

Second Saga continues with Book Two: Rai's Proof. Rai is Second's diminutive yet dynamic guitarist. Together with her musical sisters, she is dominating the rock scene with heady riffs and leather-clad ferocity. She is in for a serious surprise though, as Stephen Cooper, with his golden good looks and satirical wit, narrows his sights on her.

Second Saga, Book Two: Rai's Proof

by Jill Marie Denton

Order the complete book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10106.html?s=pdf>

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.

SECOND SAGA, BOOK TWO



Rai's Proof

JILL MARIE DENTON

Copyright © 2018 Jill Marie Denton

ISBN: 978-1-64438-146-5

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.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2018

First Edition

Chapter 1

Friday, October 10

The cover of the new issue of *People*, lying on her freshly-made bed with the rest of the mail, made her laugh out loud. The control freak had gone from secretive to sociable in one fell swoop.

She'd gone and shown her true colors. The media would be even more fixated now.

Emmi, the blonde workhorse she also called her best friend, would be mercilessly forced to accept fact from here on out. She'd never be seen as a prim, evasive, chastising overseer in the public eye again.

Rai lifted the glossy magazine, found the article inside and perused while pool water dripped casually down her bare legs to the carpet below. The post-swim shower would have to wait. The chemicals dried her skin to sand where she stood, but she had to see the royal photo shoot for herself before anything else.

In the early morning light, she'd torn through the still water of Haven's Olympic-sized pool in a perfect butterfly stroke. The routine kept her lean, but was also her time for meditation, the moment's peace she needed to get through the chaos of her new assignment, working with four hard-headed male musicians against her will. Emmi, ever the optimist and humanitarian, dumped the fresh-faced lads from London on her lap. Their demo, and therefore their future, was her responsibility.

It was easy to forget that she herself was once such a musician, all ambition and egocentric ideas but with no real plan to achieve. Now she was just a stressed out, disinclined makeshift producer.

The face in her private bath's oval mirror showed the strain. Fine, normally pert Korean features seemed dismal. Faint creases had begun to mar the smooth, ivory skin above her dark, manicured brows. Her long, almond eyes were tired and leaden, the new pet project's childish behaviors dragging down her spirit. The normally spry, petite and feisty guitarist was poorly handling her babysitting work and it showed.

Not even her grand suite, filled with unique international art, a hand-selected featherbed that cradled like quicksand and lounge furniture she'd designed herself, was enough to uplift on this particular morning. She'd spared no expense in outfitting her desperately earned

and meticulously decorated relaxation space, but only completing the group's demo would ease the stress now.

Dressed in her favorite worn-out jeans and threadbare gray tee with Aerosmith's bold symbol on it, she trudged down the grand staircase of their second home. The studio work couldn't be postponed any longer.

The illustrious manor house was quiet this morning as she glanced around the open floor plan. While it was luxurious, Emmi took no chances with their safety and security. Protected as Fort Knox, the home was a respite from their ridiculous lives outside its walls. The house featured more closed circuit cameras and motion sensors than she'd been able to find. With a brow lifted and a judging eye on the surveillance system, she went in search of life. The only other tenants at the moment, aside from herself and band mate Emmi, were the butler and the cook.

The *chef du maison*, Rai corrected her thoughts as her eyes rolled. Emmi had scolded her enough times about that. She'd earned her title. She was no cook.

But the guitarist froze when she turned down the east hall, her nose on high alert like a bloodhound on the hunt. That lovely woman in the white coat was baking something fabulous. The scent of cinnamon and sugar wafting into the passage was all the invitation she needed to go inspect her work.

She was the in-house food quality inspector, after all. Since Emmi was guilt-ridden for eating much of anything, it was her responsibility to ensure quality in the fattiest baked goods the chef could dream up.

It was a tough job, but someone had to do it.

Anna-Lena, in her immaculate chef coat and dark slacks, was plopping white icing onto four-inch high spiraled rolls at the immense kitchen's island. As thick around the middle as stout in stature, the chef took up four floor tiles with her clogged feet. Dark hair turning gray at the temples was pulled back into a modest bun capped with a kerchief, and a thin band of gold on her right ring finger was the only jewelry she ever bothered with.

The room felt warmer, the house more welcoming, when she was around, and the woman could certainly keep a space clean. The counter's stormy gray marble and the stainless appliances gleamed, the bright lighting bouncing off them like sunshine. The high-tech

dishwasher rumbled from the corner and Anna hummed a simple tune as she worked.

