

In Those First
Bright Days
of Elvis

-BY-

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CHAPTER 1
THE HILLBILLY AMATEUR SHOW

From my seat behind the stage in the Market Square Arena in Indianapolis, all I could see of the star performer was his gyrating backside. Glaring spotlights revealed the outline of his underpants through his white suit.

While he sang the final song, an assistant hung scarves around his neck, which he passed on to screaming audience members. Every aspect of his person radiated exhaustion. He was about to give away the last scarf when he glanced over his shoulder and saw me. He cocked his head, his face quizzical. I moved to the edge of the stage. A woman snatched at the scarf, but he reached past her and draped it around my neck, his eyes still questioning.

Knowing he'd never hear me, even if I yelled in his ear, I gestured to myself and, with exaggerated lips, mouthed, "Juliet."

A smile touched his face. He had time only to nod before applause and screams forced him back into the world of fame, where his ambition and his unforgettable voice had imprisoned him.

I tried to go backstage after the show, but his guards were not convinced I was a friend. Less than two months later, he was dead. This was the end of the story—the last, sad days of his life. But I saw him perform in a little town in Arkansas during his first, bright days. The occasion was The Free Hillbilly Amateur Show. His star was low

JOSEPHINE RASCOE KEENAN

on the horizon at that time, but it would soon blaze like a supernova in the sky.



The sun had long set, but the air still burned hot as a by-product at eight o'clock that October night when we four rushed up to the gates of Memorial Stadium. At the back of the crowd, waiting to get in, I pointed to the poster of the show's feature attraction.

"Who is this Elvis guy, anyway?"

"They say he's on his way to the top," Della said.

"And playing in El Dorado, Arkansas?" I tapped my foot. "I never heard of him."

Faye shrugged. "Oh well. When have we ever turned down a free show?"

Della peered into Rhonda's face. "You're getting another pimple. You need to use that cream I told you about."

Rhonda stuck out her tongue.

I straightened Della's Peter Pan collar. "Your new pink blouse is the most. A birthday present?"

"Yes, but my big present is Daddy letting me have the car tonight for the first time."

Without thinking, I blurted out, "Mama made me wait till I turned fifteen, too."

The girls gave me their familiar, pitying looks that said they knew I had no dad. I pressed my fingers against the shame that flared up in my cheeks whenever my gimped family came into focus. In truth, I did have one, but no sane person would call him a dad.

Rhonda pulled a compact out of her purse and checked first one area then another of her face in the small mirror.

"Maylene McCord's been getting the car since she turned fourteen."

I sighed. "Maybe that's why she's radioactive popular. Look at her, up there in front with her in-crowd cronies."

Della frowned. "She could put someone's eye out, swinging that foot-long ponytail around."

"She calls it her 'crown in glory,'" Rhonda said, tossing her head as if she could swing instead of wag her two-inch ponytail. "You know,

In Those First Bright Days of Elvis

like the hymn.”

“Think they’ll save us seats?” I asked with a cynical laugh.

“They act like we’ve got cooties!” Faye jerked up her chin. “Who wants to sit with them, anyway?”

Della tapped Faye’s nose with a finger. “You do, for one.”

“Let’s face it,” I said. “We all do.”

Della snorted. “They don’t hobnob with Dilberts, as they so charmingly refer to us.”

My sphere of influence consisted of these three friends. I’d do better to call it my sphere of *no* influence, for we fabulous four—joke—could not influence the in-crowd to acknowledge our existence. I guess if I were one of them, I’d feel the same way about us groveling Dilberts—so anxious to please, always hoping that today they’d speak to us in the halls, choose us for their team, invite us to go to the Dairyette with them. We tried so hard, but to the mighty in-crowd, we remained invisible. “Try, try, cry, cry.”

To be totally honest, all our efforts shimmered with rage about the way they treated us, so who could blame them? *At least we four have each other. Or so I thought.*

A tall, lanky guy with dishwasher-blond hair squeezed his way through the crowd to Maylene’s group. I shifted my stance to get a better view of him.

“Hubba hubba! Who’s that?”

“I’ve seen him around,” Rhonda said. “He’s older. First year college, I think.”

I fanned myself with my hand. “Wow! He’s so cute! Does somebody in that crowd go with him?”

Della shrugged. “Who knows, and who cares?”

I gave her a sly grin. “I do, for one.”

The gates swung open, and we inched inside and up the bleacher steps. I canvassed the seating area.

“Maylene’s group is over there in the center section.”

Della squinted. “Well, they’re not beckoning to us. I can see that much without my glasses.”

The bleachers, still hot from the southern sun beating down on

JOSEPHINE RASCOE KEENAN

them all day, heated our fannies as we settled a few rows behind them. A makeshift, wooden platform on the stadium grass served as a stage. Five contestants in the preshow talent competition bleated their songs to an inattentive crowd.

My gaze drifted over the bleachers, and adrenaline flushed through me. Off to the right, about ten rows down, sat my father. Even from that far away, I could tell he was unshaven. I hadn't seen him in five months, and I didn't want to see him for another five, if ever. But hard as I tried, I couldn't keep my eyes off him.

Removing a small flask from his pocket, he stole a glance over his shoulder. I dodged behind the blue-haired lady in front of me, but not before seeing him take a quick nip.

"Will you change seats with me, Della?" I asked, churning to get out of his line of vision.

