

*THE LAND  
OF GRACE*

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*LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE*

From where he stood, backstage at the Willow Ruth AMVETS, the murmur of female voices and the clamorous shuffling sounded like a pretty lively crowd swarming into the club. And after a few minutes all the clapping and the foot-stomping, accompanying the furious chant of “WE WANT ELVIS! WE WANT ELVIS!” had him imagining a standing-room-only throng of rabid Elvis fans. It even ignited an old, familiar spark down in his gut that he thought he’d lost somewhere on that long road he’d been traveling.

“This is why I do this,” he told himself under his breath. “By God, this is what gets me up in the morning.”

As if he’d recited some magical incantation, the memory of the latest string of skimpy, unresponsive audiences across the plains of Kansas and Nebraska faded into a mist. But when he drew back the musty stage curtain and peeked down on all the white hair and wrinkled faces scattered over a dozen rows of metal folding chairs, his sudden euphoria dissolved into the trickle of bile he felt rising up in his throat. He washed down the bitter taste with a hard slug of his Pepsi and wondered if this was what seven years of lugging his *King of Kings Elvis Tribute* through every little Walmart-raped town to-hell-and-gone had finally come down to: senior night at the AMVETS.

“Well, what the hell,” he said, shrugging. “It’s show time, and they got out of their rocking chairs to see Elvis.” He crushed his Pepsi can, dropped it at his feet, and cued his backing tracks with his remote. The club lights dimmed, the overture to *2001: A Space Odyssey* swelled through the room, and the unruly knot of old ladies fell as silent as pallbearers. But as the overture segued into the “That’s All Right, Mama” vamp they sounded like a cage of hungry

animals about to be fed. When the curtain opened and he walked onstage through a swirl of lights in the white Aloha jump suit with the E-L-V-I-S sign flashing red behind him, turning while spreading out his cape to let the spangled eagle on the back glitter like the Las Vegas Strip, he felt as if he were in the middle of a prison break.

Except for one old lady in a wheelchair, they all bounced out of their seats and jammed in around the foot of the stage. A couple of the club's employees tried to get them to sit down but gave up when it looked as if they were going to have a riot on their hands.

All the excitement and the beat of "See, See Rider" kindled a firestorm inside of him. Next, he kicked straight into "I Got a Woman," already soaring on a hot wave of senior hysteria.

Right in the middle of his hunka, hunka move in "Burning Love" he experienced that rare moment all the great entertainers speak of in whispered reverence; that moment, often compared to lightning being captured in a bottle, when singer and audience magically become one. And the magic stayed with him all the way to the end, though one granny had thrown off his timing a little between "Teddy Bear" and "Don't be Cruel" by pulling up her dress and flashing her black panties.

If anyone could tell his vocals had stumbled for half a minute, they didn't show it. All through his performance they stood, squealing at every wiggle of his leg, every curl of his lip, sounding as feral as any mob of hormone-charged teenage girls he'd ever heard.

As the final notes of "Can't Help Falling in Love" faded and he handed out the last of his scarves, it dawned on him that the youngest one out there had to be somebody's great-grandmother. So getting laid was way out of the question. But he figured that loss was more than compensated by knowing that these ladies were the King's contemporaries, the only audience that could appreciate a truly artistic interpretation of Elvis' persona.

While taking his final bow to raucous screams and ap-

plause, he felt as if they had given him the power to rise up from that drab little club and take his place among all the stars in the galaxy. Before he could make his exit, one old woman was flailing away to swing her leg over the stage apron. Afraid she might fall, he bent over to help her to her feet.

A squad of AMVETS employees jogged over to intercept the invader, but he waved them off. She looked harmless enough, and from the way she tilted her head back, he figured she was just excited from the concert and wanted a kiss. But when he dipped down to give her a little thrill, she said in his ear, “You were purty good out there, son. But you wouldn’t make a pimple on the King’s ass.”

Now, he knew he wasn’t Elvis. Not really Elvis. Nobody had to tell him that. But as he tossed back another cold Pepsi and rested his haunches on a ragged lawn chair in what passed for a dressing room, he had to admit that the old woman had kind of hurt his feelings. And it wasn’t so much what she said, although that was bad enough, it was the trouble she went through to deliver her message. He felt a sinking sensation accompanied by a wave of nausea as if he were on an elevator that dropped a little faster than he expected. It was a feeling he often had anytime he suspected he’d never be anybody but ol’ Doyle Brisendine from San Angelo, Texas.

The only thing left was for Mr. Parker, the club manager, to deliver the rest of his fee. Dressed in jeans and a red and blue plaid sport shirt, with the Aloha airing out on a rack behind him, Doyle waited. “What does that old bitch know, anyway?” he snarled. “The rest of them liked me. Hell, they loved me.”

