

[SETTING: 1961, Las Vegas]

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“Rascal, you sit yourself right down there.” Elvis motioned at the bed.

He picked up a shiny guitar. It was honey yellow, and the face had a rust-red design below the sound hole, decorated with golden orbs and stems like dandelions.

“Oh, it is beautiful, Elvis!”

He held it up proudly. “This is my Gibson. Ain’t she sweet?”

He sat on a chair cradling the expensive guitar. He delicately plucked the top string with his thumb and gently strummed the other strings with his fingers.

Soft strains filled the room.

“This little number is from my first movie.”

As he began singing, I recognized the melody.

“Love me tender . . .”

Elvis gazed at me as he serenaded, his eyes big, brilliantly blue, dreamy. His song sang straight into my heart. I tingled like I'd been caught in a breeze. Could he see my skin quivering? He could definitely see my cheeks reddening.

Elvis finished with a slow downward strum, thumbing each string individually, a sweet arpeggio. He let the last note ring and fade away.

He looked up and smiled.

“Don't I sound like Bing Crosby?”

He didn't wait for an answer. He leaned the guitar against the dresser and in the next instant was on the bed, an arm slung around my shoulder. His other hand grasped and turned my chin.

Elvis' mouth was warm and gentle. Our tongues met. Just as quickly, his retreated.

Our mouths puckered again. Elvis' lips worked softly against mine. They moved away and began pecking my face with slow, small kisses. My lower lip burned. Elvis had sunk his teeth in with a hard nip.

He released it just as quickly and turned away with a bashful look. It was like he was a nervous teenager. Was this all an act? Or was he just a giant flirt?

I studied his face. Beautiful straight nose. Dreamy, violet-blue eyes. Pouting lips. Had he been a girl, he would have been called pretty.

My searching expression rekindled his confidence, for he seized my shoulders and moved in again. This time, his kiss was wet, warm, long. Our bodies pressed together. The stiffness poking my thigh said he meant business. The male calling card.

I braced for the struggle. From behind the closed door carried laughter and the drone of a television set. The boys were probably drinking and enjoying time away from the boss.

Then I couldn't hear them any more. The quickening pants on this side of the door drowned them out.

Elvis released me and stood. He faced away and pulled his white undershirt over his head and let it drop to the carpet. I started. His back was pocked with red pimples. Nothing his adoring fans would ever see on stage or the movie screen. A complete contrast from the smooth skin of his beautiful face and neck. *Elvis' little secret.*

As he lay on top of me again — his flesh so pale it was like I could see through to muscle and bone — my hands avoided his back and kept to his shoulders, arms, neck, smooth chest. Then I reached down to seize his hands groping at the buttons of my pants.

“No, no,” I said gently. Then sternly.

“No. Stop! Not that.”

His hands froze. I intertwined my fingers in his and managed to yank his hands away.

Elvis shifted his campaign north. He squeezed and fondled my breasts inside my sweater like an over-anxious schoolboy. He pulled it up and looked delighted that I was not wearing a brassiere. He began pinching and licking my hardened nipples.

Each time a hand wandered down to my pants, I gripped the wrist. The few lovers I'd had were gentle, patient. Elvis was like a hungry teenager, kissing and petting me with frustration. The King wasn't used to being told no.

All at once, he rolled off. He unsnapped and unzipped his jeans, worked them down his legs and kicked them free. I recognized this trick. It was meant to encourage me to get undressed. When I didn't, Elvis mounted me anyway, flagstaff raised to full salute.

He stroked and stroked, prodding his hardness between my legs until it spasmed.

“Unnh!!” His deep voice hit a bass note at the low end of the scale.

He collapsed atop me, chest heaving. I squirmed out from under.

He rolled onto his back, stared at the ceiling. We lay in silence, catching our breath.

Elvis turned toward me. I was surprised to see his face was sad.

“You don’t have to go anywhere, do you Rascal?”

The question sounded like a little boy’s. It melted me.

I stroked his head. His lush hair was stiff and sweaty, strands caked to his brow.

“You want me to stay?”

“You stay all night, Rascal.”

“I have a model shoot in the morning.”

“What time?”

“Eleven o’clock.”

“I don’t like to get up until four or five. No one’ll be missing you if you stay?”

“Astrid knows where I am. Mutti will not worry.”

“Mutti?”

“Mother.”

Elvis jerked his neck back.

“You live with your *mama*?”

“Mutti lives with Astrid and me.”

“Where’s your pa?”

