

Chapter One

Munich, Federal Republic of Germany — 1971

“Excuse me!” Eddie shouted, working his way through the crowd of drunken revelers. “Scuse me. Just wanna say goodbye to the birthday boy before I leave!”

“You are going already?” a sultry voice protested. “The party is just beginning!”

Eddie looked down as a woman in a low-cut dress placed her hand on his shoulder. The satin fabric of her red halter dress slid partially open as she nuzzled closer, revealing the soft, fleshy tops of her breasts. She tilted her head to meet his eyes. “You like?” she asked, her voice barely audible over the din of the party.

“Very much,” Eddie replied.

The woman brought her hand to Eddie’s cheek and started stroking his sideburns with a long painted fingernail. “I like you too,” she said in a thick German accent, bringing her face closer to his. “You have always been my favorite Pilot. I love your lyrics. They are so passionate.”

“Mm-hmm,” Eddie mumbled. He quickly sized up the woman’s considerable attributes—nice tits, pretty face, lovely hair. Obviously willing. He stole a quick glance at his watch and debated whether he really needed to leave the party after all—or if he ought to leave it by himself, at any rate. He looked back at the woman’s eyes. They were a gorgeous shade of blue. Sexy. Inviting. Dilated.

“All right everyone, shut up!” shouted Eli Deere, Eddie’s bassist and the host of the party. “Time for the cake!” He switched off the lights. A scantily-clad woman worked her way across the room, parting the crowd with a serving trolley bearing a large cake covered in candles. The drunken guests fell into a chorus of song.

“Happy birthday, dear Gerr-eee, happy birthday to yoooo!”

Gerry Enis—the celebrated man of the hour—threw back his head to take a breath, knocking his crumpled paper hat to the floor. He blew out the candles and pitched the room back into darkness. The woman in the halter dress started massaging Eddie’s thigh. After a few seconds of blind chaos, someone in the back of the room found a light switch. The crowd hailed the return of the light with a shower of whoops.

Eddie gazed once more into the luminous eyes of the woman by his side. Her enlarged pupils had barely registered a response to the changes in the room’s brightness.

He took hold of her roving hand. Loosening her firm grip on his trousers, he brought her fingers to his lips. “Another time,” he whispered, gently kissing her knuckles. Then he let her go and approached his drummer Gerry.

He looks drunk, as usual, Eddie thought as he watched Gerry sway unsteadily on his feet. *That didn’t take long.* But he forced a smile and called out in a tone of practiced joviality, “Hey, mate! Wanted to say ‘Happy Birthday’ before I left!”

“What? You can’t go yet!” Gerry protested. “You haven’t even had a piece of my cake!”

“’S’alright. I’m not hungry,” Eddie said. “Have fun!”

“Like you need to tell me to do that?” Gerry laughed. The woman who had brought in the cake scooped a dollop of frosting off the top and brought her finger to his tongue. Gerry licked it greedily. Eddie turned and walked away.

“Hey Rochester! You leaving already?” yelled Eli. “The night’s still young!”

Eddie sized up his bassist and couldn’t decide if he looked more drunk or stoned. “I’ve got a date,” Eddie lied. “Gotta go home and get ready to pick her up.”

“A date with a book,” laughed the shaggy-haired man standing behind Eli.

Eddie shared a knowing smile with his pianist and song-writing partner Jim McCudden. “Gotta go now, mate. I’m at the dirty part. Tess is just about to lose her virginity.”

Jim smiled. “In grand Victorian style, no less. I remember reading that book in seventh form and not even realizing Tess and Alec had it off, and the next thing you know she’d given

birth.”

“You have to learn to read between the lines,” Eddie replied, tapping the corner of his eyes. He glanced over Jim’s shoulder and saw the woman in the red dress kissing his manager’s younger brother Alan Poole. *That didn’t take long either*, he thought with a fleeting wave of disappointment.