Upon seeing Rai, she bowed slightly with a pause, her accent, still thickly Eastern European even after years in the UK, rung out boisterously.

“Good morning, little bird. May I tempt you with a pastry?”

Rai grinned and stepped over, taking a long dramatic sniff with her eyes closed. “You already have. I’d have happily walked right on by. You’re dangerous, Chef.”

She snickered, tickled down to her soul, and sat her raven-haired employer at the glossy kitchen table. A piping hot cup of black coffee and warm roll, along with a damp towel for sticky fingers, was set down at her place.

“You swam twice as long this morning. Surely you’ve earned a bit of frosting.”

“I had frustration to work off. Two of the guys in this band we’re working with, they think they’re owed a hit album because of some cosmic sense of entitlement,” she muttered sourly around the sticky bun. “The other two just let them prattle on like know-it-alls. Sure, there’s talent there, but Emmi took pity on these fools and took none on me. I’m ready to pull my damn hair out at the thought of listening to their nonsense for one more minute.”

Anna lowered her eyes in sympathy from her spot at the far end of the table. She bundled sets of heavy silverware, rolling them in sky blue napkins and stacking them.

“It’s hard to teach humility,” she sighed, completing her pyramid of linen bundles. “I worked with a chef at a hotel in Vienna years ago. He’d tell you the sun rose and set on him. He’d worked in a few Michelin restaurants and so he knew the best way to do everything.”

“Sounds like a familiar smarty-pants British drummer that will go unnamed. So, how’d you deal with him?”

The chef rose to clear the sticky plate and empty mug, an unmistakable smirk playing at her lips. “I was younger, more impulsive back then. I wouldn’t advocate doing as I did.”

Rai was at her side in a moment with wide eyes, following her like a puppy to the basin sink.

“Now I’m curious. Spill it.”

Anna chuckled and looked up wistfully. “I may, or may not, mind you, have spread petroleum jelly on his daily prosciutto and heirloom

tomato Panini. And he may, or may not, mind you, have spent the evening dinner rush sitting on a pickle bucket in the corner while his intestines evacuated like a pub at closing time.”

Rai’s laughter resounded over the manor as she wrapped an arm over Anna’s shoulder. “Oh Chef, you are my hero.”

Behind the soundboard in their subterranean studio, Rai’s eyes tried desperately to close. The stereophonics were outstanding, the production tools state-of-the-art, but the task of listening to every note, analyzing every influx, was exhausting, inane work. How band mate and keyboardist Marilyn handled this grind daily, and actually seemed to enjoy it, was beyond her.

Robbie, the drummer for White Light and her current source of gut-wrenching antipathy, was pounding out his solo for their demo recording. She captured every beat, knowing it would need to be dialed back in post-production. It was already too fierce to be heard over the other instruments and it hadn’t even been modified yet. Knowing the drum set well, having spent years as Destiny’s percussion understudy, she was well aware of the abuse the rims were taking in his onslaught.

The live audience at their shows must be deaf, she thought with a sigh. If this was how he worked out his anger, he’d pound through the high-dollar drum skins before long.

She sat back and watched, with arms crossed limply, appraising the musician like she’d do to a canvas. Large headphones smashed down his spiky black Mohawk. His jaw was taut, his angular face fixed, while his booted foot slammed down into the kick pedal. With squinted steely eyes and fingers curled menacingly around the wooden sticks, he was undoubtedly engrossed, raging against some unseen force.

She exhaled as her mind wandered away from work, back to how she acted at his age. As recently as five years ago, she was fierce, dedicated and borderline insubordinate. Studying multiple types of close-quarters combat and playing ice hockey robbed what little spare time she managed to steal from Second’s endless workload. She’d broken a few guitars in half when she hadn’t nailed a riff just right, but she’d learned to rein those emotions in, to control them and focus them on the quieter, more serene things in life. She still rooted for the feuding giants during hockey games, but swimming was lower impact and certainly caused fewer bruises than mixed martial arts.

And Emmi had made it clear that a well-publicized musician, featured occasionally on magazine covers and promo posters, needed to avoid cauliflower ear at all costs.

She'd learned to relish art most of all, to savor the solace and whimsy of it, since music so often took a front seat to all else and bred the tension she dealt with daily.

When Robbie struck the cymbal to end his session, Rai snapped back from her momentary siesta. She clicked on the studio microphone, her tone, mindfully casual, rung out inside the enclosure.

"All set, champ. Have you given any thought to my proposal yesterday?"

