

EARLY JUNE

I took a job at MarketRama, a store on the other side of town. I worked as the only bag boy, but had other duties as well. My mind-numbing job paid well although I expected minimum wage for the grunt work. Maximillian Dietrich, owner of MarketRama, could afford it because his last bagger was his daughter Elsie who had left for college. I was the first non-family employee of MarketRama.

I moved constantly, from cleaning the store, to stacking and moving stock, and checking out and double-bagging groceries. I found myself coming home with aching feet although my 45-minute lunch break provided little relief.

MarketRama's air conditioning became faulty as the summer proved hellish. The windows and doors were open to bring in the hot, dry air and the lights stayed off to cool down the store. Also, we had a few box fans placed about the store. It didn't work too well because the freezers and refrigerators worked overtime in the heat. Dietrich didn't bother to get the

air conditioning fixed. He said that the price for repairs would be tremendous.

While at MarketRama, Dietrich would tell me stories about himself during dead time. Dietrich was a large man and a native of Switzerland. He said he used to be skinny, but pumping iron changed all that, although it slightly slowed him down for football. He decided to come to the United States as a college student to experience the culture. Dietrich entered the States on a football scholarship, but wasn't told that he would be playing American football. He did OK as a kicker.

Dietrich would wander the St. Louis streets at night and frequent a 24-hour diner where he met a waitress and his future wife, Elizabeth. He fell in love rather quickly and begged her to marry him until she said yes. They got married two years later. Dietrich later started his store and became successful.

Elizabeth was away visiting relatives and taking care of her sick mother while I worked at MarketRama, so I didn't get a chance to see her during the summer. Dietrich would jokingly tease that the closest to know Elizabeth was through their son, Max Jr., or Junior. Junior, an accountant, graduated the same time I did although he was three years older than me.

Junior and Dietrich swore that he looked like his mother. I said, "Give me a picture and I'll believe it." Pictures were shown from Dietrich's wallet. Junior looked just like his mother, having her dark hair and eyes and small nose, as Elsie looked like her father. She shared his blond hair and pale gray eyes.

Junior, quite the chatterbox, talked more than his father did and seemed content to not have any silence *at all*. He helped out a little in the store by sweeping or mopping, but mostly he hung around me gossiping about everything and everybody since he had nothing else to do. He preferred to carry his accounting away from distractions in the store. I listened with half an ear as I restocked shelves until a customer came in and I had to bag groceries. Junior would shut up and do some restocking or sweeping until the customer left. Then he would resume his conversation.

One day at work, something interesting came out of Junior's mouth. I had to clean up a soda accident in the back and Junior followed me.

"Hey. You play music, right?" Junior asked, his slight Germanic accent falling queerly on my ears. Although he grew up in the same neighborhood as me, because of his Swiss father, he picked up on the inflections and even the language.

"Sure. What's up?"

"My friend, Sal, is looking for players. I would gladly join, but I don't listen to rock and roll music. I'm a jazz fiend." Junior grinned. "Do you listen to rock?"

"Of course I do! What player is he looking for? I play guitar and piano."

"*Wunderbar!* He's looking for both. Kill two birds with one stone, eh? Is that what you say?"

I laughed and nodded. Junior usually mixed up his idioms but got it right that time. He said he would swing me over to Sal's apartment after work and introduce me. Work seemed to go much easier and faster that day.

JOINING THE BAND

Sal lived in the city and an hour away from Market Rama. I tried to think of where we headed to practice because Sal resided on the third floor of the apartment and I knew that some of his neighbors wouldn't be happy with the noise. Sal greeted us and led us inside. I figured Sal used to be a football player. He had such a large build and a commanding voice. He wore his jet hair in a crew cut.

Sal's roomy apartment appeared small because of instruments and recording equipment. The apartment had an electric organ, electric piano, one acoustic and one electric bass, and two acoustic and three electric guitars. Sal turned to me and said, "I need a guitar player. How long have you been playing?"

"Er...not long, but I've had piano for a while. I can pick up well."

Sal frowned. "I want to see. You look promising enough." He picked up an acoustic guitar. "Try this." He handed the guitar to me.