“You have to learn to stop looking for love in books,” Jim said. “Someday you’re gonna fall for a real woman, Eddie.”

Eddie shrugged and sighed. “Hope so. Though probably not at this party.” He looked back at Eli. “Where’d ya put my coat?”

“Dunno. Threw it in a bedroom I think.” Eli staggered towards Gerry. “You wanker, Enis! Save some cake for the rest of us!”

Eddie slipped out of the crowded living room and stepped into a long hallway. He opened the first door and saw his lead singer Tony Wright locked in a passionate embrace with a nearly-naked blonde. He shut the door, peeked in the opposite room, and saw two people snorting coke off a mirror. They looked up at him and laughed. He turned away and walked to the end of the hallway. Bracing himself for another awkward spectacle, he rested his fingertips on the last doorknob and slowly rotated the handle.

The door creaked open, revealing a floor covered in coats. Eddie stepped inside and removed a ladies’ tweed overcoat from the top of the pile. He was just about to throw it onto a bed in the far corner of the room when he noticed a woman was sitting on top of the mattress. She had curled herself into a ball, with her knees drawn up to her chest. In her right hand she held a book.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Eddie said. “You were so quiet, I didn’t even notice you.”

The woman ignored him and continued to read her book.

Eddie examined her carefully while he waited for her to respond. Long, dark curls of raven-colored hair cascaded in luxurious waves around her silhouetted profile, shielding most of her face from view. The topmost strands of her untamed mane glowed like a halo in the soft light cast by the room’s solitary lamp.

“I’m sorry, miss,” he repeated.

She remained silent.

He took a step towards the bed and summoned his courage. “May I ask what you’re reading?”

She drew her knees closer to her chest.

His curiosity piqued, Eddie stepped even closer to the bed. “I’m sorry if I’m bothering you. It’s just that—well, I usually prefer books to parties too.”

Without looking up, the woman began reading aloud from her book. Her voice was low and dusky and bore traces of a foreign accent Eddie couldn’t place:

“—Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me—”

The woman marked her page and closed the book, then lifted her head and gazed at Eddie with an inscrutable expression.

Eddie stared at her face. Though the room was dim, the light from the bedside lamp accentuated her features with dramatic shadows. Her lips were soft and full. *And they’re wet too*, he noticed as they reflected the glow of the lamp back at him. Without thinking, he ran his tongue over the surface of his own lips.

He started admiring her large, wide-set eyes, then realized with a jolt that she was staring

back at him just as intently. *How does she expect me to respond to a passage like that?* he wondered in a panic. He tried to make sense of her cryptic invitation, but was too mesmerized by her face to think clearly. After a few seconds of embarrassed, painful silence, he managed a rambling reply.

"Kiss you? Suck your—goblin juices? Christ! I mean—um. Oh, wait. Goblins!—I know that poem! It's *Goblin Market* by Christina Rossetti. I read that at university."

The woman smiled, her lips parting ever so slightly. Eddie's heart started pounding.

"You like poetry too?" she asked in a husky whisper.

Her smile was dazzling. Bewitching. Eddie gazed at her longingly and grinned back.

"Could I—?" he asked, stepping towards her. "I mean, if you don't mind, could I see your book?"

She offered no reply, but continued to smile at him. *I'll take that as a 'yes'*, he decided. He sat down on the edge of the mattress and took the book. He gazed into her eyes for a brief moment, then looked down at the cover and smiled. "This is the same anthology I used in my Victorian literature class at uni. Are you—um, going to school now?"

The woman said nothing, but reclaimed her book and started reading aloud once more:

*"—She gorged on bitterness without a name—
Ah, fool, to choose such part
Of Soul-consuming care!—"*

Eddie took a deep breath and rested his hand on top of hers. He felt a brief spark.

"I'm Eddie," he whispered. "That is, um, you probably knew that already, right? I'm Eddie Rochester? Of the Pilots?"

