



# Shooting Stars: My Unexpected Life Photographing Hollywood's Most Famous

By Jennifer Buhl

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### Get an Insider Glimpse into What Life is Really Like Among Hollywood's Bright Lights and Big Stars

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### A Hilarious and Utterly Addictive Memoir...

Shooting Stars is the first memoir to offer the inside scoop on the world of paparazzi and their surprisingly cooperative relationship with the stars. Jennifer recounts her wild ride through this testosterone-driven industry with moxie, weaving juicy real-life celebrity encounters with her own poignant story of searching for love and finding her way among the glittering lights of Tinseltown.

### An Irresistible Snapshot...

A smart and sassy chronicle of celebrity culture, fame, and the art of perfect timing, Shooting Stars reveals the real lives of Hollywood's rich and famous?from behind the camera.

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**Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #754271 in Books
- Published on: 2014-03-25
- Released on: 2014-03-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.25" h x 5.50" w x 1.00" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 352 pages



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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Jennifer wrote this book simply and straight to the point. She placed the right amount of humor into it and wrote it in a way that would make you appreciate the paparazzi. She didn't try to make herself look good to her readers but she still managed to make me like her. Her story was believable and I loved the information that she gave about the celebrities, though she might wanna make sure that Kate Bosworth doesn't read this."  
- *Geeky Chiquitas*

"This book was a great and fun read," - *The Nerdy Princess Book Reviews*

"A fun, lighthearted book about what it's like to be a Hollywood paparazzi and, more specifically, how Jennifer Buhl became one. She writes about that in *Shooting Stars: My Unexpected Life Photographing Hollywood's Most Famous*." - *Bookviews by Alan Caruba*

"Any reader who has ever flipped through the pages of US Weekly or People magazine in a grocery store checkout line will find this memoir endlessly fascinating." - *Library Journal*

#### About the Author

Jennifer Buhl was a top-earning *paparazza* in Los Angeles for three years where she photographed hundreds of A-list celebrities. Her work appeared frequently in *People* magazine, *TMZ*, *The Guardian*, *E! News* and many others. A former field producer at CNN, she currently resides in Boulder, Colorado, where she runs a successful family photography business.

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### Introduction

My lunch shift at Tropicalia, the Brazilian restaurant up the street from my apartment, has just ended. I'm sitting on the restaurant's patio drinking coffee and reading the newspaper. I didn't come to L.A. to be a waitress, but I'm thankful for the job.

I hear tires skid on the pavement and look up. Eight blacked-out SUVs have come to a screeching halt in front of White Trash Charms, the boutique across the street. I watch as seven guys jump out of their vehicles and a beautiful, skinny blond gets out of hers. It could be a mugging or robbery, or possibly gang violence.

No. It's Paris Hilton. Shopping.

I've never seen paparazzi in action before. For ten minutes, the guys press their cameras against the store window, bursts of flash going off every few seconds. When a meter maid walks up to write Paris's car a ticket, one of the paparazzi tries to negotiate on her behalf. Unsuccessful, he instead captures the ticket-writing moment. When Paris exits, the men crouch in front of her, moving backward while taking her picture. It's very physical, but oddly friendly somehow. The men thunder about loudly and intrusively, yet Paris remains untouched in a small bubble of space. And keeps smiling.

She drives off in her Range Rover, followed by a chain of similarly sized vehicles. But I notice one nice-looking Latino paparazzo has stayed behind and is sorting through pictures on his camera. I'm curious about the whole spectacle-and a little starstruck too-so I amble over and strike up a conversation with the first question that comes to mind: "How much do you make on a picture?"

"Oh, at least five hundred," he says.

Holy snap. Right then and there, it's like God whacks me over the head. I have \$50 in my pocket and less than a thousand in my bank account; my life is lackluster and I want more. I just haven't figured out how to make "more" happen.

"Do y'all ever hire girls?"

\* \* \*

One week later, Richard (the nice-looking Latino paparazzo) has agreed to let me ride along. From the passenger seat of his SUV, I witness the year's No. 1 out-of-control celebrity: Britney Spears.

