

Kill Me Tender

A Love Story



Joseph Valentinetti

KILL Me TENDER

A Love Story

Copyright © 2002 Joseph Valentinetti

ISBN 1-59113-257-6

Published by ImageSmith & Associates, USA.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

ImageSmith & Associates
2002

KILL Me TENDER

A Love story

Joseph Valentinetti

Love me tender

Love me true

All my dreams fulfil...

Elvis Presley and Vera Matson 1956

Dedicated to,

Joseph Anthony, Regina Maria & Ben

Chapter 1

Vincent August stood on the observation deck looking out through the tall tinted windows and watching the baggage train snake across the hot tarmac to stop under the belly of the jet.

He could see the compact cardboard box he'd checked into air freight a few minutes earlier.

It used to be that all he heard about from other people was who did what to who. Who slept with who, hurt who. Who's sorry and who's not. Who moved, got a new car, got a new marriage, had a new baby or got a new job. Now all he seemed to hear was who got what organ cut out and just how polluted with cancer it had been. How they'd gotten to it just in time—or, if only they'd gotten to it sooner... Vincent was glad that he didn't have any good idea where his vital organs were located—other than inside his body, somewhere under his skin.

He was ashamed of the primitive relief he felt, the almost joyful selfishness that it was Jean's ashes in that cardboard box and not his own. When Jean's cancer overtook her to sail into her pancreas, he'd felt a dull ache in about the center of his back, just to the right of his spine. Was his body trying to talk to him? Or was it Jean, his friend of twenty-five years, reaching out somehow from that hospital room to pluck at his organs? Was Jean now reaching

out from her urn inside that cardboard box, making his pulse throb at his throat?

Vincent was still trying to shake the memory of the terrible smallness that Jean's head had taken on in death when he walked through the automatic doors and crossed the shimmering blacktop to his car. Sweat streamed down his face. Got to be a hundred-thirty on this asphalt, he thought. He reached in the window and fired up the engine without getting in the car, turned the AC on high and unlocked the doors. He took off his blue pinstripe suit coat and folded it onto the back seat. Why had he felt the need to wear a suit and tie just take a cardboard box to the airport? Jean, goddamned, why?

He tried to open the trunk with the release lever by the front seat, but it didn't work, so he shut off the engine and used the key instead. He popped open the trunk, took out his unloaded pistol and clipped it on his belt. New clients always liked to see a private detective who looked like a Private Detective. He ran his hand through his close-cropped graying hair and looked at himself in the rear-view mirror. He didn't look forty-nine, did he? Except for the hair, maybe?

When Vincent got to Arrow and Ninth, he swung the car into a light industrial complex and down a row of mid-sized businesses. 16243-S was a free-standing warehouse tucked behind the four rows of smaller buildings. The lot was vacant except for a freshly polished blue Toyota parked by the front door. He drove past to see if there were any cars parked on the far side, out of sight, then U-turned, parking a dozen stalls from the lone car.

Another thing he wondered: Why had he ridden around with that cardboard box for four days so it would be a Sunday when he shipped it? Sister Margaret would be proud of her work, he thought. He remembered the heavy drapery smell of her habit. How old would she be now? She was already beginning to turn to stone when he was a fifth-grader.

Vincent pulled his jacket on as he walked up the shipping steps and rang the bell. When the steel door swung open, he got his first

look at Max Kraten. Vincent guessed him to be sixty to sixty-five, and in good health, though his face was haggard. He stood five-foot-eight, four inches shorter than Vincent. His tie was conservative and tightened to the throat. Beefy arms hung out of his short-sleeve shirt. His hand was calloused and strong as he shook Vincent's.

"Mr. August?"

"Glad to meet you." He used his thumb and forefinger to wipe the corners of his soft mouth. "Big place," he said, gesturing at the cavernous warehouse.

"Watch your step, it's dark," Max said, leading Vincent to a modest office at the far end of the dim corridor. "Please, sit. Coffee?"

Max slid into the chair behind his desk. The collar of his shirt was specked with tiny hairs and Vincent could smell barber's alcohol, almost feel its refreshing splash.

"No coffee."

"I've never met a private investigator before. Or is it detective?"

"I say 'detective'—less syllables."

Max's eyes wouldn't fix. "Since I called you I've been wondering... I don't know... I—"

"Lot of people have problems telling private things to strangers."

Max swivelled his chair around to face the window. "It has to do with my wife—"

Vincent stood up abruptly, scraping chair feet on the dark tile floor. He strode around the desk and planted himself between Max and the window. That look of shock was just what he wanted: That dropped lip, the wide eyes.

"Look at me when you talk. It's a quirk I have." He headed back around the desk and would have gone right out the door if that's what it took. He heard the squeak of the swivel on Max's chair.

He turned back toward him. "I can call you Max, right?" He didn't wait for a reply. "What you tell me, Max, is confidential. I've been at this most of my working life." Vincent didn't feel that

mentioning that his license was in limbo would be a good thing. “I gave you references on the phone. You check them?”

