don’t be shy. I know the drill:

“I have to make love to the cameras!”

The first thought across Riley’s mind: *Oh. Dear. God. NO!* But it could not be stopped. The fifty-eight-year-old actor pouted his lips and winked several times while blowing kisses.

Next to Riley, one cameraman seemed to love it. He took several pictures and said as he took them, “Oh yes, baby, that’s it. Dance for me!”

Riley stopped taking pictures for a moment just so he could look at this reporter and say, “What the hell is wrong with you, you sick freak?”

Unfortunately, the conference went on for another half hour while Mahler detailed his trials and triumphs in his role as hero of this movie. When it was finally over, Riley went back to his car and breathed a sigh of relief. He opened his glove compartment, sprayed a little perfume on himself, and took out the five Jenna albums, in order: *Jenna Pierce*, *This Baby Got Back*, *More Back And Some Front This Time*, *Art Of Lust*, and *Yes, I Really Am That Slutty. Got A Problem With That?*

Riley put the last one into his CD player and shook his head.

“I’ve got to get you back, Jenna,” he said. “Carson Forbes is going to pay for taking you away from me...”

At this declaration, Riley sped off with all the determination a beat-up old Corolla could muster. Sure it may not have been impressive, but it was the thought that counted.

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Back at Jenna’s mansion, Carson found his task easier than he ever dreamed it to be. The first servant he asked, a gardener, knew that the wedding would be in only two days, and that all the servants would be flown out of the country to witness the event. Jenna’s reasoning for this plan was simple: she wanted a private wedding, and servants were the most likely leaks to the press, so all servants would have to be treated as family and kept under her watch at all times.

The gardener added that because the wedding was so secret, Carson should not utter a word of this to anyone who did not work for Jenna, especially not the press. Carson said he understood perfectly and promised he would tell no one.

Carson then asked if the gardener knew where the wedding would take place. The man shrugged and said, “You’ll probably be the first to know. All I know is, we’re headed to somewhere outside the USA. Last week we got a warning

that we should be prepared to pack our bags. She won't tell any of us where we're going, though. It's the strangest thing... She might not even tell anyone until you have to drive her there. Then I guess you'll be the first to know."

Carson wondered out loud, "But if we're going out of the country, then how will I drive? I don't have an international license."

"Got me there," said the servant. "You might as well ask her yourself, then."

Carson got a chance to do just that later that evening, when Jenna called for the limo to take her to a dinner party. Carson kept himself to only two questions during their conversation: was it true that they were flying out of the country for the wedding, and would he not need an international driver's license if he were to take her to the event? The answers: yes, and he was a guest who would not have to drive. Her old driver, Alfonso, had an international license and would do the escort job as his final assignment before she fired him for good--she had not yet told him for this very reason.

Furthermore, Jenna assured Carson that her agent was making all the necessary arrangements, and there was no need to worry. Carson then changed the subject to the dinner that night, but this apparently reminded Jenna that she did not have to converse with the likes of servants, so she ended their talk there.

When they had arrived at the destination (another typical Hollywood mansion), Carson reclined in his seat to think things over--and in so doing, he forgot that protocol required him to open Jenna's door for her. She reminded him with a cough, and he got up at once. Later when he did have time to think, he did so outside the limo as he leaned against it and smoked a cigarette.

Not five minutes had passed before someone approached the parked car from behind.

"Hi." The voice was young but not childish. The tone seemed almost nervous. Almost.

"You talking to me?" Carson turned around and saw a short, skinny man in his early twenties, dressed in a shabby brown suit. He did not have a hat with the word "PRESS" written on it, but he did have a notepad out, and his pen was ready to write.

"Hi," he said again. "I'm from *The International Informer*. I was wondering if you'd care to answer a few questions regarding your mistress, Jenna Pierce?"

Carson was caught slightly off guard. "Uh, we're not supposed to talk to the press," he said.

The reporter took out a \$100 bill and slipped it to Carson. "You sure about that, sir? Because my questions aren't all that nosy, as press inquiries go. I just want to learn a few simple, harmless things, is all..."

Carson eyed the bill in his hands and said, "Well..."

"What I want to know is, do you know when and where Jenna's wedding is going to be?"

Carson almost laughed, but he stopped short and said, "Let's see... Now, I do remember hearing something about that, but my mind seems a bit hazy on the subject..."

Another \$100 bill. "Remember now?"

“Hm... Yeah, I think I do. It’s going to be on Valentine’s Day... and it’s in Jenna’s hometown, back in Missouri somewhere. Small church, I forget the name. She wants it to be really quaint and private, you know.”

