

## Chapter Nine

# Poison Pen

“Drive over to the Hippopotamus,” Henry instructed, the Hippopotamus being then a slick Upper East Side nightclub in New York City and Henry being Henry Diltz, celebrity photographer, telling the driver of our Lincoln limo where to carry David Cassidy, the girl with him, his friend/valet, plus Henry and me late one night in the late winter of 1972. The quote was the lede of my cover story on Cassidy, in town to perform a sold-out show at Madison Square Garden the next night. But when we got to the Hippopotamus, the guy at the door wouldn’t let us in, in fact had absolutely no idea who David Cassidy was, which was pretty much the point of the ten-thousand-word cover story that would follow.

Cassidy’s PR man had approached *Rolling Stone* about doing a story. David was getting old for *The Partridge Family*, a TV sitcom in which he played—and then became—a teen idol. *The Partridge Family* was getting old period, and David now wanted

to be considered an adult talent. Since the media had created the teen heartthrob he was in the first place, it seemed logical, I supposed, to call on the media to transmogrify his image. And what groovier vehicle than a cover of *Rolling Stone*? So we gave it to him.

And I was the one assigned to do it.

If the PR man or Cassidy himself had taken the time to read anything I'd written in *Rolling Stone*, we could all have been spared a whole lot of trouble. The *Esquire* editor hadn't called me the new bitch for nothing. I can see now that I was, in much of my writing, at least, on a one-woman crusade to out the pretentious, the phony, the self-deluded, the boorish, the cruel.

David Cassidy wasn't any of those. He was merely lame. He wore his heart on his sleeve. He and the industries from which he sprang were such easy targets. I wrote the shit out of the thing, not just about him in his little androgynous white jumpsuit, but about the teen-magazine, poster, and lunch-box businesses that profited from him.

Still and once again, other writers were traveling with the Stones, the Dead, Dylan, and here I was for five days in New York City and then Bangor, Maine, with this kid and his stepmom, Shirley Jones, who always seemed to be somewhere around.

After the article was published in the May issue, there was fallout for Cassidy. The PR guy got fired; endorsements dried up; Cassidy himself retreated to Hawaii for a while. But what I wrote wasn't even the half of it. It was Annie's naked photos, both on the cover and in the center spread, that finished the job.

"It pissed off everybody that was really profiting from the business of David Cassidy," Cassidy later said. "I had fan letters that came to me—and there were hundreds of thousands of them, literally—in defense of me by fans of mine that said, 'Oh David.

I know that you couldn't possibly have done this because I know that you would never have posed nude for photographs.' And the fact was I had, had willingly done so, had thought about it. I scratched my head and thought, You know, this David Cassidy business has really gotten outta hand."

He'd told this to an interviewer in 1992 on the occasion of the publication of a book of iconic *Rolling Stone* covers. But I was there that day in 1972 at his house by the pool when the photographs were taken, and I had seen Annie coax him into it—he wanted to be cool, didn't he?

Well, sorry, I guess. I can't speak for Annie, but in those days I didn't think much about the damage anything I wrote might do, how it might hurt feelings, careers. It comes back to what Joan Didion wrote about our brand of journalism in the preface to *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*: "People tend to forget that my presence runs counter to their best interests. And it always does."

In November, I'd have another story on the cover, "Joe Conforte, Crusading Pimp," about the owner of a legal brothel outside Reno, Nevada, an article that resulted in a grand-jury investigation and then a prison sentence for Conforte for tax evasion: in the wee hours of the morning, I'd watched him oversee the burning of the night's receipts in a backyard and make a joke of it.

I'd spent a day and night in the brothel (a collection of interconnected trailers in a compound surrounded by chain-link fencing topped with razor wire), hung out with the prostitutes in a snack room overflowing with sugary treats, stood by in the dank double-wide-trailer parlor to observe them as they lined up in their bikinis so the customer could choose the one he wanted to follow back to her little cubicle in the trailer.

Annie flew in to photograph the scene, and the two of us spent