I scowled. I knew I should have brought my own guitar, but Junior had told me that Sal had already a few I could try. If we tried to swing back to my house and then to Sal's the drive would have been an extra hour and Sal had something to do later. I pulled the strap over my head and realized that I would be playing it front to back. I shrugged. Not a problem. Luckily, I could play either way, although using my stronger right hand for the fret board would be ideal. I strummed a few notes and asked Sal, "What do you want me to play?"

Sal answered, "Anything you like, as long as it's rockin'." He grinned. I began an acoustic rock riff and played a first verse. My fingers were going to pay afterward. Sal seemed pleased and said, "Let's see how well you play with others." He picked up his bass and we had a mini jam session. Junior became content and said something congratulatory in German. I smiled and handed the guitar back to Sal. He said with much enthusiasm, "You're hired!"

"Great. When do I start?"

"Tomorrow. I'm no good at giving directions, but Junior knows where we practice. Just remember where he drives you. It's a little out of the way place that a very few would stumble to." He led Junior and me out to the door. "Junior, you found a real gem this time! Thanks a lot."

Junior smiled. "No problem! I'm glad to help." We left Sal's apartment. As we went downstairs, Junior said, "Good luck with all your endeavors. Sal is sorta hard to get along with, but you should fit in nicely."

“How?”

“Um...I don't think you'll butt heads with Sal. That's the only way you can get along with him. He's quite stubborn.” Junior and I remained silent as we made our way to the car and the drive back to the store.

Junior dropped me off at a little recording studio where I met Frank, Mark, and Lauren. When I first met Mark, I gasped inwardly. No one could ever forget such features. He had flawless skin, dark, extremely curly mahogany hair that stopped a bit past his shoulder blades, and hazel eyes with a touch of pale grass green. A definite jaw line and long nose kept his features from being delicate. “He must have modeled,” I thought, but didn't ask. Mark also seemed to be the closest in age.

“Hi, I'm Mark,” he said and gave out a hand to shake. I returned it and mumbled my name. Introductions to the drummer, Frank, and the producer, Lauren, followed shortly.

Frank looked to have come straight from California, sporting a tan and a wild haircut on his bottle-blond tresses. His dark brown roots could be seen. He also had many earrings in both ears. Californian he proved not, because when he spoke, his St. Louis accent gave him away.

Lauren had the same height and build as me, but she had an odd accent. “Are you from St. Louis?” I asked. She said yes and complained that until people knew her, they always thought she was from out of state or from Australia. As I got to know Lauren, I tried to think of how she developed her unusual speech inflections.

“I hope you learn fast,” Lauren told me. “I tried to convince Sal to wait until after the first album was out then he could replace Eric, but he decided that he couldn’t wait.”

I felt my palms start to sweat. “OK.”

“Don’t be so nervous! You’re a musician, right? They learn fast.” She switched off the mic and went about her business. Mark got the mic set up. Frank seated at his drum kit and appeared ready to play. He twirled his sticks and snapped at his gum.

“Why did we have to get rid of Eric?” Mark complained to Sal.

Sal shot bitterly, “He never showed up on time! Constantly late and making excuses. He may be the best player in the world, but he doesn’t show much respect by coming in here late.”

I gulped and made a mental note to never be late or call ahead if I were to be.

Sal pointed to the empty chair. “You sit right there.” A mic and a piano were behind the chair. I saw a stool nearby and took it. I felt better sitting on a stool. As I sat, Mark adjusted the mic for me.

“I wonder how you play,” Mark said. I pulled out one of my guitars from its case.

“Well enough.”

Mark laughed. “You’re funny.” He frowned as he saw the instrument. “I never saw a guitar look like that. That doesn’t have steel strings.”

“This is a Spanish guitar. It uses nylon strings and produces a warmer sound.”

Sal grumbled, “You didn’t tell me you played classical guitar!”

“You didn’t ask.”

He groaned. “This will ruin our sound!”

“I have an acoustic! Don’t freak out on me.”

“All right. Listen carefully to the song as I play, and then you follow. I’ll get the bass and we’ll try it.”

I scowled. “You don’t have written music?”

Sal shook his head. “All up here.” He tapped at his temple.

I sighed and muttered, “This is going to be hard!”

Frank said to me, “It’s OK. Someone usually writes the notation later. I read music too. Do you know how to write?”

I nodded. All I had to do was listen for chord changes. “Sal, can you tell me the chords you play? I can write around them.”

