

*Marilyn only needs two things: music and her friends. Henry only needs her, and nothing scares him more. It's time for Second Saga to end, and for Marilyn to get everything she never knew she needed.*

## **Second Saga, Book Five: Marilyn's Promise**

By Jill Marie Denton

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SECOND SAGA, BOOK FIVE



*Marilyn's  
Promise*

JILL MARIE DENTON

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# Chapter 1

Sunday, February 15

With a cleansing breath, Marilyn opened the door to her suite at Haven and tossed her suitcase unapologetically to the floor. Skipping inside, she spun in a carefree circle over the lush carpet.

She was finally home. Home with her sisters. It had taken far too long to find her way back.

She remembered the smell of fresh paint and Henry's air fresheners from her first tour through months before, welcoming back the aroma with lightly closed eyes. She gave into temptation, launching onto her four-poster bed and hopping excitedly on the duvet like a toddler.

With a giggle, she pulled her legs out from under her petite form, bouncing to the mattress below. With arms crossed under her head, she gazed out at the somber English winter sky. It simply couldn't keep her down.

Marilyn, Second's valiant keyboardist and producer, was finally done with jet setting, at least for the time being. The most naturally talented musician in the group was always pulled in a million directions, her unique skillset in constant demand. And Emmi, Second's singer and manager, as well as Mar's oldest friend, didn't cut her any breaks. While Rai and Destiny took life in stride, and while Deis and Emmi worked themselves to death, Marilyn loved a bit of balance. She was in desperate need of a few hours' rest and something sweet, a little respite from her worldwide obligations.

The whirlwind work trip to Paris the week before had completely wiped her, but she'd decided to enjoy herself a little before leaving for Haven. After chopping off a good five pounds of platinum hair at a ritzy boutique, she felt lighter, freer than she had in years. The dusty pink pulled through her pixie cut made her feel fearless, flirtatious. It enlivened her high, rosy cheekbones, mellowed the porcelain of her

complexion, and made the blue of her eyes glow aquamarine under the choppy fringe of brow.

Emmi would have to hold down the long-and-blonde fort for a while. This cropped cut was so much easier to manage, she hadn't had time for styling, and she had no beau to please with such silly things. Most guys she eyed weren't worth the trouble anyway.

She'd just escorted the four lads of White Light, Second's pet project band, back to England from the airport. All four were undeniably sexy in their own way, but two were already spoken for and Marilyn wasn't willing to jump on the other two. She'd survive a while longer.

She wasn't promiscuous by any stretch, but she wasn't long-term girlfriend material, either. Her schedule was routinely littered with scouting new talent coast-to-coast, producing the music she loved, plus fill-in performances for other bands and networking when she had a few minutes left. She hadn't found a genuinely interesting man in months, to her regrown virginity's dismay. None of the usual culprits at parties or flirty hopefuls were enthralling enough to bother with, and her last stab at an ongoing arrangement ended between Thanksgiving and Christmas with a disinterested phone call.

The noises coming from the room next door, through walls she'd preferred to be thicker, clearly proved she was the only uninvolved female left in the house. Destiny, Second's fiery redheaded drummer, was thoroughly enjoying the triumphant return of White Light's drummer, her boyfriend Leif. Destiny was still afraid to call him that, but Emmi had been clear during their chat the Friday before that Destiny's reign of wild, aimless lust was at an end, and that her friends had all fallen like dominoes to the British invasion of Haven.

Love, in fact, was rhythmically pounding against the east wall, testing her patience. She scowled, grabbing a plush pillow and smothered herself with it to drown out the din.

When the banging persisted, she evacuated, determined to find a quieter hole to hide in. Second's bassist Deis was across the hall, her door closed, and a guitar pick dangling on a loop of floss from the doorknob. Charlie, White Light's lead singer, was no doubt loving his

reunion with her friend, his fiancé and future stepmother to his daughter, Ruby. Deis had turned into a full-fledged momma. Mar could only turn away with a wince, escaping down the atrium steps and to the lounge beyond.