“He is in Germany. My parents are not married.”

“Not married? You mean, they’re divorced?”

I nodded.

Elvis turned his gaze toward the ceiling, then back to me.

“I didn’t mean it to sound like that, Rascal. I mean, I never think of things like that. You know, when I get married, it’s gonna be forever.”

“You are thinking of marriage? You have a girlfriend you are going to marry? You are in love with some lucky girl?”

I poked him in the ribs.

Elvis laughed. His head fell back on the pillow.

“Honey, I ain’t never been in love with but one woman.”

“And what is her name?”

“Gladys.”

“Gladys? Have I heard of this girl?”

“That’s mama. Gladys is my mama.”

“And your mama is in Memphis?”

Elvis fell silent. He stared into space. The silence lengthened. It made me uneasy.

He turned toward me, propped an elbow and laid his head on his hand. His eyes were serious. His voice lowered to a whisper.

“Mama’s with the angels now. She left us three years ago.”

I felt foolish. I was not a big Elvis fan, which is why I hadn't known this basic fact the rest of the world knew.

"I am sorry!" I said.

Elvis gazed at me.

"Rascal, can I ask you something?"

I nodded.

"You ever wonder why you wind up where you do? Why things happen to you, and the people you love? What I mean is, you ever know anybody you loved who's died? I mean, died young? You know, mama was too young. And I wonder what I'm still doing here, alive and all. Why am I so special, I get to live? Why was I the one who got to live and my brother didn't?"

"Your brother is dead?"

"Yeah, I had a twin. But he was dead at birth. You know, stillborn. And I was alive and a-kicking and a-wailing. And here I am. And here you are. We're both just here in Vegas, alive and a-kicking. Mama's dead. My brother's dead. A lot of people die. Buddy Holly's dead and he was younger than me."

"I do not know. I do not really think of such things."

In truth, I hadn't really known death. Except for Oma Maria, my dear grandmother. But where I'd grown up, in Munich, all the people older than I had seen death countless times. They'd lived through the war. I'd been an infant then.

My parents had scores of bad memories. They didn't talk about them. Papa had seen death every day during the war and was half-dead himself when he finally came home. My memories of the war were false. They were just the stories Mutti had told me of the first two years of my life. Like the time a bomb fell a few feet from where I was sitting outside a Bavarian farmhouse.

I turned to Elvis.

“Mutti said I almost died once, during the war. It was dangerous, you know, in Germany. When I was a baby, the bombers came a lot over Munich, and everyone who lived in our apartment building had to go down into the basement, and I think a lot of people in the city were killed. Mutti took me to live with some friends of ours on a farm. And she told me that I was sitting in the yard outside the house, playing with the cats, when a bomber flew over and there was an explosion and it threw me into the air. Mutti ran out of the house and grabbed me and right away she took me into the forest. And then she went all the way to Prague, hiding me most of the time because it was against the law for people not in the army to leave Germany.”

“She carried you all that way, Rascal?”

“I do not think so. She got on a train and she hid me inside her coat. And she begged for food from farmers we met, and maybe they helped us get to Prague. That is where Papa was an officer, and he found us a home with the bishop. I

remember that old bishop. He had a white beard. One time he told to me, 'If you ever lie, I am going to cut your tongue out.' That is why I am always afraid to lie.”

“Yeah, Mama taught me that lying is a sin,” Elvis said. “I can’t stand for liars.”

I shook my head. “I do not know why some people live and some people die. Papa saw a lot of his friends die in the war. When he came home, after the war, he was very sick. He did not even weigh one hundred pounds. But he was very lucky, you know. So many died, but he was kept as a prisoner, and he was alive. And then they let him go. I cannot explain it. Only God knows these things.”

Elvis nodded silently. We both stared at the ceiling, our hearts beating, our bodies touching side by side, warm on top of the bed. We were alive, breathing, thinking. From outside the door came a burst of laughter. But on this side of the door the two of us were lost in thoughts. For a moment, I forgot that I was with Elvis.

His rumbly voice broke the silence.

“Rascal, you ain’t like the other girls I’ve met in this town. That’s good. You think about things just like I do. And you’re a lady. I mean, you’re polite and all. Kinda quiet. And you’re not much of a drinker. And you’re not a smoker. Girls shouldn’t smoke. It’s cheap. You’re going to take care of yourself. You’re going to

tee-see-bee. You're going to take care of business. You're going to do real good with your dancing and your skating."

"Thank you. You are doing well, too, with your music."