The room was powdered in dust and carried the faint scent of a wet dog. The spotted mirror in front of a cluttered table told him it had tried to be an actual dressing room at one time. But all the broke-leg chairs and cracked table tops piled in the corners made it look more like a storm-littered beach on Galveston Bay.

He'd gone over the graffiti on the walls a couple of times and didn't find any of it very interesting—just a few numbers to call for “a good time” and the names of a some people who were “here” on various dates. The art work, mostly crudely drawn genitalia, did have one sketch of a vagina that, to the best of Doyle's memory, looked like a pretty convincing representation of the real thing.

Something written over the mirror caught his eye, but the lettering was too small to make out from the chair. When he got close enough, he saw that the words were drawn in such a fine calligraphy that he figured it must have taken its author a long time to write. It declared simply, “If you're reading this, you are standing in the heart of my broken dream.” And it was that inscription along with the old woman's harsh assessment of his act when he exited the stage that made him wonder if it was too late to go back home and take his uncle up on that grocery clerk job at Albertsons.

After a while, he consoled himself by thinking the money he had coming would go a long way toward getting him back to San Angelo. He could stay in a couple of nice motels, even eat a few decent meals along the way. But he couldn't get away from the thought that whatever amount the wild flock of old ladies had spent out there would have covered only a fraction of the fee he'd been promised. The more time that went by, the more he was convinced that the five-hundred they'd paid up-front would be the only money he'd ever see from this down-at-the-heels, geriatric gig.

While cramming the Aloha into his garment bag, he cursed himself for being so stupid. He wondered what could have made him believe an AMVETS in an Alabama town barely on the map could pay him over six times his usual fee. Of course, he did suspect it was bullshit till they actually wired him the advance to the Check-and-Go in Bellevue, Nebraska. With his bookings calendar blank for the next three months, it was either the Willow Ruth AMVETS or nothing. So he had packed up his van and headed toward Alabama, stopping only for gas and nature while



got time.”

“Well, it’s getting kind of late, and I don’t usually...”

“Course you don’t have to, but she said she’d really appreciate it.”

“It’s not one of those old...?”

“Oh, hell, no,” Parker said, chuckling. “I wouldn’t do that to you after what you did out there. I’ll swear, son, you are a true professional if I’ve ever seen one. You took to our little humble stage like you was performing at the International. And you sang to that hand-full of biddies like they was two thousand débutantes, sipping champagne out of crystal. And I’ll be damned if you didn’t look and sound like the real thing, too. And, believe me, I know. I’m an Elvis fan from way back. Might even call me a Elvis scholar.”

“Well, thank you, sir,” Doyle said. Disarmed by the compliment and his newfound riches, he couldn’t come up with a reason to refuse. So he shrugged and added, “Sure, I’ll talk to her. Why not.”

The club had looked seedy enough in the dark, but with its harsh overhead lights glaring down and Ernest Tubb rendering “Walking the Floor” from the house speakers, Doyle thought the joint had taken on the ambiance of the underside of a rock. That is, with the exception of the woman sitting at the table near the wall. She stood and smiled as Doyle and Parker approached.

“Mr. Brisendine, this is Ms. Rhonda Price,” Parker said.

“You were just wonderful out there tonight,” she said, holding out her hand.

“Well, th...thank you, ma’am,” Doyle stuttered while holding her soft hand as if he didn’t quite know what to do with it.

Doyle liked her large brown eyes, her throaty voice, and he liked the hue of her skin that told him she spent just the right amount of time under a good tanning lamp. He liked the way her black hair, bound tight behind her head, shimmered in the light. He especially liked the fragrance now wafting in front of his nose. He couldn’t decide if it

was flowers, exotic spices or something good to eat, but he was sure he was looking at the personification of that scent, and it scared him. He had no doubt that she was way out of his league, and that he had no chance in hell of getting in those high-class panties.

“That’s great,” she said, as she retrieved her hand and eased back into her chair. “That yes ma’am, no ma’am stuff. You’re still in character, aren’t you?”

“Well, I’m, uh...Yes ma’am. I guess so,” he said as he pulled up the chair across from her and sat down.

“Well, hey, I’m gonna let you two get acquainted,” Parker said.

Doyle couldn’t think of anything to say, but she looked perfectly content to just sit there and smile at him from across the table. That was okay with him too. He just wished whoever had put together the playlist they were listening to had picked out something a little more romantic than Eddie Arnold wailing “Cattle Call.”

Doyle finally pulled the envelope from his pocket and thumped it on the table. “You uh... are you the one I should thank for this?”