Diminutive Rai, Second's guitarist and resident art connoisseur, was propped on the sofa's armrest, cooing fiancé Steve's name into her cell phone, promising all sorts of inappropriate favors in a sexy, muted voice. The comedy writer was on location for his newest sitcom. Disgusted, Mar beelined to the kitchen, praying Emmi wasn't naked on the dining table with Simon, her actor boyfriend.

Relieved to see the squat Austrian chef Anna-Lena alone in the space, dressed in pristine white and standing at the island, she exhaled deeply with relief clear in her upturned eyes. The *chef du maison* was spreading whipped white icing on a mile-high yellow cake.

"Oh, thank God. Wherever Henry is, let him know this place's rooms will need a thorough cleaning and airing out once doors reopen," Marilyn grumbled, stepping past the chef to retrieve a glass of Emmi's iced green tea from the fridge. "What's new with you, Chef?"

"You are all home and I'm pleased as punch," Anna replied easily. "I imagine the ladies are well-enjoying their reunions. Destiny, especially. What a change in the lass. Doctor Deis, I expected this from, but color me surprised at the sudden change of heart in our wayward vixen."

With a chortle, Marilyn leaned a hip against the island. "We're all happy she's shelving that reckless lifestyle. I hear you're quite the judge of character, so what about me, Chef?"

"Well," she breathed, resting her buttercream-smearied wrist, with the spatula still clenched in it, on the counter. "I know you to be a gypsy of sorts, always on the road. You're the most musical of all the sisters, and the most temperamental of them, if you don't mind my saying. And you think them sisters, in the proper sense. You're the only other person here who will touch Emmi's mint tea, so I'll be sure to keep the pitcher filled. By the look of you, you barely eat enough to keep a bird alive, but I'll fix that in time. Emmi told me you have a nut allergy, and

to make sure we have Belgian white on tap for your stay. How am I doing so far, miss?”

“Impressive. And I do eat. Food’s just not a priority, and I’m cutting back on the beer but a little’s okay. Destiny’s the drinker. And please don’t call me miss. You’re Chef because you earned it. I’m just Mar or Marilyn, Lyn, ‘Hey You,’ whatever. We’re house mates. I’m no boss of yours.”

“Oh, but you are,” the chef replied matter-of-factly, gesturing with the frosting-covered tool. “And, I’ll have you know, our Destiny doesn’t drink at all anymore. I haven’t seen her imbibe, nary a sip, in over a week. A changed woman, she is.”

“Wow,” the keyboardist puffed, stepping away to the table. “Good for her. And Leif is an intriguing dude. I can just tell there’s more there than he lets show, but that’s what she needs. And Charlie, he eyed his pictures of Deis on the entire flight back. If she wanted devotion, she’s got it. Does Simon spoil Em?”

“Aye, eight violet dahlias arrived today, one for each day he’s got to wait until he sees her again. And Steve’s a charming lad. I hope that Rai and her beau settle here to have a brood of their own, so I can bake all day and spoil them rotten.”

“Broods,” she repeated, fascinated by the notion. “You didn’t know my girls before Haven came to be, but this is so odd for them. It’s beautiful here.” She glanced around, taking it all in again. “Even more so than I remembered. Oh, and before I forget, so we’re clear, I do my own cooking.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort,” the chef argued in that Eastern European accent she clung to. “My job is to feed this family and care for the home. I do both, and without argument.”

“And you’ll feed us as a family, as you were hired to do,” Mar insisted calmly though her palms moved to her hips in an obvious tell. “I’ll eat family meals when they happen and enjoy anything you leave around. But the meals I eat alone, I will make myself. I can’t allow anyone to serve me like that. I never have and never will.”

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“With all due respect, it’s my job. I was hired to take the burden of food and nutrition from this household. I can’t ignore an order.”