“I love my wife, Mr. August, always have. We got off to a rough start, but we’ve been married for thirty years--.”

“Long time.”

“The best years of my life. With Christine I’ve always felt lucky. Tough at first. There’s...”

Vincent rubbed the arms on his chair, itching to get to the point. “Tough, how?”

“A sixteen year difference in our ages. Now sixteen years doesn’t mean much, but when Christine was sixteen and I was thirty-two—and I got her pregnant—it was everything.”

Vincent wondered what a thirty-two year old man talked about with a sixteen year-old girl. But what the hell was he thinking?

There was an eighteen year span between Rita and himself. What did he and Rita talk about? Not much, according to her.

“Go on,” he said.

Max drew a sharp breath. “Her father would have killed me. Do you believe that? I don’t mean, want to; I mean would have. Christine faced him, I didn’t even do that, I was outside on the porch. God, the yelling. ‘He’s as good as a dead man. You got your whole life in front of you and now? And at sixteen no less. Where’s the son a bitch now? Too gutless to be with you now? I’ll kill him. I’ll goddamn kill him!’” Max got up, jammed his hands in his trouser pockets and began to pace. “You know what I did?” he said, pausing to cover his face. “I left. I ran away. Scared he’d come out and find me. What would I do then? What if I killed him? What would you have done?” He snorted. His red cheeks drained. “He saw me running away. Some future son-in-law.”

Get to the point. “Why call me?”

“I’m telling you this... I’m hoping... We’ve had a good life.” Max slumped down in his chair, looking suddenly exhausted.

Who was this man trying to convince? Vincent let the silence settle in. He watched Max, sitting with his arms resting on the desk, one hand in the other, rotating his battered wedding band around his finger. He still didn’t know what Max wanted, but he

was relieved it sounded domestic. He needed the money and most domestic falls outside the interest of the police. He needed to stay clear of them.

"Tell me, Max, what's the trouble? How can I help?"

"I'm afraid she's having an affair."

"Any evidence?"

"Some pages from a diary, is all."

"She always kept a diary?"

"It's funny." He laughed but his laugh didn't sound funny. "I was sitting home, watching the news, petting our cat, Vince. Vince?--like Elvis?--in King Creole? Every pet we ever had was named for Elvis—in one way or another. Christine is a very devoted fan. Obsessive to some."

"And what would you say? Is she?"

"I'd almost believe that now. Anyway, that's off the point. All of a sudden Vince lets out this wail. I never heard a cat make a sound like that. He tore to the back of the house—where the utility room is—by the time I got there, he'd cornered a red squirrel behind the washing machine. Somehow the squirrel managed to leap onto the washer, then to a shelf, then he wiggled out a hole in the window screen. Vince was right behind it, knocking everything off the shelf." Max went to the coffee pot and poured a cup.

"I was putting the things back...the bottom fell off a can of spray starch and a roll of papers fell out. I never saw anything like that before. It wasn't spray starch at all: The can was a safe."

"The papers were the diary pages?" Vincent asked, trying to follow the route of his story. Waiting out the prologue. Max seemed to be aging before his eyes. Revisiting these images weighted a slope into his shoulders and turned down the corners of his eyes. He slid a roll of pages from his desk drawer and read aloud, "I can't believe how much he looked like The King, like he looked in those early pictures, and even sounded like him. I was right up front. I caught his eye. He looked right at me the whole time..." He flung the pages across the room, but they did not separate. They struck the wall with a hollow thud, then rolled to rest by Vincent's feet.

Choking, clearing his throat, Max whispered, "I'm sorry," then turned his chair around slowly to face the window.

Vincent didn't insist that Max turn around. He'd had ample chance to study him. He unrolled the pages. The handwriting was large and rounded with incomplete O's and sentimental circles for dots and periods. The lavender ink on gray paper appeared to be from a fountain pen. The entry went on to describe a backstage meeting.

"Graphic," Vincent said, scratching behind his ear. "No room for doubt. She doesn't give a name, no date. You suspect anything more than what's here? Like maybe who—or when?"

"No."

Vincent held a page up to the window-light. "Watermark at least. I can test the age of the paper and ink. Could be some help."

"Don't bother. I gave Christine a gift of that paper, a pen and lavender ink just last month."

"So that's the when. How about who?"

Max shook his head.

"Maybe she made it up. Maybe she was just testing your gift, making up a little harmless fantasy. She's nuts for Elvis, isn't she?"

"Could that be?"

Vincent didn't think so. He was testing what Max wanted to believe. "Do the two of you use fantasy in your own sex life?"

"No." The light in Max's pale blue eyes dimmed. He straightened himself and became more formal. "Our intimacy is more... circumspect. Before this I'd have guessed that Christine would blush at thoughts like these."

Vincent drummed the glass topped desk with the roll of pages. "Have you showed her th--?"