The woman fixed a steely gaze at him.

"You know? Gerry's group?" he floundered. "Gerry Enis! The birthday boy. And this is Eli's house. Eli Deere, our bassist."

The woman stared at him blankly, obviously unimpressed by his pop-music credentials.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She smiled at him again, even more radiantly than before, but said nothing.

"Would you like to come outside with me and join the party?" he asked.

"No!" she said, her voice finally rising above a whisper. "I can't."

Eddie furrowed his brow. "Why not?"

"Don't ask me!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing. "Just go! You need to go now!"

"I don't understand," Eddie replied. "Please, just tell me your name."

She buried her face back in the book.

"Hey, I'm sorry," he apologized. "I didn't mean to upset you. If you don't want to join the party, then maybe we could just sit here and talk for a while."

She drew her legs more tightly towards her chest.

"Please, just tell me your name," Eddie pleaded.

"Who the hell are you?" a threatening voice called out from across the room.

Eddie looked up and saw a gaunt, dark-haired man approaching him. The stranger grabbed Eddie by the shoulder and shoved him off the bed.

"Get away from my sister, you asshole!"

"I'm not—I wasn't doing anything," Eddie protested. "I was just trying to talk to her."

"Well, don't!" the man shouted. "Nobody asked you to do that. Now get the fuck away from her. Fetch your coat, Roberta, I'm taking you home. Now!"

The woman turned her face towards Eddie once more. Her eyes seemed to be begging him for help. Imploring him to do something. Anything.

"Seriously, I didn't even touch her," Eddie insisted. "I was just—we were just reading poetry. Listen. I'm Eddie Rochester. I'm one of the Pilots! Who the hell are you?"

The man grabbed the tweed overcoat Eddie had discarded earlier and pushed it into the woman's hands. "Goddamned pop star! You only want one thing from the girls you meet at parties, and it's got nothing to do with reading fucking poetry. C'mon, Roberta. Let's get the hell out of here."

The woman said nothing, but as she reached for her book she met Eddie's eyes once more. He tried to read her expression but felt too confused to think clearly. She looked frightened, but angry too. *Is she mad at me, or at her brother?* he wondered.

"Goodbye," he said, holding her gaze. "Roberta."

"It's Birdie," she whispered as the dark-haired man dragged her out of the room.

Eddie took a few deep breaths and struggled to make sense of the last five minutes. He tried to imagine what circumstances might have prompted this gorgeous, well-read woman to appear at Gerry's birthday bacchanal. He cursed his luck for having lost the mysterious woman to an even more mysterious man. But then he steeled his resolve and decided to seek out Gerry or Eli for an answer. He found his coat on the floor and went back to the party.

He stepped out of the bedroom and was hit by a malodorous reek of incense. Covering his nose, he eased his way past a group of four strangers groping each other in an orgiastic huddle. He walked into the living room, found Gerry and shouted to him.

"Hey Ger! I need to ask you about a bird I just met!"

Gerry flashed Eddie a lopsided grin and beckoned him closer.

"This is the best fucking party ever!" he growled into Eddie's ear. "I feel soo good."

Eddie's heart sank. He stared into Gerry's bloodshot eyes and knew his drummer was in no position to help him track down the woman. But then he remembered the last time Gerry had looked this high and felt a pang of worry. "What did you take?"

"Dunno. Don't care. But it was fucking wonderful!" Gerry let loose with a throaty laugh.

Eddie sighed. *Stupid bastard*, he thought as he left Gerry and went to look for Eli. *I'm not going to stick around so I can take him to hospital once more.* He found his bassist sitting alone in the kitchen, staring intently at the inside of a large metal spoon.

"I'm upside down, man," he moaned.

Christ! Eddie cursed in his head. *I am surrounded by morons!* He cleared his throat and decided against all reason to try his luck one last time. "Hey, Eli, I just met this chick named Roberta. She was with some bloke who claimed to be her brother. He was kind of skinny with short, dark hair. She had long, wavy, black hair. Do you know anything about them?"