"Bollocks," Robbie declared in a gruff accent, tossing his headphones off like an angry child and striding out of the booth. The overpriced soundproof door slammed behind him. "I don't need a mentor, or a coach, or whatever shite you said yesterday. I have the drive, I know the game, and I'm just as capable as any of you twats."

Rai stood with heavy shoulders, five feet of female overshadowed by the over six foot frame of the sweating, aggressive egomaniac. "Robbie, I only asked you to hear Destiny out. She's professional, knowledgeable, and she's made it pretty damn far in this industry. She can suggest ways to improve your skill set. It never hurts having an ally."

She watched his gray eyes blacken. "I don't need suggestions. And I certainly don't need a life coach. What I need's a dogbody broad who keeps her mouth shut and her opinions to herself. I've been working at this my whole fucking life. Back off, you overpaid scrote, and let me do what I do."

"You'll do it anyway," Rai contended, her patience ebbing as she stepped in his path, blocking his escape. "You know the game better than us, God knows. You're a drummer in a band that's just getting their first real shot. Take the help, and the partnership, before it goes away for good."

The bullish face dipped dangerously close to hers, his dark irises burning like coal. "I won't be *browbeaten* into feeling less than. I won't be told I ain't got what it takes. I know how close we are to making good, and I know how we all got here. Back off and do your job. I'll do mine."

Second Saga, Book Two

“Unless I pull the plug,” Emmi’s doleful voice rang out from the doorway behind them. “Which I may do if morale doesn’t improve around here PDQ.”

“Hallelujah,” Rai breathed, turning her hopeful eyes to the new arrival. Her band mate’s fists were on her hips, her stare judgmental. In somber black velvet, she bore holes in them both with a wicked stare.

Rai threw her arms up as she strode toward her and the way out. “You argue with him. I’m done.”

“Not so fast.” Emmi halted Rai’s quick exit with an outstretched arm. “You’re going to hash this out, without arguing, or I’m going to be locking this door and posting Dante on it until it’s all settled, one way or another.”

Dante’s presence wasn’t an idle threat, nor was the Caribbean bodyguard’s inevitable wrath at having to play chaperone. With a huff, Rai turned back to the egocentric drummer.

The blonde boss eyed Rai impatiently, lowering her voice to keep it between them. “You, work constructively, and you.” She turned to Robbie, her tone again at full volume. “You take a second and realize what your pride may cost you. Take it from me, pride is important, but not important enough to risk a real shot at the gold ring.”

When she saw him glower in silence, the singer stepped up with unwavering resolve in her violet eyes. “White Light is here on my dime. That’s no secret. I brought you here personally and against my friends’ recommendations because you have a fire inside. You have the dedication, the passion it’s going to take, but fires wreak havoc and burn down bridges. Bridges are everything in this industry. We know everybody in this business, everybody, and a few of them even owe us big favors. You know why? Because we helped out when they asked, because we didn’t bite them when they reached out. No good deed is wasted on the way up. Mine was bringing you here. Remember that.”

When she turned away and headed back to the door and a deflated Rai, Robbie puffed out a held breath and twirled his drumsticks anxiously. Rai saw his temper dissipate, watched his eyes shift into realization, as her spiteful thoughts cursed her boss’s diplomacy.

Damnably violet-eyed show off.

“Rai, he’s in your hands,” she murmured, pulling her petite friend in closer. “And if you let them rile you up, you’ll never come out on top. There’s no need to win an argument if there isn’t one. Rise above.”

Emmi touched her friend's cheek and slipped away through the dark doorway, leaving the quarreling children in uncomfortable silence.

"Um, maybe I could meet her," Robbie volunteered after a moment, tapping his drumsticks on the costly console. "Knowing a hen wouldn't do me in."

Rai lifted a brow and crossed her arms over her chest. "She's willing to say hi, I'm sure. Why are you all of a sudden?"

He tossed his drumsticks on the chair with a huff. "I'm not convinced I need it. I don't want to have to kiss ass to keep this door open. But it seems like I have to," he paused, puffed out a hot breath. "You all are pushy bitches, but it's about the band. They're my mates. I won't screw them over."

Rai pulled her cell from her jeans pocket, punched in Destiny's number. "Good enough for me."

Emmi joined the recording effort a few hours later, coaching Light's lead singer Charlie on his timbre. Robbie had skulked off, thankfully, and the sexy and sultry vocalist was much calmer when he worked. His voice was stunningly powerful, though, like a verbal sonic boom when he hit the lower, rumbling notes of their heaviest songs. Emmi nearly punched the handsome front man's diaphragm to get the resonance she was looking for, but she was a convincing and awe-inspiring coach to watch.