“Well, the people I work for,” she said.

“Who is that, by the way?”

“It’s a faith-based organization you’ve probably never heard of called Our Lady of TCB.”

“You mean like, taking care of business?”

“Taking care of business,” she said. “Very good.”

“How would they, I mean how did they ever find out about me?”

“I couldn’t really say other than the fact that I know they stay plugged into the entertainment trade. Especially the Elvis acts. Well, the really good ones anyway.”

“Tell them I really appreciate it.”

“I will. They tell me you changed your act a few years back.”

“Man, those cats really do keep up with this stuff,” Doyle said, nodding, feeling a little more comfortable with the conversation now that it had turned to something dear

to his heart. “Yeah, actually, I used to do Elvis, 1956. You know how he dressed with the pegged pants, the loud shirts and sport coats.”

“I get it,” She said. “With the simple trio backing him—Scotty, Bill and DJ.”

“Exactly. During the first set, all my backing tracks were just rock-a-billy stuff. The second set was the ’68 comeback, and I came out in a tight leather jumpsuit.”

“You know,” she said, giving him that smile again. “I can see it. If you had on that leather jumpsuit right now, you’d be the ’68 Comeback Elvis right down to the ground.”

“Oh,” he chuckled, feeling himself blush. “I don’t know about all that. I did it like that for a few years. But it got to where all people wanted was the Las Vegas Elvis. You know, like I did tonight, with all the capes and the spangles and the karate kicks.”

She shook her head and said, “People can be so stupid.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” he said. “What really gets me is all those overweight clowns out there doing Elvis, and comedians still doing fat Elvis jokes.” He shook his head. “It’s got to where people forgot that for most of the twenty years that we saw Elvis, he was as streamlined as a race horse. Then he hit his forties and sickness got the best of him that last year. Damn vultures,” Doyle snarled. “They just lay around and wait for somebody who’s on top to stumble a little. Oh, hell. Look, I’m sorry, I kinda get on my soapbox sometimes about Elvis.”

“Oh, don’t apologize,” she said. “We feel exactly the same way.”

It was late, and he knew she would get up and leave at any moment. But he wasn’t quite ready to lose her yet, so he blurted, “Hey, I know he’s trying to close, but I bet we could get Parker to hustle us up a couple of drinks.”

“Wouldn’t you rather go get some dinner?”

“Dinner? You mean, go somewhere? Like together?”

“That’s sort of what I had in mind,” she said.

“Well, I guess I could eat,” he said, his stomach growling at the memory of gobbling down the last of the jerky

coming out of Little Rock. “You know a place open this time of night?”

“Oh, I know the best place of all,” she said as she stood. “Come on. We’ll take my car.”

He glanced over at his computer, his amp, his mic, his speakers, his neon sign and the light show. Then he still had all his makeup, not to mention the Aloha he had worn during the show and the Fringe he’d broken out for back-up. Damn near twenty thousand dollars worth of gear and wardrobe not counting his van. That was a lot of money, but it made him a little sick every time he thought about what all that stuff had really cost him. “I got all my...” he said while pointing to the stage.

“Don’t worry about your stuff,” she said. “The Colonel’ll take care of it for you. Won’t you, Colonel?” she called.

“Safe as if it was in a bank,” Parker answered from somewhere in the shadows beyond the bar.

Doyle followed her to the door through the wonderful scent she left in her wake. “Hey,” he said. “Colonel Parker. Man, that’s a hell of a coincidence, isn’t it?”

She didn’t answer as she walked ahead of him, clutching a black leather purse in her arm like a running back carrying a football. He couldn’t help but notice that she had a couple of very playful-looking legs working under a tight knee-length skirt. She and those legs led him across the parking lot to something that made him think of a hulking mass of pink candy perched on four monstrous marshmallows. The headlights of a passing truck shimmered over its glossy pink finish. “*This* is your car?” he said, easing around the vintage automobile as though it were a ticking bomb sitting on gangster sidewalks.

“My mama’s. Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“It’s something,” he said.

“It’s a ’55 Fleetwood Special. You won’t see many of these around.”

“I know. I know. It’s just like the one Elvis bought his mother.”

“Yes,” she said. “Now that you mention it, I think it is.”

“Can I drive?”

“Nah, better not. Mama’d kill me if I let someone she didn’t know behind the wheel of her baby. Hop in.”

He opened the passenger door and settled into a pillow of plush white leather. “No seat belts?” he said.

“You won’t need one,” she said, sliding behind the wheel. “I’m a real good driver.” She started the car and pulled out onto the road.

After a few miles, he leaned his head into the soft leather, the cushy suspension making him feel as if he were sitting on a big pink cloud floating through the night.