The man took his notes rapidly and said, “Two more questions, then.”

“Hm?”

“Do you know, if she wanted this to be ‘quaint,’ why she would announce her engagement to the press? And second, do you know who the groom will be?”

Carson bit his tongue. He too had wanted to ask those things... “No idea... But my instinct says it’s a publicity stunt. Don’t know what kind. But she’s done stunts before. And no, I don’t know who the groom is. No one does.”

“Fair enough,” said the reporter, grabbing another \$100 bill. Carson waved it off, though, to signal that he really had no more information.

“You can give me money, and I won’t complain,” Carson said, “but I don’t know anything else. Now scram before someone sees you here. I don’t need anyone catching me talking to you.”

The reporter nodded and went away, taking the third \$100 bill with him. Carson pocketed his \$200 profit and smiled. He had only a moment to savor this before his cell phone rang.

Carson answered. “Hello?”

“Haven’t gotten a progress report from you today. Is now a safe time to call?”

Carson checked around briefly. Nobody there. Just a bunch of other limos outside a typical mansion dinner party. “Yeah, I think it’s safe.”

“Good,” said Gerhart. “So, anything new?”

“Suffice it to say, you’ll have your pretty pictures between forty-eight and seventy-two hours from now.”

“Pictures? You mean--”

“It’s gonna be sooner than we’d thought. But from here on out, I gotta ask that you not call. I’ll get back to you in two or three days. Is that alright?”

“Yeah, sure. Uh... One thing, though.”

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing big. I just wanted to remind you that secrecy is the most important thing we have on our side right now.”

“Meaning?”

“The other papers are trying to get this story too, remember. I think there might be a reporter snooping around this dinner party tonight, since everyone knew this was on her public schedule. See if you can find any reporters and throw them some bogus information.”

Carson smiled but showed no teeth. “Thanks for the heads up. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Best of luck.”

Carson put his phone away and leaned against the limo. Some of the other chauffeurs were talking with each other further up the U-shaped driveway. He thought about joining them, but as long as he was keeping a low profile, the fewer people he talked with tonight, the better. Eventually he took out his cell phone again and played some games to pass away the time.

Two hours later, Jenna left the party early and returned to the limo. Her

agent, Palmer, walked with her. Carson found it odd that he should be there. Moreover, it looked as though the pair had been arguing for some time now.

“But everybody knows you’re getting married, and this will be a great chance for publicity. Why can’t we announce it? Let it leak at the last second, and before you know it, you’ll be all over the papers again, and with perfect timing for another album release announcement.”

“A deal’s a deal,” said she as they walked. “I announced the engagement, now isn’t that enough?”

The tone in her voice had changed, Carson noted. It was no longer the dominant, cocky voice he was used to hearing; now she sounded tired, withdrawn. *So it is a publicity stunt after all*, Carson thought.

Jenna continued, “I don’t like it when people break their promises, Palmer. And you promised a private wedding. I will not be denied that.”

The agent sighed. He had argued enough for one night. “I still don’t think it’s possible, Jenna. Now that the press knows you’re engaged, they’ll stop at nothing to get information on the wedding. And they’re going to find out sooner or later, and likely sooner.”

“If they do, you’re fired,” she said.

“But why? This could be a great thing, Jenna!”

“No. I’m fine with publicity, but not at my wedding.”

Carson opened Jenna’s door for her and smiled as he shut it. He could not help but smirk in Palmer’s direction as he walked back around the car to get in the driver seat. Palmer did not notice this. Instead, his eyes were fixed on Jenna. He sighed again, his stout figure slouching as he exhaled. But he said nothing more.

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“Less than seventy-two hours, eh?”

Riley sat in the bushes across the street from Carson’s limo--well, really, he was across the driveway... and really, it was Jenna’s limo. But that was beside the point. He had overheard both of Carson’s conversations--everything except for what Gerhart had to say. Riley knew the Valentine’s Day story was a lie, though; why would Carson tell the truth to another paper’s reporter? Technically, Riley did not know that Gerhart was the one calling Carson, but Riley could make educated guesses. “You’ll have your pretty pictures” could only mean one thing, after all.

Riley would have followed Carson everywhere for an endless number of days if he had to--and he would be more stealthy than he had been on the freeway last night--but this news was rather fortunate. If the wedding were going to be in two days, and if Jenna had to travel anywhere for it, she would have to do so tomorrow. Riley made another educated guess that if Jenna wanted privacy, she would not stick around Los Angeles or let her limo be followed to the wedding chapel. This meant she would be on an airplane tomorrow...

