

Twenty Minutes Until Showtime

By Linda Saether

“Twenty minutes, Mr. Presley.”

Elvis acknowledged the stage manager with a silent nod, one that Joe Esposito translated into a dismissive wave as he stepped out into the hall. Years together had taught him and the other members of the Memphis Mafia to read their boss with the precision of long-married couples, though none of them would admit they were watching him more closely these days. They orbited him like planets around a dimming sun, their gravitational dance growing more precarious with each passing show. The Vegas Hilton had become their universe, its golden elevators and mirrored hallways a maze they'd purposefully memorized through countless nights of shows, parties, and increasingly frequent medical emergencies.

Alone in his dressing room, Elvis reached for the familiar orange bottle, letting a few blue pills tumble into his palm. Diazepam—that's what Dr. Nick called them, though Elvis had long stopped keeping track of names. He swallowed them with lukewarm Pepsi, grimacing at his reflection. Dr. Nick's voice echoed in his head—some to calm the nerves, others to help him sleep, and more to wake him up again. The cycle had become more choreographed than his stage moves, though he couldn't quite remember when the pills had become as essential as breathing. The doctor's promises of “just enough to get you through the show” had evolved into a symphony of prescriptions that played through every hour of his day.

The dressing room walls were covered with photos—snapshots of a life lived at full throttle. There he was with Johnny Cash at Sun Records, when they were both young and hungry. Another showed him with Priscilla and their daughter at Graceland before the divorce had carved another hollow space in his heart. Lisa Marie was eight now, growing up in a world that knew her daddy only as an idol carved in rhinestones and gold, and who she knew for sure hung the moon.

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He picked up his old Martin D-18, different from the gleaming showpieces he used on stage. He had bought it back in '56, when he was still stunned by the success of *Heartbreak Hotel*. His fingers found the frets without thought, muscle memory carrying him back to Sunday mornings in Memphis. The first chord rang out clear and true, a fragment of *Amazing Grace* that his Mama used to sing. Back then, music had been a prayer, pure and simple, before Colonel Parker had turned it into an empire, but he still found his way back to its gospel.

The Colonel, Tom Parker, the former carnival barker who'd transformed a truck driver into a king. Elvis could still remember signing that first contract, his Mama's worried eyes watching as he traded away fifty percent of everything he would ever earn. But the Colonel had delivered on his promises, hadn't he?

From Sun Records sensation to Hollywood's golden boy, from laughingstock Vegas newcomer back in '56 to the Strip's reigning king, he'd blazed a path from Mississippi poverty to international stardom that defied imagination, his voice now as recognized in Berlin as it was in Birmingham, but in the process he had learned that even blessings had their cost.

"Colonel wants to see you, E," Red West's voice carried through the door, heavy with decades of friendship and unspoken worry. Red had been there since high school, back when they'd bonded over their shared love of gospel music and football at Humes High.

"Tell him I'm praying," Elvis replied, and it wasn't entirely a lie. These moments alone with his old guitar were the closest thing to church he had left. His fingers found the opening notes of *Peace in the Valley*, and for a moment, he was back in Memphis, watching his mama smile as he sang her favorite hymn.

"Fifteen minutes!"

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Elvis turned and took in the man in the mirror. His white jumpsuit caught the light like armor, each rhinestone a tiny star in his personal constellation. It was perfect. Bill Belew had outdone himself with this one. The Phoenix suit, they called it, with its high collar and elaborate beading that traced patterns of fire down the legs. His hair was still midnight black, his face fuller than in those wild early days, but his eyes remained unchanged, blue as a Tennessee sky, with that familiar Memphis fire burning behind them. Sometimes, he wondered if that smoldering was consuming him from the inside out. Pricilla had seen it, calling him “fire-eyes” when he raged.

He thought about his first Vegas run in '56, when the New Frontier had billed him below Freddie Martin and his orchestra, with Shecky Greene as the headliner. The critics had dismissed him as a guitar-wielding juvenile delinquent, all sneer and swivel hips. “A jug of corn liquor in a bottle of Champagne,” one had written. Now he owned the Strip, commanding the highest-paid residency in Vegas history – \$1 million a year to play two shows a night in the Vegas Hilton's cavernous showroom, two months a year. The journey from Tupelo to this gilded cage was a story even he sometimes struggled to believe.

“You okay, Buntin?” Linda Thompson's voice carried that sweet Tennessee lilt that always brought him home as she slipped through the doorway. She'd been his anchor these past years since Priscilla left, loving the man rather than the idol. At twenty-seven, she was young enough to still be impressed by the glamour of his life, but wise enough to see through it. His eyes caught the flash of blue diamond on her finger, a random Tuesday gift he'd given her at Graceland, transforming an ordinary moment into memory with the casual extravagance that had become his language of love.

“Ten minutes, Mr. Presley!”

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The call echoed down the hallway, but Elvis kept his gaze fixed on Linda.

“I’m fine, honey,” he lied, and they both let it slide. The truth was a luxury he couldn't afford, not with two thousand people waiting and the Colonel’s contracts to fulfill. Linda's hand lingered on his shoulder, her touch saying what words couldn't, that she saw the tremors in his hands, noticed how the jumpsuit had to be taken out again, watched him chase pills with Pepsi and prayers. That, more than anything, she wished she could help.

“Five minutes!”

This time the call had urgency in it, making Elvis straighten his shoulders beneath the weight of the Phoenix suit.

Elvis popped another pill, chasing it with more soda instead of the water Dr. Nick had recommended. The Memphis Mafia formed around him as he stepped into the hallway, childhood friends and distant cousins who'd followed him from Mississippi mud to a neon world that some believed was paradise.

The excitement of the crowd grew louder as they approached the stage. Twenty years of adoring fans still made his heart race like the first time he was at Sun Studios when he'd paid four dollars to record *My Happiness* for his mama. Maybe that's what kept him going—not the pills or the doctors or the endless contracts, but that electric current of pure love arcing between him and the audience. In those moments, he wasn't the lonely boy from Tupelo or the troubled man in the gilded cage—he was Elvis Presley, and he could make his fans feel that the heavens could touch the earth.

“Two Minutes!”

Through the halls, the opening notes of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* began to build. Elvis

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closed his eyes, letting the memories wash over him: his mother's voice singing hymns in their shotgun house, Sam Phillips at Sun Records telling him to do it again, Ed Sullivan's camera showing him only from the waist up, Hollywood's hollow promises, and that first Vegas failure that had led to this triumph. He thought of twin brother Jesse, stillborn, and wondered if somewhere in heaven, Mama was holding him, watching her surviving son with pride and worry in equal measure.

The orchestra hit its crescendo, and Elvis stepped into the light. Two thousand people leaped to their feet as the opening riff of *C.C. Rider* thundered through the room. For the next two hours, he wouldn't be the man with the pills and problems, he'd give his audience exactly what they came for. The rhinestones caught the spotlight like falling stars, and somewhere in the darkness beyond the stage, a new generation of fans was discovering what their parents had known all along: that when Elvis Presley sang, magic happened, and the world stopped to listen.