She had a technique of working with these young guys, Rai realized as her friend retook her seat at the console. She knew how to handle their attitude, how to quell the anarchy and bring the power out from down deep. It was enviable, but she made it look natural, like she'd been born to coax the best out of would-be rock stars.

Emmi used her ear to dial back reverb, to correct audio as Charlie began the next song. She spoke to her bandmate without lifting her eyes.

"Did you and Robbie make headway? I'm guessing so since I wasn't called in for medical response."

"He's a stubborn, sexist ass. But he agreed to talk with Destiny, so that's a win."

Emmi's sidelong glare was instant and fierce. "Damn it, Rai. He needs your help, not her words. He's four drumbeats from a psychotic break."

“Had to start somewhere,” Rai replied apathetically. “He thinks we’re all sadistic bitches that delight in belittling him. And we’re not drummers, after all, so we don’t understand. But you signed them, so here they are.”

Emmi scowled, sighing as she sat back. “You know they’re not signed. They’re here for coaching and to record a few songs for us to evaluate. I won’t take them on unless I have reason to. We have enough on the line.”

“Speaking of that,” Rai interjected, switching out for a more uncomfortable subject. “The new issue of a certain magazine came this morning.”

Emmi’s eyes closed, hiding some lingering shame. “There was no avoiding that. The Crown owns those photos. I couldn’t even get permission to see them first. At least I thought to have a pedicure the day before.”

“Bare feet, huge smile, royalty in the background and a happy toddler beside you. Who wouldn’t want those pics shared with the world? How’s Simon holding up?”

The vocals inside the booth ended and Emmi flipped on the microphone inside where Charlie stood, waiting with perfect patience.

“Great, got it. Go through the background vocal track.”

He nodded, replacing his headset and readying for the music as Emmi eyed Rai.

“He’s fine.”

“No, no,” Rai pleaded dramatically. “No evading. How’s he dealing with the rumor mill? You two at Buckingham, rumors of you guys already thinking about kids. It went from zero to sixty in five seconds flat.”

Emmi turned a few dials on the soundboard as Charlie sung. “He’s more accommodating and understanding than he should be. Bernie and Steve are hounding him and his costars are pelting him with questions about us, but he’s maintaining his dignity and mine, thankfully. I’m sure his interview on Radio One will be peppered with questions about me when he goes on tonight.”

“Can’t blame the reporters for snapping this one up. You were solo for so long and he’s so dreamy.” Rai’s eyes went dewy as she teased. “He still making you nervous?”

“No, but thanks for your faith in me, darling.”

When the singing ended, Emmi flipped the intercom back on. "Okay, come on out. Let's review."

He lifted off the headphones, set them back on the stand with absolute care and practically skipped out of the sound booth like an eager schoolboy. Rai noticed how much cooler he was than his drumming cohort. The same passion, the same drive, but without the ego and drama.

Robbie would be out on his ear if he didn't learn something from Destiny. How these guys had dealt with such an explosive prick up to this point was a mystery in her mind.

Emmi kept her tone muted as she showed him out of the studio. Her guiding hand rested on his shoulder as they disappeared up the steps to the atrium.

Rai, left in the quiet studio, rolled back through the recordings. Charlie's voice was naturally richer than she'd expected. Delighted that it wouldn't require as much production work as Robbie's demonic drumming, she settled in to modulate and correct. She laid the vocals over the drum line, guitar and bass parts recorded in the days prior.

Time slipped away as she teased out every nuance of the deep vocals, every influx in the base riff. When she surfaced at the soundboard two hours later, the tune was meticulously corrected and ready for Emmi's review.

With a deep yawn, she climbed the studio steps, emerging into Haven's foyer. A web conference with a local guitar maker was scheduled in less than twenty minutes. They were willing to give her the world for a meet-and-greet session the following week, and were bartering for an autographed guitar or two from her collection. She had thirty-six guitars in total now, most of them stored safely at Spire. She supposed she could spare one, but the proceeds had to be for a good cause.

And by good, she thought, pausing on the steps, it had to be magnificent.