Riley’s cell phone started buzzing at his side less than a minute after Carson and Jenna had left.

“Hello?”

“Hi, sorry to call you so late.” It was Gerhart. “Paper’s got some big political headlines, so it’ll be one of those long nights for me. Just wanted to tell you, though, that we’re running a story on Mahler tomorrow, and two of your pictures are going to make the print. Congratulations; you did an excellent job for your first day on a new assignment. Very excellent indeed.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll have you cover him all the way through this summer at least, so you can get into the premier of this movie.”

“But you said I could switch after three months!”

“Screw that. Your pictures will keep making the paper so long as you keep up this quality work. Keep that in mind, and you’ll get a promotion at the end of the year, maybe. Okay?”

“Okay...”

“Later.”

Much later, thought Riley. I’ll call in sick tomorrow... Jenna travels on a private plane, so I’ll have to secure a spot on that jet somehow... That won’t be easy. But if scum like Carson Forbes can get away with it, then so can I.

He stepped out of the bush--carefully, because it had thorns--and hurried down the driveway, past the other conversing chauffeurs, then two blocks over, where his car sat. He would go home and pack quickly, then go to the office to do some research on Jenna’s airplane crew. Then he would get to the airport very early...

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Carson and all the staff of Jenna’s mansion were told to set their alarm clocks for 5:30am. The plane would leave at 7:30. In his servant quarters, Carson had a portable CD player alarm clock that he set to play “Bullet With Butterfly Wings” by the Smashing Pumpkins when it was time to wake up.

When it played this tune in the morning, he did not turn it off or hit the snooze button; rather, he let the whole song play through while he dressed. He was still humming it to himself when he stepped out into the cold morning and walked to the garage. His only assigned task was to take the limo out to the driveway and wait. He did this, then made sure all his packed belongings were with him for the trip: three days’ worth of clothes, his favorite small camera in a carry-on bag, extra film, cigarettes, the \$200 from last night along with the other emergency money in his wallet... Everything was set to go. He briefly checked the rear-view mirror to make sure his appearance was alright; he had showered before bed, which was not his usual practice, but because of his chauffeur cap, his messy hair would not be an issue--at least not for now. He had not brushed his teeth, but he had some breath mints--a must for any smoker to have on hand at all times. While Carson sometimes enjoyed the ability to repel people with nothing more than an exhale in their direction, this talent would not be useful today.

To accommodate all the servants, several cars were needed. There were also family members, band members, and friends of Jenna traveling with them. Everybody emptied from the mansion at once and went to his or her assigned

vehicle. Carson admired the planning that had gone into this. Where had all those people come from overnight? There had to be a lot of coordination to make this work.

Jenna instructed Carson to go to the airport, and as she and Carson both expected, press cars followed their train the whole way there. No matter. Once the plane was in the air, they could not track it anymore. They would not know where the plane was going to land. For that matter, Carson still did not know where the plane would land, and neither did anyone else except Jenna and Palmer. Palmer rode in the last van of their group; his role was to make sure none of the following press cars got past airport security and into the boarding area. He did a good job, too. When they arrived at the airport, the press were all led away from the area behind the security fence. Airport guards and Palmer seemed in good communication with each other, Carson observed.

The airplane was well away from the fence and could not be seen from the press's vantage point. Also, the plane was considerably larger than the one Carson had seen a few days ago. This might have been a 757 or larger, by the looks of it. And no wonder, since it had to seat so many people...

Meanwhile, in the cockpit...

"So what's this new flight training program you mentioned?"

"It's called, 'Look, Learn, Fly.' I've never flown before, and I'm not supposed to touch the controls, but they want me to watch a master at work so I can get the feel of it."

"Oh. Righteous. I wish they had that thing when I was in flight school, man." Dave "The Dude" Sullivan was a bit disturbed by the absence of his regular copilot, but this new Martin O'Reilly guy seemed nice enough. The shift in flight school training program policy was a surprise, but every now and then the program changed anyway, and Dave guessed it was time for some things to be shifting around. Past time, in fact.

Riley watched "The Dude" lean back in his seat. The pilot was in his mid-thirties, clean-shaven but long-haired for a man of his profession. He worked private flights for celebrities, and his job for the last year and a half had been transporting Jenna Pierce and a few other singers on tours. It had been a while, he said, since he had flown a plane this large, but he used to do it all the time a few years ago, so it was really no big thing.