Sal seemed to brighten. “That’s cool, but you really would like to listen to the song first. We got some of them recorded.”

Mark complained, “Let’s go!”

Lauren switched on the mic and said, “I have last session’s tape. On the count of five, four, three...” The tape began to play. I tapped my foot, keeping time but listening only for the guitar parts. I groaned inwardly at the well written and played songs. Eric was a terrific guitarist. With his riffs, they were sure to get to the top. I didn’t play guitar that long to be that experienced.

As the tape carried on, someone came inside the studio and handed me a pen and music manuscript paper. I would have to listen to the tape again to write all the chords. The evening passed quickly as I sat and wrote music notation. The

band helped too, but Mark became bored. He left after about an hour and didn't return.

Sal seemed bitter when Mark left. "I wish he'd get some help," he murmured.

"What do you mean?" I asked, scribbling notation.

"Mark has a drinking problem."

I quit writing. "Then why didn't you get rid of him if his drinking is so bad?"

Sal shook his head. "It's not that bad—yet. He gets wasted after our little job in the studio, but he sobers up and comes in ready to sing. He does all right—as long as he doesn't shove anymore mics up the guitars!" He frowned.

Frank said softly, "I'm afraid for him."

I figured I would have to take my chances.

After a month of practicing, Sal pulled me aside and said he liked the new sound with the Spanish guitar, but I would have to do acoustic and electric for some songs. I grimaced. I have to tear up my hands for the sake of the song. We were to record for our new album as soon as I got my parts down and I had to redo Eric's work in place of my own.

"You don't have to play like him, but I would like that idea," Sal said. "Put your own spin to it. Make the song your own."

I nodded. I was left alone for the next week recording with the tape. Mark would come in the studio to watch me play. He sat right beside me on the piano bench, his long, curly hair scratching against my arm, his scent overpowering my nose. That sort of unsettled me. He didn't sit on a stool and

watch me from a distance like Frank or Sal. I guess Mark tried to soak up the atmosphere of my playing.

After a session, I left to get a bite to eat and Mark came along. I asked him why would he rather stay and watch me than take a well-deserved break. “The rest of the band is on vacation. You could do something.”

“I *am* doing something,” Mark said and produced his usual goofy smile. “I like how you play. Eric was all loose and crazy with his style, like he didn’t care if he messed up.” Mark shrugged. “You try to be perfect.”

I blushed. “Isn’t that what Sal wanted in Eric—to be loose? That’s the part of jamming!”

“Yeah, sort of, but I’m sure you’re to get loose when you want, especially if we tour. I mean, the recording studio is where everything is all slicked up, you know? You have to make it *right*. On the stage, with millions of people staring at you and wanting a good show—You want to give it your all! You want to cut loose! Otherwise, it’ll be very boring to hear the same song you heard a million times on record. They want a variation. That’s what they came for. Also, I can’t see myself singing the same song the same way a million times. If it’s not fresh, it’s not fun anymore.”

“It sounds like you’ve done this before.”

Mark nodded and blushed slightly. “I was in another band before Sal’s,” he said softly. “We hopped the bar scene. That’s how I started drinking.” He gave a mild chuckle and didn’t say anymore.

Mark didn’t seem to have an alcohol problem as I studied the people around me. For me to not say much, I became quite

invisible. I noticed Frank was easily talkative; blabbing whenever there was a quiet moment and was also a heavy smoker. He didn't like to smoke in the studio and chewed gum instead until we had a break. Sal acted like the authoritarian because, of course, it was his band. Mark appeared hard to follow. On some days he carried himself like a hyperactive boy and other days, he'd be quiet and sullen. Frank would complain of Mark's playful antics when Mark was on his good days.

"I'd wish he'd grow up," he grumbled after carefully cutting and peeling the tape from his drum kit. Mark had come to the studio early and went wild with the packaging tape. He used half of the tape by binding the chair to the bass drum and the cymbal stands together. His pranks were random.

"He's not so bad," I said and got shot dirty looks by Sal and Frank. Mark didn't do much, but wait out his turn to sing. He would watch Sal, Frank, and me work on the instrumentation until we got it, and then the singing would come in. I asked Mark why he didn't stay home and wait until Sal called him to do the lyrics. He just shrugged.