At least twenty guys swarm her car like bees around a hive. They ought to call this a gangbang, I think. Later I find out they do.<sup>1</sup> I see bursts of light amid thick, burly men. Britney is the only woman. I hear her name:

"Britney, can I get a smile?"

"How you today, Brit?"

"Brit, here!"

"Here!"

"Here!"

Five minutes prior, we were midway in the caravan, eight or nine cars back, when Britney's car turned into a parking lot and abruptly stopped. Richard followed, slammed into park, left the engine running, and took off sprinting. No way could I ever move that fast.

Immediately I lose track of him in the mass of men. Britney is the one to watch though. She is the passenger and has her door open with one leg hanging out. After about thirty seconds, her driver, Sam Lutfi, a guy who will later have a restraining order slapped on him by Britney's dad, starts to pull away with her door still ajar and her leg still hanging out. Slowly though, lest he run someone over. Or lest the Brit fall out...

Some of the men run alongside the vehicle as it begins to move through the deserted parking lot. Perhaps they think she'll stop again and get out. Others run back to their cars so they don't miss what is apparently called the follow.

Richard startles me when he opens the car door and jumps back in. Carelessly, he tosses his gargantuan

camera, flash, and handful of tangled cords off to the side, and thousands of dollars' worth of equipment thuds to the floorboard where he leaves it. His car lurches when he pulls into drive, and we play no-touch bumper cars with the others, inching forward little by little until we fall into line. The race restarts.

This seemingly purposeless pass through an office park is our first stop, ten miles out from Britney Spears's Malibu home. According to Richard, she does this frequently-stopping haphazardly, sometimes getting out, sometimes not. "She likes to see us run," he says.

Why, I wonder, would anyone participate in something like this? Does she have a choice? Is this what happens to all the stars?

Now we're headed up Sunset Boulevard, toward town, into Beverly Hills. Though it's rush hour, we move fairly fast in our seamless convoy. Nobody stops at lights: it's as if we were strewn together like one long beaded necklace.

When we first left Britney's, Richard called in backup on his walkie-talkie and it has now arrived: Jean-Luc, a well-dressed Frenchman wearing dress pants, not jeans like everyone else, and an ironed shirt, joins us on the chase. He's on a motorcycle, and another guy is sitting behind him recording video. Richard says that's stupid: "Does he want to kill himself? Lunatic Frenchie."

We are mostly large SUVs, about twenty or twenty-five of us at this point plus the Brit-mobile, and more keep coming. Richard jockeys for position, in and out, missing other cars by centimeters as he tries to get closer to the elusive celeb. Apparently it's vital to be one car ahead-one car closer-in a line of two dozen.

Interestingly, no one looks to be endangering Britney. Everyone is behind her, going as slow or fast as she does, not crowding her. It's a stark contrast to the scene at the office park minutes earlier. It makes sense though: What would be the point of overtaking the car you are trying to follow? It's the paparazzi who own the jeopardy on the road, as well as unrelated drivers who happen to get in their way. The pedestrians could be at risk too. They gawk, confused as to what is going on as we edge curbs and ignore crosswalks hoping to gain ground against the competition.

We wind through Beverly Hills, into West Hollywood, and turn left off Sunset onto a narrow residential street, Kings Road.

"Holy shit, we're going to Paris's," Richard says. "Them two together are big." He informs me that Britney has been seen with the world's most famous socialite this week.

Our train inches up the steep, winding hill. I think I can. I think I can... Richard stands up and leans his body out the window while keeping his foot on the gas pedal and honking the horn. Cars ahead of us have stopped in the middle of the road. He cusses when he bumps the SUV in front of him (rather hard, I think), but it's another paparazzo so neither stops.

When we can't go any farther, Richard grabs his camera, jumps out, and like the others, leaves his car parked in the middle of the road. This time I get out too, running uphill a few feet behind him to a medium-sized stucco home covered in bougainvillea. It is situated on a small lot covered with vines and palm trees, and a low fence separates the property from its neighbors'. The environs remind me of Italy.

There are about twenty guys pacing in agitated circles. They are standing in the middle of the road in front of the house, their cameras dangling from their necks like wattles.

"Are we too late?" I ask. I might not be shooting, but I'm already starting to feel the desire: I want the shot

too.