In the hour Riley had come to know this man, Dave had talked about three subjects: planes, piloting, and surfing. Riley could see him as that type--easily. The man looked out of his element in pilot uniform; a Hawaiian shirt would have gone with his personality much better. True, he was getting a little old for surfing, but equally so, he might never outgrow the sport. Growing old was mandatory, after all, but growing up was strictly optional.

"When I was learning to fly," he said as he brushed some stray hair strands from his eyes, "they had us do this little exercise in the middle of flight, and I thought it was the sweetest thing. Y'know, it's the one where they teach you how to avoid a hijacking. Basically all it is, is--have you had that lesson yet?"

"No."

"Oh, that's right; you're just getting started. Well, it's this lesson where you

have to make the plane drop down real fast..." He took his hands, which were next to the wheel but not touching it, and he motioned them upward as if to make the plane dive. "...And then you pull it right back level." He put his hands down again. "Anyone who's not sitting with their seatbelt on will get knocked real hard into the ceiling. That'll most likely knock out any hijacker or at least put 'em on the ground. Pretty cool, huh? Just, when you're gonna practice, make sure you haven't eaten much in the last hour, 'cause oh man, that can do horrors for your stomach if you're not used to the effects."

A few things went "clang" behind them. "People are boarding now," Dave explained. "The dudes handling the luggage are probably almost done, too."

Private jets did not need flight attendants typically, but since this was a large plane with many passengers, some had to be hired for the occasion. There was still a short staff, though, since the plane had no captain aboard. Dave would have to handle all of the technical aspects himself--evidently, Jenna did not trust anyone else with the location of their arrival. At least... nobody but her regular pilot, probably...

"So where are we going?" Riley asked, quiet but innocent enough.

"Paris, man. Jenna's got something going on there, and while I don't know for sure, I think she's getting married. 'Cause y'know, she said she'd get married, and I know she's not on another tour already."

"You don't say." It was hard for Riley to contain his mirth, but he managed.

"Yeah. I think she's trying to be all 'secret' about it, though, to keep out the press. I can't blame her, man. Some of those Paparazzi bastards can be real annoying."

"Tell me about it."

"Sometimes, man, I want to strangle those sons of bitches. All they do is hound people, man. It's because they're so pathetic, they can't get lives of their own, so they try to leech off the popularity of others. Let me tell you, those are some real losers right there, man. Sorry, soulless, crooked..."

"I get the point," said Riley.

The plane took off in another half hour. Things went smoothly, and Riley did his best to stay to the side and not get in the way. Carson, meanwhile, sat next to the other servants in what would have been the coach section of the plane had it not been a commercial flight. He put his headphones on--screw the no-electronics rule--and tried to catch up on sleep.

Jenna and her agent sat in first class. The former was nervous, the latter still worn out.

"The second we land, the press will be there," Palmer said.

"I don't think so," said she. "According to our plan, they won't catch up with us for a couple hours after that."

"I've done all I can," said he. "I'm afraid now we can only hope for the best. I still say we should have done the wedding at your house, which could have been secured better. Or we should have made a big spectacle of this and used it to our advantage..."

"Oh, but there's no fun in having it at home."

“Yes, I know.” He sighed. “No fun’ equals ‘not happening.’”
“You got it.”

In the cockpit, Riley did a little mental math while the plane leveled out of its ascent. “So wait... If we’re going to Paris... That’s a pretty long flight from L.A., isn’t it? Aren’t you going to get tired?”

“Aw, don’t worry. We’ve got autopilot on this baby. Unless you want to take the controls for a bit. It’s not so hard, really. Mostly just keep going straight.”

“What about turbulence?”

“Oh, that’s the best part, dude! Catch some breezes, and it’s just like riding a killer wave back home. See those clouds over there? I bet there’s some pretty strong rotating wind in them... Wanna check it out?”

“Uh... Not really?”

“Ha. Well, too bad you’re not the pilot. I’m gonna see what’s over there... Mind, don’t be surprised if I get too caught up in finding waves... Try to keep your lunch off the controls, okay?”

Carson’s CD player skipped, but that was the least of his problems right now. The whole plane was shaking, and he could not get to sleep... The maid lady next to him was scared of flying and was about to go berserk... Refreshment servings would have to wait until things were level again... All of this reminded Carson why he had not flown in over a decade.

He put his headphones down and turned off the CD player to save its batteries. Then he sighed and looked at his watch. Oh for the love of... only half an hour into the flight? This did not bode well.

There was a ding, and a voice spoke over the intercom. “Hello, passengers... Uh, we are experiencing some turbulence... Oh, uh, I’m sorry, I have to introduce myself first. This is your copilot speaking. We’re getting turbulence, as you may have noticed by now...”