"No, I can't. What if you're right? What if it's just a fantasy? I wouldn't want her to feel that I didn't trust her."

"What about your children?"

Max cast his eyes down. "We don't have any."

"She was pregnant when you married her."

“She miscarried. We couldn't conceive after that.”

“Max, It's not likely this is a fantasy. But it can't hurt to hope for the best. I'll need some pictures of Christine—newer the better. Right now we need to make a calendar of her comings and goings. Make one list of her habits and another of your mutual friends.”

“Do not contact our friends.”

“Relax, I won't. But if I'm following her, I need to know when she's with someone we know about. Write me a check for one week in advance—twenty-five hundred.”

Max looked at Vincent, his eyes vacant as an infant's, ignorant and naive. “Do you know what it's like to think you've base your life on a lie. You wonder: Is there any truth to it? How deep into your life does it go? And how much of it is of your own making?”

Chapter 2

When Vincent pulled his Sterling into his driveway and turned off the key, the car wouldn't stop running. He jiggled the key, but it didn't help. He pulled the key completely out of the ignition, but the dammed car still kept running. He yanked on the hood release, but the hood didn't budge. He thought about shooting the car but he'd already put his gun back in the trunk and that probably wouldn't open either.

Vincent huffed into the kitchen. Rita was agitating a six-roll film developing tank. The action made her whole body shake. For the three years they'd been together, he'd always been glad to be present at that little ceremony.

Rita Ginneta stood almost five-four and was absorbed in her photography. She loved Vincent, and more than seldom, she enjoyed having a drink. When she looked at you, you got the sense you were a projection instead of existing on your own, from the way she examined every inch—captured you with her eyes.

Rita's raspy voice skidded across sandpaper on the way out of her larynx. "What was that banging outside—was that you?"

"Yeah. Kicking the car."

Rita went to the door and peered out through the screen "Sounds like it's still running."

"I don't want to talk about it. It'll run out of gas sooner or later." When she turned back into the kitchen he said, "Hi," bending down slightly to kiss cheeks.

"Hi." She smiled, flashed her eyes. "Everything go OK at the airport?"

He grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator and fished the bottle of Wild Turkey down from above the sink. He poured a healthy shot into an old-fashioned glass and sipped.

"How else? Like I expected."

He sat at the table with his back to her, a rounded lump in the window lit room. Vincent felt her cool fingers traipse along his shoulders. The metal film tank always chilled her hands. She circled the chair until she came to rest in his lap. There was nearly a head difference in their heights and he outweighed her by almost eighty pounds. He held her tight and inhaled the sweet aroma from her thick pile of hair.

"I'll miss her."

"You're the only man I know with a close woman friend."

"Jesus, Rita, the woman's dead."

"I just mean that—Nothing. I don't mean anything."

There were plenty of things Vincent could have said besides 'I'll miss her.' Too honest, maybe.

"We didn't sleep together. For the nth time, we were friends—that's all."

"Vincent, I didn't think anything like that. I liked that you had a woman friend. It made me think maybe we could be friends too."

What's the use? He knew that Rita couldn't believe there was no sex between Jean and him. She couldn't be convinced otherwise.

He hung his head. "She was only forty-six."

"That's not exactly young, Vincent."

"Not exactly young?"

"Not exactly."

"I'm older than Jean." He crunched his chin and looked down at Rita. From this angle her forehead broadened and her chin came to a point. Just a month ago Rita'd stomped around the house

having a fit about turning thirty. No more birthdays for her. If her life was over at thirty, what must she think of him at forty-nine? What did that make him—a relic? In fact, what did Rita find to like in him?

“I’m not even fifty.”

“Oh Vincent. I’m not talking about you. You’re not old to me. You’re so... it’s different with you. To me you’re ageless.”

“Give it up; you’re not waltzing out of this one.” He rubbed her arm, kissed her downed temple. “Remember the old Abbott and Costello routine about the guy who’s forty-five and marries the girl—”

“Abbott and who?”

He hugged her, hoping some of her naivete would vanish—or at least fade from his mind.

“Never mind. It never was all that funny in the first place, now that I think about it.”

He pinched a tiny quantity of air and held it before his eye. “How can twenty years in the past be just a minute ago—seem like such a tiny thing? Seems like a minute ago. You think twenty years is a long time?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Lookit, Rita, you caught me in the middle of feeling sorry for myself. I’m trying to figure out how to get through this death-of-a-friend thing. I don’t think it’s really hit me yet. I don’t know—is this how I’m supposed to feel?”

“Poor baby,” she said, pecking his cheek, “let me help.”

“And do what?”

She sat upright and stared at him. He always liked the stern slant her eyes took on, the way her mouth set itself in a bold line when she grew angry. There were times when he aggravated her just for the pleasure of seeing it, but he hadn’t expected it now.

“What could I do? I could comfort you—would that be getting too close?”

“All I meant was, things like this take time.”

“And during that time, you just want to be alone to mope?”

“I don’t know.”