Soon I learn that this is Paris's house, but that Britney is not here. No one in the group knows where she went, or at least they're not letting on if they do. The road was too curvy, and Richard was too far back in the chain to do anything but follow the car directly ahead of him. Like the others, he figured she was going to Paris's.

Richard talks to the guy whose bumper he hit, and it sounds amicable. When we hear the noise of an approaching car, everyone moves to the side of the road, and the queen bee's GMC Yukon flies by, followed by a half dozen other ginormous vehicles. And that's the reason it's important to be one car ahead: the closer you are to the celeb, the more likely you'll be able to keep up.

But there is no race to the cars this time. Even I, a first-timer, can tell that we would never catch up: a giant parking lot of paparazzi SUVs sits on Kings Road, and too many vehicles block one another. She will be gone in a few seconds anyway.

It's dark now, and I ask Richard how late he works. The action was barely two hours, but the adrenaline that spiked through my system has left me exhausted. "As late as it goes," he shrugs. "But it's over today. Let's get your car."

We drive back to Malibu at a steady pace, but it still takes an hour. When we get back, my car is the only one remaining on the dirt road outside Britney's private seaside subdivision, the Malibu Colony, where Richard and I met for the ride-along ten hours earlier. I spent the morning making "contacts"-I need this to turn into an actual job-walking from car to car through two rows of paparazzi parked on either side of the road. I was the only female among the group of mostly Latino and British men. I wasn't surprised about the lack of women per se, but I did think it was odd that there were practically no Americans. The guys all seemed to leer at me in my short skirt and tall boots too. What was I thinking, wearing that? Most assumed I was a tabloid reporter and chuckled when I told them I was training to be paparazzi. One of them, the only American I met, showed me his new picture of Britney: a peek-a-boo of her shaved snatch, completely bald, folds and all, which I really didn't care to see. "It's all over the Internet," he said proudly, feathers puffed up like a mating rooster.

Apparently Britney had flashed the paparazzi when she'd gotten out of her car last week. Who doesn't wear underwear with a short skirt when cameras are all around? Was that intentional?

The fact was, at that point, I knew very little about any celebrity. I'd lived in L.A. for a year and a half but had seen just one, Brian Austin Green, and that was on a production assistant (PA) job I'd picked up for two days off Craigslist. And obviously, you can barely count Brian Austin Green as a celebrity.

I get out of Richard's car and am nearly run over when the Yukon barrels by me and into the private subdivision. The smaller procession, maybe five or six vehicles, is still trailing, and they again park on the shoulder of the road outside the Malibu Colony: Britney's back home.

But neither Richard nor I will wait around for a nighttime outing. I head east toward my home in Los Feliz, processing my day on the long drive. Is it always this intense? Will I eventually be able to handle more...or start to crave more? Could it possibly kill me?

The ultimate video game is what I equate it to: spying, celebrities, chases, shooting, loot-Will there be loot? Please, let there be loot!-everything is here. And more-it's reality.

Britney was the prize today; the one...devoured.

Could she possibly like it?

Richard says she loves it. So does he.

\* \* \*

After watching the Paris and Britney gangbangs (as vulgar as that sounds to me, I will soon desensitize to the term), I was in. Now I needed to figure out how to get the job.

Paparazzi firms are news agencies. Celebrity news, albeit, but they are every bit as on-call as CNN. I phone a firm whose name I find online and get right through to the owner.

"Dylan Sheen," he answers.

"Hi Dylan," I begin. "My name is Jennifer. I'm an amateur photographer and would like to be a paparazzi." I use the plural since "paparazzo" doesn't seem like the right word.

"What's the difference between f4 and f10?" he asks aggressively.

"Ahhh,"-I haven't thought about that in a while—"well, f4 is a wider aperture, so you need less light. It also has a smaller depth of field."

"What's the aperture's correlation to the shutter speed?"

When I answer that correctly too, he changes tactics.

"Well, we don't just want a picture of Britney Spears. We want a picture of Britney without any underwear on. We want pictures of Britney Spears's PUSSY."

He makes sure to say that last word extra-loud with an emphasis on the "Pu." Then he pauses, sure he's gotten me.

Freak, I think. Who says the P-word to someone they don't know?