A different voice over the intercom, one more distant but loud all the same, yelled, “**RIGHTEOUS!**”

The first voice said, “Dave, will you cut that out? You’re making me airsick.”

“**NO WAY, MAN! I JUST CAUGHT THE BIG KAHUNA OF AIR WAVES, DUDE! I’M GONNA RIDE THIS BABY THROUGH TEXAS BEFORE I PULL OUT!**”

“I... Oh, wait, I’m still on this talk thingy... Do not worry, folks, everything is under control.”

“**WHOA! MAJOR TIDAL WAVE, MAN!**”

Then the speaker went silent, and the plane’s shaking grew more violent. Of the people in the cabin, those who had not feared for their lives before hearing the message began to do so now. All around Carson, people prayed to every god they could think of: Jesus, Buddha, Tom Cruise... all of them.

Carson, though, thought for a moment: he knew that voice on the loudspeaker. That copilot. He. Oh no. Not that psycho stalker kid, Riley. Anybody but--

The speaker came on again. “Hi, folks. Copilot again. Still in turbulence,

still under control. Uh, yeah. Let's just keep telling ourselves this, okay?"

It was him, Carson knew. He got on this plane--but how? Carson grudgingly respected the implications here; getting a copilot spot on the plane could not have been easy on such short notice.

Something angered Carson, though: *Why is that runt stepping on my turf? He knows damn well this is my assignment. He must really be one desperate man*, he thought. *He wants to be at the wedding, and he wants to take pictures. That's clear enough. And that's my job, not his.* Reporters from the same paper were never supposed to do this to each other; rather, they were to respect one another's turf. Carson looked straight ahead at the back of the seat in front of him and thought, *This means war.*

Carson would have smoked a cigarette then, but he would not be allowed to do so while the plane was in the air--yet another reason Carson hated flying.

After a solid hour, the turbulence subsided.

"Whoa," said Dave. "Sorry about that, dude. Got caught up in the moment. Good news is, it made our flight go a lot faster than I knew was possible before." He laughed. "I need a rest. You want to take it for a while and try it out? Or should we go auto?"

Riley looked solemnly at his second vomit bag and said, "Auto. For the love of God, auto."

"No problem."

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Carson did not get to sleep until the plane was over the Atlantic Ocean. When he finally dozed off, he dreamed he was chasing a Paparazzi's dream target: a major celebrity caught at a nudist colony. The blonde bombshell was running through a maze of halls and staircases in a seemingly endless house of sorts, and he was always a step behind her. He got his share of photos--good ones--and laughed as he went. To anyone else, his laugh might have sounded a little bit evil, but to himself, it sounded far worse: deeper, fuller, louder. And he would not have it any other way. It was a very nice dream.

He was about to reload his camera, when someone from behind knocked him to one side and ran past him. It was Riley, and he was laughing too.

Carson woke up briefly, but he would not let the things troubling him keep him from any more sleep. The next time he woke up, the plane was in descent toward Paris. The "fasten seatbelt" sign was not yet on, but it soon would be. Last refreshments had already been served. The maid lady sitting next to him was nice enough to save him a roll from her snack.

In the cockpit, Riley had been awake for two hours. Dave was about to contact the Paris airport (Orly), and Riley would once more do his best to stay out of the way. He would continue to be as quiet and useless as possible until the plane landed. Then he would need to take care of Carson...

It was as obvious to Riley as it was to Carson that both of them could not go to this wedding and take photographs. Carson would have to be detained all the way through the wedding. Riley had a plan for that... Not the world's most sophisticated, but he hoped that knocking him out and stuffing him in the

lavatory without clothes would take care of him for a while.

On Dave's direction, Riley turned on the seatbelt sign. As soon as that light turned off again, he knew, his plan would have to go into effect...

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As a boy, Carson had seen some cartoons, old ones, in which whenever a character got a bright idea or had an epiphany, a lightbulb would appear over that character's head. This was similar to what happened to Carson, except that it was the seatbelt light instead of a normal bulb, and he was not in a cartoon, last time he checked. All the same, at that very second, he realized that if the wedding party were really on this plane, something very crucial was missing: the groom, whose identity Carson still did not know.