"I'm upside down, man!" Eli repeated, his voice beginning to quiver. "How the fuck did I get upside down?"

Eddie took the spoon away from Eli and flipped it from the concave to the convex side. "You're fine," he said, handing the utensil back. "Now listen, you invited the guests. What can you tell me about this bloke or this bird?"

"You're a genius, Rochester!" Eli exclaimed, panting in relief at the sight of his right-side-up reflection. "You're a fucking genius!"

"Eddie! You're still here!" Jim shouted. He walked into the kitchen, smiling broadly and dangling a hand-rolled cigarette between his fingers. "I thought you wanted to nip off so you could read."

"I did," Eddie replied. "But then I met this chick, and she—"

Jim offered Eddie the joint. "This is good shit. Take a hit. Christ, Eddie, just for once why don't you try to enjoy being a pop star?"

Eddie slipped his hands into the pockets of his coat. "Not tonight. I can't think straight when I'm stoned, and I'm trying to find out anything I can about this girl I just met."

"You found yourself a woman?" Jim laughed. "Well, good for you. Sex beats drugs in my book any day! Tell me about her."

Eddie started to relax for a brief moment. "She's a stunner! She has these incredible eyes! And her face—Christ, she was just bloody perfect! And she was reading this book—"

"Wait, did you just say 'book'?" Jim interrupted.

"Yes, this collection of Victorian poetry—"

Jim broke into a fit of giggles. Eddie's face fell. He started walking away.

"I'm sorry, mate!" Jim called after him. "Really, I am. It's just that—Oh, Christ, Eddie! Victorian poetry? You are such a tosser!" He brought the joint to his mouth and inhaled deeply.

Eddie stepped back into the living room. The Pilots' latest single was booming from the stereo's speaker. He felt every bass note reverberate in his gut. The woman in the red dress spied him and ran back to his side. "God, I want you!" she cried over the cacophonous roar of the drunken crowd. She licked Eddie's face and grabbed at his crotch.

"Get off of me!" he yelled, pushing her away.

He started walking to the door, but his manager's younger brother Alan blocked his way. "I'll take her if you don't want her!" he shouted into Eddie's face.

"She's yours," Eddie grumbled. He slipped into the crowd. A throng of inebriated dancers pressed hard against him, flailing their limbs and jostling him roughly as they gyrated to the pulsing beat echoing through the room. He snaked his way through the undulating mass of bodies. When he finally reached the exit, a topless girl with glazed eyes forced her way in front of him, dripping vomit in her wake.

I am so fucking tired of this! Eddie thought in disgust. *Why does every party have to end this way? It didn't used to be like this when we first started out.*

The half-naked girl pushed the door open and ran outside. A blast of cold air enveloped Eddie, calling him back to his senses. But as soon as he stepped out of the building, a cascade of bright lights rippled before his eyes.

"Damned paparazzi!" he mumbled under his breath as he stumbled into the yard.

"*Halt! Das ist nur Eddie Rochester!*" shouted a frustrated photographer. He spat out Eddie's name contemptuously, then asked about the Pilots' more popular lead singer. "*Wo ist der Tony? Wann kommt er draußen?*"

Eddie ignored the questions and started sprinting towards his car. An aggressive Fleet Street journalist broke away from the crowd at the door and pursued him.

"So how was the party?" the man asked. Eddie tried to dodge him, but the reporter ran ahead and forced a camera in front of his face. Without waiting for Eddie to respond, he released the shutter button. A flashbulb burst a few inches away from Eddie's eyes, blinding him.

He staggered away from the photographer and reached out his hands towards his car. Pulsing circles of intense white light danced painfully in front of his eyes. He groped the surface of the vehicle, trying to find the door handle, and wondered if he would ever see clearly again.