Upstairs in her suite, she reviewed the framed certificates hanging alongside the art she'd been collecting while touring Asia and Europe. Each document was proof of the other causes she'd supported, of the good her money and time had done for humanity. She brushed her fingers over her favorite, printed in Korean and detailing the generous donation to the refugee organization in Seoul that housed displaced victims of war, its home base situated alongside an orphanage for

abandoned children. She'd funded the music room there personally, gifting keyboards, drums and a few guitars to the destitute and hopeless. The rest of the band had given generously, following her lead, and the facility was now known as Second Step in their honor. The memory of the smiling children, and of showing them how to make music, brought a smile to her face even now.

The photo of her family, perched on her desk, halted her stride. It was only a few months old, taken during her sister's summer break from school. Harold, her father, and her mother Sarah had their arms around little sister Kara, and all three were smiling from the round car of a Ferris wheel. The wind pulled her mother's graying hair and her sister laughed heartily, their car towering over trees and other rides in the distance. She plucked the frame from its place and plopped onto her butter yellow chaise.

She didn't remember any of her life before she joined them. There was no recollection of her childhood in Korea, no shadowy memories of her time at that orphanage she'd donated to. She'd spent hours over the years thinking back, trying to imagine her birth mother's face, but it was always dark and featureless. She was nearly three when her American parents came to take her back with them.

While she'd lost the culture and traditions she'd been born with, she'd gained so much more in return.

Harold and Sarah Donovan were hardworking, decent and generous, encouraging and doting to their adopted daughter. She'd enjoyed ten years of undivided attention, spoiled completely, until Sarah discovered she was pregnant. When they'd stopped trying for children, it happened on its own.

It had taken a while to adjust to the competition, but in time, Kara became her protégé and she took the big sister role seriously.

She'd been selfish, she thought now, to hate her sister for being born during those first few years in the crowded house. She was as much their child as Kara, and neither was favored more than the other in her memory.

Her phone rang from its charger on the desk. She rose to fetch it, replacing the frame and noting Steve's name on the display. The tall, British comedy writer had taken on the role of confidante and close friend during the past few weeks, calling or texting nearly every day and delighting her with laughter and gossip.

"Hey buddy," she greeted, flopping back down to her chaise.

"Evening, Rai," he replied in the dapper accent she found snootily intoxicating. There were other voices in the background, muffled but demanding. "How goes it?"

"About the same, except for Robbie finally deciding to listen to reason. And by reason, I mean Emmi. There's nothing like a good threat to make a guy agreeable."

"Why didn't you think of that?" He asked with a chortle. "You're way more terrifying than she is."

"Ah, you're just trying to butter me up."

"No way. I can put you in my pocket and you still scare the shite out of me."

"That's because you're a big wuss. Are you calling me from a bus terminal? I can barely hear you."

"No, can you imagine me on a *bus*?" His posh accent on the last word made her snicker. "I'd be throttled on the spot."

"Wuss," she repeated. "On set, then?"

"Unfortunately. Bernie can't make up his mind on this one scene and I'm knackered."

"You're what?"

"Knackered. You know, tired, worn out, over it. We've been here since four this morning. We've done it scripted. We've done it improvised. We've done it every which-way, and he's still a pain in my ass."

"That sounds familiar. Maybe if I send Emmi down there, she'll straighten Bern out like she did with Robbie in the studio today."

"No dice. I have it on good authority that she'll be busy with a certain superhero bloke tonight."

"Uh oh," Rai giggled. "What are they planning so I can tease her relentlessly about it?"

"Dinner at Xiu, exhibit at the London museum and general showing off, I'm sure. Now that they're out in the open, Simon's taking full advantage. He's been planning this for a week. Some reward for his having to be interviewed on the radio, like he needs an excuse to be seen out and about with her."

"Nice. I'll wait up, make her life hell when she gets home. What would I do without this gossip you give me?"

"Pester her, I'd wager." In the phone, she heard Bernie's voice ring out angrily. "And I'm off. Cheers."

Second Saga, Book Two

“Cheers.” She mimicked, sweeping her finger across the phone screen to end the call. With a grin, she rose to go find and interrogate her band mate.

Chapter 2

Sunday, October 12.

With the filming done, he could finally return to his London flat and enjoy an evening of peace.

He had to miss a few freelance jobs but the head writer position on Bernie's new sitcom was well worth the hiatus. He'd drafted all twelve shows in less than two weeks, barely able to control his excitement over finally being given the opportunity to manage his own writing staff. He'd collaborated, contributed, written a few zingers on shows before, but never decided the final product.