"OK," I say out loud.

He carries on a bit more about getting the shot, then suddenly has to go. "Call me back in an hour and we'll meet," he says and hangs up.

I really don't want to meet Dylan. Even more, I don't want to take pictures like that.

But why would I have to? Ethical boundaries exist in every profession. I've always respected mine. I still would.

Next I try Aaron, a Scottish guy from an agency called Celebrity X News (CXN).<sup>2</sup> I met Aaron on the street the day of the Britney chase and while, no joke, I couldn't understand more than two consecutive words he said to me, I'm pretty sure he told me to call him if I wanted a job. Aaron answers on the first ring and puts me in touch with his boss at CXN.

From the outset, the agency seems professional, possibly because both Aaron and his boss are British, and like most Americans, I'm a sucker for the accent. I schedule an interview, thrilled not to have to call Dylan back.

\* \* \*

Five days later, I'm at CXN's office in Venice Beach. Right off, the space feels comfortable-there are no sterile cubicles, the kind that make my chest contract in suffocation; no boring-looking people in suits poring over their computers; no beige carpet, cream walls, or uniform furniture; no hushed voices. Everyone works in one open room with camera equipment and tabloid magazines strewn over a small floor space and large posters on the wall-blown-up pictures of celebrities in tabloids with CXN's credit line emblazoned on the bottom.

The staff introduces themselves. I meet one of the three owners, an American and former paparazzo who shot the O. J. freeway chase and used the cash he collected to start the business; two English editors, including Aaron's boss J.R.; and a secretary, also British, who says she brokers online sales.

J.R. is the staff coordinator and lead photo editor. He appears either mildly autistic or mildly drunk-at this point I'm not sure which-and takes me outside while he has a cigarette. He asks whether I'd like to work days or nights.

"Days, I guess." That sounded better to me.

"Days pay more," J.R. says. Lucky me.

When we get back inside, he asks if I have a sample of my work. I show him my backpacking-through-Asia photos which happen to be on my laptop: the Pushkar Festival with throngs of Indians selling camels; Ton Sai climbers hanging on rocks over the Indian Sea; Ko Phi Phi, the Thai island ravaged in the 2004 tsunami; naked Buddha statues; more naked Buddha statues.

"I don't get to see pictures like this very often," he says as he scrolls through. "They're nice."

He asks me one more interview question: "Have you ever been convicted of star-stalking?"

I laugh.

Pause. Pause. Pause. Pause. Like ten seconds here.

But it was a serious question. "I have to ask," he finally says when I don't respond.

"Uh, no. I've never really been that interested in the stars." I rarely read the tabloids and am the worst star-spotter out there. But I don't tell him that. I've always wanted to be a CIA agent too. I don't tell him that either.

J.R. has little faith in me beyond avoiding a restraining order, that much I can tell, but it's clear he's also fascinated by the prospect of hiring me. I offer variety to the stale, mostly male paparazzi culture. Some softness. Womanness. At the moment, CXN doesn't have any female shooters. "Almost nobody does," he says. "You'd be freelance too, pay your own expenses and find your own stories."

Apparently I was hired. Sort of.

And why not? The risk for him was minimal, and if I were as talented as I was confident, his payoff could be big. An agency makes 40 percent of every freelance picture it sells, and one sales guy can easily market the photos of twenty or more photographers every day. The more photo contributors CXN has, the more money they make.

From J.R. I request just one thing: equipment to borrow until I can afford my own. J.R. rummages through a closet and finds a dusty camera, the kind whose batteries last not quite twenty minutes of consecutively being "on," and some other parts I'll need. He leans out the window and takes a few test shots of a seagull on a telephone pole. "It seems to work," he says, and hands it over.

"When I was on the streets," J.R. offers, "my partner was a woman. She made twice the money I did."

"Does she still work?" I ask.

"Nope. Decided to go have a baby."

I smile at the thought. J.R. doesn't care if I'm interested in the stars and he doesn't care if I have experience. He only cares about one thing: if I can make him money. I'm another camera on the street, and a pink one to boot.

1. Refer to the Glossary of Paparazzi Terms in the back of the book.
2. Unless noted, names of celebrity photo agencies have been changed.

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