

Jill & the King

BY JOHN MANDERINO

IT WAS SPRING, with puddles. The one in the alley behind the dry cleaners was a bottomless pit.

Not really. But that's what this boy in my class, Anthony Calvano, tried to tell me. I was walking home from school and he just comes up and starts giving me this. I was thinking maybe he liked me. I wouldn't have minded. He kind of looks a little bit like Elvis. And he knows it, the way he keeps a curl of hair hanging down in front.

I love Elvis Presley. Everyone else loves the Beatles, especially after they were on Ed Sullivan a couple months ago. But Elvis is better. He gets to me.

I told Anthony I'm sorry but there's no such thing as a bottomless pit.

He said how about a bet? If he's right he gets to kiss me on the lips and if he's wrong I get to kiss *him*.

I wasn't sure. I had never kissed a boy.

He sang to me softly, "Don't be cruel..."

I said, "Okay."

We walked to the corner of the block, around and into the alley. I kept wishing he would take my hand, like we were going for a stroll.

Then, there it was, the puddle. He said there was only one way to prove who was right. I would have to run up to it, take a long jump out to the middle, and see what happens.

I wanted to ask him how he thought he was going to kiss me if he won the bet since I'd be falling down a bottomless pit, but I didn't bother. I just said, "Wouldn't it be better if *you* jumped in? Since it was your idea?"

He said, "Why would I want to jump into a bottomless pit?"

"It's not a bottomless pit!" I told him.

"Prove it," he said.

"Let me go home and get my rain boots."

"No. We have to do it now."

"How come?"

He stuck his face up close, locked me in his eyes and sang, "It's now or never..."

I said, "Okay."

He went over and dragged his heel in the gravel to mark where I should start my run-up to the puddle. But all of a sudden I changed my mind. "Forget it, Anthony. You're just trying to make me jump into a puddle. You're just trying to make me look stupid."

He looked really hurt, like he was al-



most going to cry, that's how hurt. "Fine," he said. "If that's the way you really feel, Jill," he said, using my name, "then fine." He started walking away, hanging his head, singing to himself, "You get me so lonely I could die."

I told him, "Wait, will ya?"

He looked back, so sadly. "What," he said.

I marched over to the line he drew and told him to count down from three.

"Don't do it, Jill," he told me, using my name. He really believed it was a bottomless pit and didn't want me falling through—*because he likes me*, I thought. *He likes me for my guts*.

I set my front foot on the line and

crouched down.

"Don't, Jill. Please?"

"Count, Anthony."

"Okay. Three...two..."

I crouched lower.

"One."

I took off running, staying low, and when I reached the edge of the puddle I gave a leap, and just for a tiny second I thought *What if he's right?* But before I could scream I landed in the middle of the puddle, which was deep, over my shoes and socks, but not bottomless. I looked at him: "Well?"

He shrugged. "Guess you win," he said, and went walking away, laughing his head off.

I came splashing out of the puddle after him. "What about kissing you?" I said.

He stopped walking. He looked surprised.

"I won the bet," I said. "So how 'bout it?"

He closed his eyes. "Love me tender, love me true," he sang, and puckered up.

I got as close as I could without touching him. Then I lifted my knee up, hard, straight into his boy-parts.

He gave a holler and went walking around all doubled over, moaning and holding himself down there. I felt bad, I really did, and went over to him and apologized. "I'm sorry, Anthony. I shouldn't have got you there. I'm sorry, okay?"

He was still doubled over but looked up at me with his lip curled, and said real slow, like he really, really meant it: "Get away from me, you ugly, little, bony hound dog."

I ran all the way home. I held in my tears till I got in my room, put an Elvis record on, and dropped on the bed with my face in the pillow:

"Wise men say, only fools rush in..."

Then I let go. ■