Carson thought of a couple explanations for this: the groom could be waiting for them on the ground. Or he might already be at the church... though it was very late in Paris right now. *Hm, church, he thought. Where will Jenna have this wedding, anyway? And how will she keep a party this large under wraps-- in Paris, of all places?*

Carson looked around him. The coach section of the plane was not completely full. Most of the empty seats were near the front. Carson and the others in coach had been told to stay toward the back to make room for the others--but why would they have to make room if there were not enough others to fill the whole space? *Wait, how many empty seats are there? One, two... About ten or twelve. That's almost as many seats as are in the first class section.*

And then it hit him. *This is where the wedding will be! Paris isn't the location of the chapel; it's the location of the honeymoon!* Carson checked his carry-on bag to make sure his camera was ready to go. It was. All he would need to do was lift it up and click when the time came. He smiled. He had wanted a seat at the wedding, and now he had it. Now if only he were in the aisle seat instead of against the window... Ah, but he would not complain now.

I wonder what Riley will do when he finds out what's happening, he thought, but he did not dwell on that subject for long. Instead, he tried to remember the people he had seen in first class when, he had looked them over during a trip to the lavatory. Most of those people were Jenna's close relatives. But a few were faces he had not seen in any of the paper's file pictures of her family. Those, he figured now, would have to be the groom's family. Which meant that the groom was somewhere on board...

Dave was about to land the plane. He said to Riley, "I bet you'll be a very good pilot someday, man."

"Thank you," said Riley.

"You just need to work on not getting sick in flight, that's all. Now, my usual copilot, Dan, he had that same problem you did. But he got through it pretty quickly, and I'm sure you will too."

Riley nodded and thought to himself about the copilot--the man whom, many hours ago, he had followed from home to the freeway... The copilot saw he was being followed, so he pulled his car, a small but well-kept Mercedes, over to

the right. He came out of the car, like Carson had, and Riley stepped out, too, but this time Riley grasped in his right hand a Jenna Brand Beauty Products Perfume-soaked rag--it was his best makeshift substitute for chloroform.

The man was about Riley's age, if not a few years older. He was taller than Riley, better built, and was not as tired from staying up all night searching through records at the newspaper office to track down a copilot's home address (tabloid offices contained information on nearly everyone in Hollywood; one only had to know how to find what he was looking for). But despite the man's physical advantages, Riley had the element of surprise, and the man had scarcely inhaled one pungent whiff of the "Lusty Lavender" perfume before he was out cold.

Riley had then dragged the man into the Mercedes. Once in the car, he took the copilot's uniform and luggage (one suitcase, one carry-on with various airline logos stitched onto it) and ID card for getting past airport security. Though the uniform was very loose on Riley--not to mention somewhat awkward to put on while inside a car--he hoped it was a close enough fit that it would not gain attention.

Riley had slashed one of the copilot's tires to assure there would be no chase anytime soon, and from there he had sped off for the airport.

Riley sighed contently in the cockpit and wondered if he should have brought more of the perfume with him for using on Carson. The copilot had been much stronger than Carson, though, so Riley doubted he would have much of a problem, Lusty Lavender or not.

Yeah... Knocking out that copilot had been some feat... typical L.A. muscle builder jock, the type who made Riley's adolescence hell on earth... Riley had *enjoyed* defeating him.

The plane landed at last, and Riley admired for a moment what Dave had done--in spite of the man's passion for turbulence. With a shorthanded crew, he had simultaneously filled the positions of pilot and captain with only minimal help from an incompetent copilot during both takeoff and landing. That took a lot of experience to do. Riley stayed silent but watched as the plane taxied away from the commercial flights and toward an empty lot behind some hangars. There the plane stopped, and Dave turned the engines off. Riley pointed at the button to turn off the seatbelt sign.

"Should I?" he asked.

"No," Dave said. "There's no point. Nobody's coming with the stairs, so until the crew at Orly get their act together, we can't get off this flight. This is where they told me to go, though, so here I am."

Riley was confused. Before he could ask another question, though, someone knocked on the cockpit door. Apparently the seatbelt sign was mere formality to whoever this was.

"Who is it?" Dave asked.

"Palmer," said a voice from the other side of the door. "Is Dan ready to go?"

"Uh, no..." Dave was just as perplexed as Riley.

"Oh, that's right. You need your tuxedo, don't you? Here, I'll get it; it's with Jenna's gown."

Then all Riley heard were the footsteps of Palmer--whoever that was, Riley did not know--going away from the door.

"Weird," Dave said. Riley agreed.

It took almost a minute for Riley to put the pieces together, but he did.

"Were Dan and Jenna seeing each other?" he asked.

"Heh. Jenna was 'seeing' practically everybody who toured with her, dude."

"Oh. I was just wondering if Dan was supposed to be the groom at the wedding."

"I don't know, but that would explain why Palmer wants him to wear a tux."