And he was learning that being in charge meant there was no buffer between his staff and the temperamental actors he wrote for. He hadn't considered that hurdle in his eager acceptance of the position. Plus, every producer, director and stagehand had an opinion on what was funny and what was rubbish. Everyone wanted to write, but no one wanted the hassle brought along with it.

With a huff, he collapsed onto his worn tan leather sectional. Between the tiring rewrites and the four-hour drive back to London, every bit of his brain was fried. The antique grandfather clock's pendulum swung back and forth with dull thumps as he stared at the second hand. It traced the circumference of the calligraphy-etched face while his mind wandered.

In the round reflexive glass, her face slowly appeared. The edgy smile and the glow of her long, deep brown eyes invigorated and inspired his exhausted brain. Thinking back on the gallery visit, he recalled the way her fingers reached out, wanting to touch the brushstrokes she felt drawn to. And he adored the way juicy gossip turned her everyday smirk into a wicked little grin.

He hadn't been able to resist her ear for gossip. She was a good co-conspirator, always in supply of a little of her own dirt and always willing to hear his. It was one thing he could always revert back to when his nerves made words hard to find. For an accomplished screenwriter, the sudden detriment to his skill set as a wordsmith was embarrassing, irrefutable evidence of his infatuation.

But her past was still so elusive. She spoke of her family very little, though he knew she had one sibling, a younger sister, from his web searching. He also knew she was adopted but she spoke nothing of

the process or when it happened. Emmi also hid details of her band mates' pasts like her grandmother's jewels. They'd all survived the persistent barrage of the media by clamping down on personal details. He understood the judgment and the antagonism of the press, though he was subject to it on a much smaller scale. Their fortifications were impressive.

Rai, though, was his muse. He envied her quick wit and her backbone equally. It no doubt took nerves of steel and a sarcastic mind to make it in metal music as a diminutive Asian female. So he channeled her spirit in his new sitcom characters, found her humor in their interactions and relied on his experience to make the dialogue fly.

The memory of her onstage at Wembley, the leather-clad vixen under hot lights, snuck into his preoccupied mind.

But she was more than just sex appeal, his mind argued. She was substance, fierce and genuine. Anyone could be tough but turning it on and off like she could was impressive. One minute, she was hard as nails, and the next, she was bawling to him about the band mate she'd found battered and desperate on the floor of their hotel suite.

Simon's description of Emmi's attack had left him broken and sickened, too. He could only imagine how guilty Rai had felt in that moment. She'd cried to him on the phone when he'd called to check in the next morning. She hadn't been forthcoming with details, though he already knew them and dared not to press. But the fear, the anger and the misery in her words had fractured his heart into pieces all over again.

He wondered if Emmi had any idea that those memories still haunted her roommate. She'd confessed as much to him on the phone two days back.

She did confide in him in small doses, he decided. He was making progress. At this rate, he'd know her parents' names by Christmas.

With an agitated huff at his own impatience, he rose to raid his fridge.

On the way over, he stopped short, spun and grabbed from his drawer of menus. He couldn't face the smiling young woman's photo on his fridge yet, his actions that night so long ago, or the idea of confronting it all while preoccupied with the Asian beauty.

"Tell me one more time why this kid is my problem?" Destiny groused over the telephone line.

Rai was passing a toy spring between her palms, her cell phone propped on her shoulder. From her bedroom chaise, she watched a pair of rabbits dash across the rolling lawn and pass through the fence in the distance as the sun set.

"It really is nice here. It's like an active landscape painting. I can see why you'd want to visit."

Destiny blew a frustrated breath. "Quit it, Rai. I don't want to visit. I want to handle my own business for once. I'll visit like I'd planned to, but not to mentor some brat because you can't handle doing *actual* work."

"Oh, come on," Rai pled pathetically. "I can't work with this kid. He's a giant pain in my ass."

"Key phrase there, he's a pain in *your* ass. Stop trying to pawn your troubles off on me. Does Emmi even know you're trying to pass the buck?"

"She knows I could use the help. I need all the help I can get. I'm no producer, I'm no manager. Marilyn's touring with that Seattle band and I'm stuck here doing her work."

"I know for a fact that you're doing very little of her work, as you're arguing with me about taking it. You've been to art galleries, enjoying London and acquiring art, from the looks of your social media accounts. Do some work or I'm calling Emmi."

"Dessie, come *on*."

"Emmi gave you the option of going home after Wembley. You decided to stay and hobnob. Staying that close to the boss always means more work." She laughed now, tauntingly. "You deal with it."

The curt click made Rai wince.