I didn't feel silly for saying such a thing. We were friends now.

Elvis shrugged. "Well, someone has to be the big singer, Rascal."

He was still staring at the ceiling. "I guess someone had to be me, the king of rock 'n' roll music. But really, the movies is where it's at. You know, James Dean, Marlon Brando, that's what I wanna be. A serious actor. And I know their secret. It's simple. You know why James Dean and Marlon Brando got so big?"

I knew. Because they were handsome and sexy. *Especially* Brando. When he was on the screen, I couldn't take my eyes off him. Back in Munich, at school, all the students were mad about James Dean. But I was even madder about Marlon Brando. And I still was. What I wouldn't do to be with Brando! Even to meet him. The sexiest man alive.

I shook my head, thinking of Brando: those biceps, that dark hair, that moodiness, that simmering rage ready to explode. That pout, so much more dangerous than Elvis' sneer.

Elvis took my headshake to mean no.

“They got so big because you never see them smile, do you, Rascal?”

He furrowed his brow and squinted — mimicking a brooding expression. He was trying to be serious. But it looked so comical, I had to bite my cheek.

“That’s it!” He snapped his fingers. “That’s their secret. *They never smile.*”

His face relaxed. He grinned his crooked grin.

Elvis was not, never would be, James Dean or Marlon Brando. But he was right what he said about them.

I thought about it. All my friends in school in Munich had gone to American movies and idolized the biggest stars. Brando was my male idol, like I said, but the others went for Dean. There had been an older student named Christian who looked just like James Dean, and he was the most popular boy in school. Christian was going out with my best friend, Muschi, even though her family was rich and his working-class, and such a dating match was *verboten*.

No, I couldn’t think of Brando or Dean smiling in any of their scenes. Well, maybe Brando, for only a second, at the end of *The Wild One*.

Elvis sat up. He was excited.

“Y’know, Rascal, I want to do a serious movie, something classic.

Something they’re gonna remember me by. Now, the movies I make are all the same. They’re travelogues. Y’know, I’m in Hawaii, I sing to girls and I fight guys. And then I go somewhere else, and I sing to girls and I fight guys. If they put me in a movie on Mars, I’ll be singing to Martian girls who got those antennas, and I’ll be fighting Martian guys with two heads. Y’know, I’d like to do some serious drama roles. I’m tired of the musicals. But my next one is gonna have me as a boxer, and they got some old boxer named Mushy who’s gonna learn me how to box.”

“Muschi? That’s my best friend’s name!”

“Well, this Mushy has a nose like this.” Elvis flattened his nose with a finger. “Does your friend look like that?”

I laughed. “Of course she does not! My friend, she is very pretty. But the movies you are in, they cannot be too bad a thing for you to do. They make you all this money, yes?”

“*Money*, Rascal. That’s all I got is money! I buy whatever I want, and then there’s always something else to buy. The money keeps coming and coming. It’s crazy! It don’t make no sense. I can buy anything I want. But it’s a lot more fun giving what you buy to people, see their eyes light up like Christmas. That’s really all that money means any more.”

I laughed. I had too much money to spend, too. It just kept coming to me here in Vegas. Men were practically throwing it at me. Elvis and I shared the same secret: *Money was a joke*. It was horrible to be without it, but once it started coming and coming, in crazy amounts, it became absurd.

All around us, people were slaving for money, gambling for money, growing old for money. And here we were: Elvis the singer and Ingrid the skater, like kids in a candy store with our pockets stuffed with money — more than we could count, more than we bothered to count. Men pursued me and lavished me with jewelry, and bought me whatever I wanted. And when I’d been Major Riddle’s gambling companion when I was a showgirl at the Dunes, I’d made out like a bandit.

We were a couple of spoiled brats, Elvis and I. And because our good luck mystified us, we mocked it.

We lay back on the bed and sighed.

“The hell with money,” Elvis sneered.

“The hell with money!” I scoffed.

We burst out giggling like children.

Elvis pointed at his penis. It had shrunk to half-staff.

“He don’t like money, either, Rascal.”

I rolled my eyes, then burst out laughing again.

Elvis drew a deep breath and released it with a long sigh. He turned his head toward me. He smiled sweetly. His eyes narrowed.

“Rascal, will you do something for me?”

I was worried he was going to ask me to undress. At that moment, I might have. I felt giddy.

Elvis curled on top of the sheets and lowered his chin on his chest.

His eyes turned up toward me like a small child’s.

“Talk baby-talk to me.”