"What for?"

"I just want to sit on the aisle."

She groaned and picked up her purse. "I guess so."

The audience jeered as the off-key talent show winner clutched his prize of a seventy-five dollar bond and clomped off the stage. Three musicians clattered on behind him, lugging music stands and chairs.

"That's the backup group for the feature attraction," Della said.

The three warmed up their instruments with a din of discordant noise. People stomped their feet on the bleachers until finally the MC, dressed in a candy-striped, red-and-white jacket, leaped upon the platform.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your patience."

The crowd guffawed.

"You're going to love our show!" he shouted into the mic. "At this time, I am happy to introduce the boys accompanying tonight's feature attraction. Please hold your applause until the last."

The crowd hooted.

The MC shouted again. "Please welcome Scotty Moore on guitar, Bill Black on upright bass, and D. J. Fontana on drums!"

People made sloppy slaps.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, that rockabilly, bopping hillbilly,"

In Those First Bright Days of Elvis

he paused for effect, “Mr. Elll—vis Presley!”

With a sheepish smile, the new singer ran out from underneath the bleachers, carrying his guitar. His dark hair was combed back off his forehead in pompadour style. He wore violet pants, a black shirt, an orange jacket, and white bucks.

I bounced on the bleacher. “Get a load of that outfit.”

Della sneered. “He looks like a hood with the sideburns and ducktail.”

“No boy I know would be caught dead dressed like that,” said Rhonda.

I laughed. “Your precious Eugene Hoffmeyer’s been wearing mismatched clothes since seventh grade.”

“That doesn’t make him a hood.”

“I didn’t say it did.”

“You *insinuated* it did. I don’t like it when people insinuate stuff. Just last week, Maylene McCord insinuated I was stupid.”

“What did she say?”

“She said, ‘Rhonda, you’re stupid.’”

We cracked up.

Elvis Presley’s penetrating eyes swept the audience. He strummed a chord.

“Folks, I’m gonna start with ‘That’s All Right.’”

“Hurry up, or you’ll be ending with that, too!” a man yelled.

Elvis signaled his musicians, and they launched into the music—wild and loud. He gyrated, twisted his hips, and squatted low. Suddenly, he jerked his face from profile to front and fixed the audience with a powerful stare.

I leaped up, screaming.

“Julie Morgan!” Della yanked at me. “What’s the matter with you?”

I dropped into a squat, arms covering my head, in case my father was looking, along with everyone else.

“I couldn’t help it!” I yelled over the blaring music. I eased back onto the bleacher. “Dig that sound! That’s not country. It’s different.”

The singer rolled up and down on the balls of his feet, his hair flopping over his eyes. Grabbing the slender pole that held the mic, he slung it back and forth, rolling its base in a circle.

“I heard he dates a girl here in town,” Rhonda said.

JOSEPHINE RASCOE KEENAN

“You don’t mean?” I said.

“It’s rumored he gave her a pink Cadillac! We drove by her house one night last week.”

Della crossed her eyes to signal Rhonda, but she didn’t notice. “Her front door was open, and she was standing just inside with a light shining behind her.”

I felt like she’d slapped me in the face. “We, who, drove by her house?”

“We all—oops.” Rhonda tucked her chin.

“Rhonda, you weren’t supposed to tell.” Della dropped her head into her hands.

I grabbed Rhonda’s arm. “You got the car for the first time . . . and you didn’t come by for me?”

“I only got it for an hour and on the spur of the moment. We didn’t have time to go all the way over to your house.”

“You can go from one end of this town to the other in five minutes,” I said.

A barrier of raucous music fell between us. I stared at the stage with unseeing eyes, wondering what else they had left me out of.

The end of the number met with rousing applause. Immediately, Elvis launched into another. For a while, we watched the show, saying nothing. Then Rhonda turned to me.

“We didn’t mean to leave you out. We just wanted to get a load of the car and cast an eyeball at a girl who’s done IT.”

“What makes you think she’s done IT?”

“By the way she stood, slouched, with her pelvis slung out.”

“That’s stupid,” I said. “You slouch. Have you been doing IT?”

She put on a pious face. “Nice girls don’t do IT until they’re married.”

I raised one eyebrow. “A nice girl might for a pink Cadillac.”

The song ended abruptly. In the silent split second before the applause, Rhonda’s voice rang out, “For a guy to give you a car, you’d have to do IT!” And everybody around us heard.

She clapped her hand over her mouth, and we leaned away from her, hiding our faces.

When everyone had turned back around from gawking, I said, “Did you see the car?”

In Those First Bright Days of Elvis

Rhonda said, “No. But she’s no virgin. I’d bet my life on that.”

Elvis lunged to the floor again.

“His music drives me out of my tree,” I said.

At intermission, I spent the last of my allowance at the concession stand for a coke in a sweaty paper cup and gave it to Della.

“Happy birthday.”

At that moment, the college boy passed near me. Our eyes met for a second, then he moved on through the stragglers heading back to their seats.

We had returned to our bleacher when a girl I had never seen before came up the steps of the grandstand. She looked about our age. Like me, she wore a black skirt and a pink peasant blouse, but her skirt wrinkled around her thighs, and her blouse was pulled off the shoulders so low you could see her cleavage. She didn’t seem to notice us, but my heart jumped as she got closer.

Faye clutched my arm. “My God, Julie, that girl is the spitting image of you!”