Damn.

Tossing her phone onto the desk, she flopped back with a sigh. Emmi was the negotiator of the group. She sucked at it. Now she'd have to deal with Robbie and the conceited guitarist of White Light, but she'd have to do it alone.

With too much energy and no one to take her frustration out on, she grabbed a towel and headed back to her sanctuary. A few more laps would have to do.

The pavilion housing the pool was walled entirely by ten-foot tall sheets of tinted glass, allowing a view out over the rolling hills and gardens, but stopping any inward glimpses from the outside. Along the expanse of windows, reclining chairs and squat tables waited for

guests and cold drinks. At the far end was a fully-stocked wet bar with every shape of glass hanging over it and a full-size soda machine imported from back home, stocked with cans of the band's favorite drinks inside. The high ceiling over the still water was baffled walnut, beautifully polished to a shine and draped with pale blue fabric.

Emmi had explained it to her when they moved in. The cloth was designed to absorb excess humidity from the heated pool. They mimicked clouds so when the mugginess rose, the gathered moisture fell, creating a makeshift indoor rain shower, regulating and correcting humidity levels. It also meant that the windows never fogged over and the view was never obscured. It was the newest technology, and it still boggled the guitarist's mind that Emmi had even thought of such intricacies.

Two white-curtained French doors opened from lounge into pavilion, and the smell of the pool squashed her stress like a pesky mosquito. Just inside the doorway was a seating area of thick waterproof cushions, a giant flat-screen television set into the wall and a video game system still in its box, the newest and best. Rai knew Emmi was inviting a few of their British friends and contracted company representatives over for a Halloween costume gala and a tour, so all these shiny amenities would be used soon enough. Anna-Lena had been running appetizer ideas past Rai all week. That was yet another reason to swim a few extra laps.

The salted water was perfectly placid, tepid and soothing all the time. Outside, the huge Galileo thermometer her manager bought as garden art stood still in the chilly wind. The lowest floating tag read fifty-two degrees. With a tipped head and a squint, Rai considered the tool as a form of art, the way Emmi had. It was a beautiful piece for sure but it wasn't art to her appraising eye. With a shrug, she disrobed into her sleek red one piece and dropped in to start her routine.

After nearly an hour of dizzying laps, she floated on her back and watched the blue drapes release tiny drops onto the still surface. The blips of rain calmed her mind and her eyes drifted closed. With deep breaths, her heartbeat slowed to normal. Bliss set in. Time floated away as breathing became her only focus.

Well into the night, she dragged her pruned body ashore. Draped in a towel, she headed back upstairs. Henry's dinner delivery waited on her desk, covered with a silver cloche.

Anna's pot roast, roasted potatoes cut into diamonds and wilted spinach sat beside a cup of French onion soup under the weighty dome. A small carafe of jasmine tea, a pudgy teacup without a handle, and silverware nestled inside a burgundy napkin were sat at her place. It was exactly what she'd needed but never thought to ask for.

Suddenly insatiable, she sat her damp frame on the black leather desk chair and ate every impeccably-made bite, wiping the plate clean with a sweeping index fingertip.

Serene and comfortable, she showered off the pool water and settled down. The acoustic guitar favored most was in her palms in an instant. It hummed to life as she closed her eyes, a nineties song with a complex starting riff finding its way to her fingers.

Two gentle raps on the bedroom door silenced her guitar. The dark and dapper butler waited on the other side, no doubt ready to clear the plates and turn down the bed for the night. She paused only long enough to welcome him in, and was pleased to see him gloveless and in casual but perfectly tailored khaki slacks and a trim cotton tee over his firm chest, instead of the tails and patent leather shoes he normally wore.

"Off-shift Henry? I like it."

He bowed his head in appreciation before moving to the desk to retrieve the empty tray. His raven hair was cut closer than in the months before, showing off obsidian eyes and strong brows.

"You know, I don't think I've ever heard you speak. You're the strong, silent type, huh?"

Setting the tray back down with great care, he tipped his face to the inquiring mistress.

"I am a butler in the traditional sense, miss. I speak only when strictly necessary."

The thick, gruff bellow coming from the puritanical man brought on a befuddled double-take.

"Wow, I wasn't expecting that accent. Way too fierce to be a Londoner, but it's not Scottish. Is that Welsh?"

He slowed his words a bit, considerate of her difficulty. "Indeed, originally from Bangor, to the north and west, though I've been a Londoner for quite some time."