Riley thought about this. "Out of curiosity... Does my voice sound anything like Dan's?"

Dave considered for a second. "Y'know, yeah, you kinda do. You don't look like him, though."

So when I went on the intercom, Riley thought, nobody in the plane noticed the difference. They think I'm Dan, and Dan's the groom--but he's not here--but I'm here--and that means--

Palmer knocked on the door again and said, "Here's the tux. Get dressed, and we'll start this in about twenty minutes."

Riley opened the door only a crack to snatch the tux. Then he abruptly closed the door and said, "I have to speak with Jenna."

"Uh, okay..." Palmer sounded confused. "I'll get her. She's putting her dress on in the back."

Carson saw Jenna march through to the back of the plane, and he saw Palmer come and bring her back when she was in her wedding gown. The people in coach understood then what was happening, that the wedding would be here and very soon. Throughout coach, people got their cameras out of their carry-on bags.

Good, thought Carson. I won't be alone, at least, when the flashbulbs go off.

Dave's eyes opened wider as Riley undressed and changed into the tuxedo.

"Dude! You're not gonna try and take Dan's place here, are you?" Dave asked. "I mean, I know Jenna's easy, but aren't you like, someone she's never even met before?"

"Not exactly," Riley said. He did not elaborate on that.

Knock knock.

"Dan?" It was Jenna. "What is it, honey? Something wrong?"

Riley could not believe Jenna was speaking to him that way, but then, she did think he was someone else, after all. He said back, "Um, Jenna, there's something I have to tell you..."

"Yes?"

"I'm... not really Dan."

"You're not?"

"No. I'm not. Dan's not here."

“But you sound like Dan...”

“I know. Listen, Dan uh...” Riley breathed hard for a moment before he could think of something to say. “Dan ditched you and was gonna leave you at the altar. He chose me as a copilot but didn’t have the guts to tell you to your face.”

Jenna gasped. “What a jerk! His whole family is here, too!”

“Yeah, but before you get too angry, there’s something else I wanted to say.”

“What?”

“I... Look, you may not know me or remember me, but I was with you all through your tour. I’ve watched you perform for ten years now, and well... Dan might not love you enough to go through with the wedding, but Jenna... I do. I love you and I love everything about you.”

“Aw, that’s so sweet. What’s your name?”

“My name is Marty... Please don’t say it’s too dorky.”

“Hehe, nah, I think it’s cute.”

Wow. Dave was right: this woman *was* easy.

“What’s your last name?” she asked.

Without thinking, he said, “Riley.” He soon realized his error.

“Riley,” she repeated. “Wait... Riley... Where have I heard that name before?”

Uh oh. “Um... It’s a fairly common last name. I’m sure you’ve heard it lots of times in several perfectly innocent contexts.”

“Waaaaaaaait a minute...”

The cockpit door was still unlocked from when Palmer had passed the groom’s clothes through. Jenna opened it and looked right at Riley, who, not wanting to be cornered in the cockpit, slid past her into the small space next to the lavatory in front of first class.

“YOU!” Jenna screamed as he went by her. “Oh my God, you’re that crazy stalker freak!”

“No, please Jenna, don’t think of me like that. I’m, uh, a really devoted fan, that’s all!”

“I thought you were under a restraining order!” Furious, she advanced on him and forced him to walk backwards through first class, much to the amazement of all the people there.

Said Riley, “Well, see, the funny thing about laws is...”

“Shut up!” She slapped him, hard, and continued to advance. Riley gave up negotiating and walked faster--though still backward--right into coach.

Carson stood up immediately when he saw Riley. Carson had overheard the talk in first class, and at the sound of the slap, his journalist instinct kicked in. He picked up his camera and, the second Jenna walked in yelling obscenities at Riley, the pictures started. Every other person in coach took this as a signal to start their picture-taking as well.

Jenna, meanwhile, continued to slap Riley and beat him as he stepped backward. Carson moved past the maid still sitting in the aisle seat and pretended to try for a better picture angle. All he really wanted to do, though, was trip Riley when he stepped past Carson’s row of seats. Jenna, blinded with rage, paid no attention to the cameras. Instead, she pounced on Riley when he tripped, and

then she hit him several times. Carson would try to remember the words she screamed for his report later on. For now, though, he kept taking his pictures in rapid succession. This was too perfect; an angry celebrity bride, a wedding ruined, exclusive photos up close... Carson was at the height of ecstasy, even though he had done little more than raise a camera and click a button--many, many times.

Riley, before blacking out from a punch to his temple, saw Carson standing like a specter above and behind Jenna's shoulder. That big shot was smiling with every tooth he had...