The brogue and tone of his voice was entrancing, like thick fog over a moor, and it dazzled her. "You're still holding on to that accent, though. Do you have family here?"

“No, miss. I don’t see much of family these days.”

She gestured to the plush armchair, across from the blond chaise she stretched out on. He sat as demanded, but kept his knees bent tight and rested his palms on them.

She set the guitar aside with a yawn. “Tell me Henry’s story. It’s nearly bedtime.”

“There’s not much to tell, miss. I was born on a Monday, outside a town of little renown. My Tad, err, my father, he was a third generation butcher and Mam tended house, gardened and sold the extra. My brother was the bright, learned type but I never met the mark. I made a terrible meat cutter and an even poorer farmer. I left town in my teen years to find my own way. I ended up a butler in time.”

Rai’s eyes narrowed. “You left home with no formal education and no savings?”

“I had a bit set aside, miss. Arriving in Cardiff, I begged a manor houseman to be his apprentice butler. Did all the jobs he despised, whatever he told me to do, with nary a cross word. Brutal it was, doing work even a butler passed on, but I learned the part, to care for the elite as they deserve.”

She looked down to her lap, shame clouding her mind. He served her. Phenomenally well, in fact. Did she deserve better treatment than any other person?

The strength wavering in her eyes made him wince. “Miss, I mean no disrespect. I simply meant that I’m a servant, and at its simplest, I serve the needs of others, even better than they could themselves. Folwyck taught me well.”

“He certainly did. And, what, you were there awhile and then moved to London to work on your own?”

“When the mistress passed, the family moved on and the work fell away. The master was ready to retire but he called his mate, the owner of the Savoy downtown, looking for transitional work for me. I was their butler, mainly for executives traveling through. He let me stay there, fed me. I worked for beggar’s pay, but I had no place else to be.”

“We enjoyed our time there with you, but you followed us here. You have a place to be now, huh?”

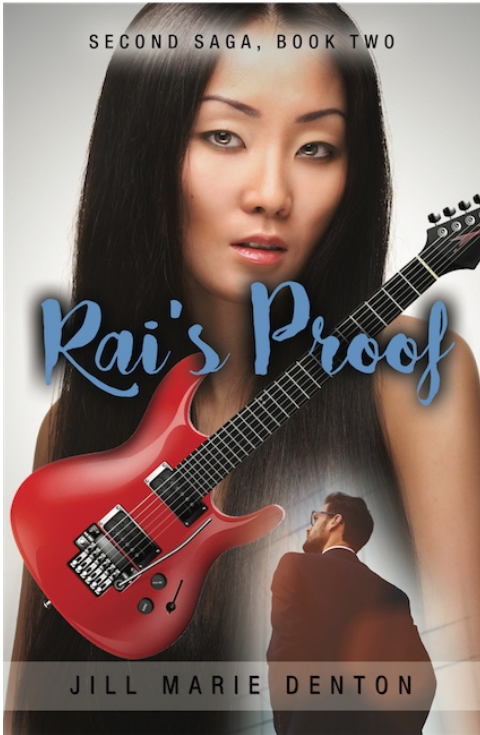
“This isn’t just your Haven, miss,” he paused with a broad smile so genuine, it warmed the guitarist’s heart. “I’m best suited to a manor, best used to serve one family in their specific way. I’m a creature of habit, miss, and it’s a wonderful thing to have routine. You, for

example, if I may be so bold. You take your meals later than Miss Emmi, prefer your coffee black and jasmine tea without honey, and your shirts are to be folded not hung. You take chocolate above all other sweets, though spice is second place. You've got two parents back home, and your sister Kara that you love more than yourself. You see, it works best for us all this way."

With an appreciative smirk, Rai shifted her guitar back to her lap. "Well, having you here makes Haven a home. You're a good man, Henry, and a damn fine butler. If your goal was to spoil us, mission accomplished."

"No better compliment to me, miss."

He rose, bowed once, took the tray and was gone without another word. With a whole new sense of respect for the wayward butler, she resumed her strumming; her mood considerably lighter than it had been earlier.



Second Saga continues with Book Two: Rai's Proof. Rai is Second's diminutive yet dynamic guitarist. Together with her musical sisters, she is dominating the rock scene with heady riffs and leather-clad ferocity. She is in for a serious surprise though, as Stephen Cooper, with his golden good looks and satirical wit, narrows his sights on her.

Second Saga, Book Two: Rai's Proof

by Jill Marie Denton

Order the complete book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10106.html?s=pdf>

or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.