Just as Jenna raised her fist for the knockout blow, Riley thought he could hear Carson's voice whisper in taunt:

"Dance for me, baby, dance... Make love to the camera..."

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Epilogue

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Rita-Mae Clugg hefted her 250-pound body through lane two at the supermarket, and as the teenager at the register started ringing up her items, she took a copy of *The Comet* off the aisle display and read the cover headline: "Jenna Pierce Wedding DISASTER!!!" She added the paper to her groceries. Any story with three exclamation points *had* to be worth reading.

The picture looked interesting, too: the singer was in her gown, and she was pounding the crap out of a man who Rita-Mae could only assume was the groom. Rita-Mae shook her head and said probably the deepest, most philosophical thing she had uttered in weeks: "Mm, mm-mm-mm-mm."

Every day the papers came up with more and more unbelievable stories--yet they had to be true, did they not, in order to be in the paper? This story, with a psychotic stalker getting into that poor singer's wedding, was a perfect example... And ooh, it said over on page three (she turned the page briefly) that the stalker was part of a cult that wanted to sacrifice her. How intriguing.

Rita-Mae's thoughts were distracted by someone yelling from lane one, the express lane. A mean-looking man was giving the poor cashier trouble because the store was out of the man's favorite cigarettes.

"Sir, I can't help it if we don't have it," the teen pleaded.

"Yeah, yeah. Screw it, I'll shop somewhere else."

Then the man walked away without taking his items or paying for them. The cashier had to clear them away himself.

"What a bad man," Rita-Mae said aloud. The word "jerk" was too sophisticated for her vocabulary. "Well, I'm glad they don't let those types of people write for the papers." Of course they did not. Because tabloid reporters strove for honesty and fairness in their journalism--why, it said so right on the paper's cover: "Fair and Honest." And if they strove for these things, surely they must be nice people, pillars of the community... Rita-Mae loved her papers and hoped she could meet some of their writers and photographers someday. Maybe she could even get a few autographs. Oh, that would be exciting. Almost as good

as meeting the celebrities themselves!

As she thought about this, Carson walked back to where his cab waited.

“No groceries, sir?” said the driver.

“They didn’t have what I wanted. Go up the road, I think there’s a convenience store at the corner of the second stoplight.”

He needed provisions, because he was going on another trip--thankfully not by plane this time. With a story this big, he was able to get Gerhart to pay up on his bonus as well as earn some much-needed vacation time. So he was headed to Tijuana.

As for Riley, Gerhart bailed him out of a Paris jail and promoted him for his role in the wedding. What Riley saw as a failed attempt at matrimony, Gerhart interpreted as the ultimate exercise of courage and self-sacrifice to get the story. Riley’s pay doubled instantly, and he was allowed not only to take pictures, but write as well.

To anyone else, it may have seemed an extremely lucky break for him, considering the circumstances. Riley, however, wished in his own way that he were still behind bars...

While Carson was off to Mexico, Riley sat in front of Derek Mahler and said, “Thank you very much for granting this interview, sir.” His voice remained flat throughout. “It is truly an honor to be invited to your home to discuss this amazing new movie you have made.”

Mahler smiled his cheeky smile and crossed his legs. “Oh, the pleasure is mine, I assure you, yes.”

Riley shuddered.

Said Mahler, “Let us discuss first the personal aspects of the film, shall we?”

“Personal aspects?” Riley repeated.

“Yes. You see, this movie was a major breakthrough in my process of coming to terms with my sexuality--which, by the by, while I hope it does not offend you at all, is not so much straight as it is squiggly.”

Riley wrote this down. If nothing else, that would at least be good enough for a story or two.

“So go on and interview me,” Mahler urged. “I know you must have many questions. Ask away, you young stallion, you.”

Riley stopped writing and looked up. Mahler raised his eyebrows at him. Twice.

“In what way,” Riley asked, “did this movie help you come to... terms with your orientation?”

Mahler took a deep breath and responded, “Well, it really is a very interesting story, I must say! It all started with my last plastic surgery attempt...”

Riley obediently took his notes and whimpered. It was going to be a long day...

Jenna Pierce married Dan as soon as she returned to Los Angeles. His only condition for the marriage was that she never, ever use her own brand of perfume near him again. She never understood the reason for this, but for his sake, she

agreed to use other celebrities' brands instead.

They lived happily most of the time during the three years their Hollywood marriage lasted. Then Dan caught Jenna cheating on him with Dave. Then they lived separately ever after.

The End.