“Fine. In that case, I am also giving an order, another one. When the family gathers and eats, I want you to join us at the table as a contributing member of this household. I insist on it. Henry’s expected to do the same. I’ll see to that personally. And I will make my own food from time to time.”

Anna shrugged with a listless huff. “Miss Emmi made it very clear what my role is in the household, both verbally and in writing. I signed on the bottom line, promising to feed you all. To sidestep those responsibilities is to let down Haven and its owners.”

“Then we’ll learn to be disappointed.” Marilyn trotted back to the chef and placed a peck on her cheek amiably. “No need bothering with me. I’ve taken care of myself forever, and this is my house, so I won’t have people here doing work I’m capable of doing. This is your house, too.”

The chef eyed her despondently. “I cannot disobey, so I suppose I’m caught in a trap.”

“I knew you’d see my side of things,” the pixie replied with a grin.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, Henry lingered in the hall closet outside the servant’s quarters, readying his cleaning supplies for the new household of responsibilities. With everyone and their mates in residence, he’d have a worryingly full schedule. Back in September, when the band had arrived in full force at that London hotel, he’d had a team for laundry and housekeeping responsibilities, but with so many to care for and tend to without a full staff, he couldn’t risk missing tasks or leaving items undone. He’d mentally prepared, sorted his timetable and considered it all in anticipation.

Dutiful and meticulous with every detail, Henry proudly served as Haven’s butler and doorman, picking up chauffeur and secretarial duties at a moment’s notice. He was proud to do anything he could for his rescuer, Emmi, and her band of friends. Treated kindly and sweetly by



them all, much more so than he had been by the guests of the hotel, he was in seventh heaven with his employers and their close kin.

He remembered the terror, the bruises, the pain his mistress Emmi endured when she shuttered herself in that luxurious hotel suite those months ago. She'd been abused, beaten by one she trusted, while Henry was unforgivably absent. After watching her bandmates come together and help each other like sisters, he'd dreamed of continuing in their employ. Their largesse turned out to be immeasurable in his mind. With their offering of room and board, in addition to a brand-new manor named Haven to care for, he felt as content as he could imagine. The hotel had been so awkward, so unfamiliar an environment for the classically trained butler. He was better suited to an established household, with continuing expectations to exceed and routines to learn.

He paused at the grand mirror at the end of the hall, just beyond his first-floor dormitory. Adjusting the starched collar around his clean-shaven neck, pulling his bleached gloves back on over calloused fingers, and standing tall in the heavy, formal woolen suit put him back in the right state of mind for work. Turning the corner, he entered the atrium, noting the footprints on the carpet and boot prints on the marble with a tipped head. He'd been relaxed before, with only two or three in residence. He'd have to be constantly vigilant now, an armed guard on patrol for lint, dust, and scuffs.

Within an hour, the floors were set to rights and the smeared doorknobs and windowpanes gleamed again. Gathering laundry was the next task, his mistresses as well as White Light's rumpled garments. The rented van was waiting outside for a wash and wax.

No tasks were overlooked or done halfway. His credo came directly from his mentor Folwyck, and he never missed a trick, even the ones the bosses knew nothing about. Scars caused by his mentor's impatience marred his knuckles, hidden deftly by his white gloves. They served as constant reminders of the importance of staunch dignity and unquestioning allegiance.

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Shedding his tailcoat and hanging it alongside the laundry machines, he filled his mind with lists and tasks, shielding his imagination as he often did during work hours. He had his day itemized into fifteen-minute increments. He'd become a machine over the years, a perfectionist visage wrapped around an eternally awkward man.

Work would have to keep him busy now that the beautiful fairy was back in England, back in his sights and as undeniably smashing as ever.

He stood a little too quick and bit his lip a little too hard. She was a mistress in this household, his superior, and coveting was as real a sin as any other.

With a deep breath, he finished sorting and loading. Slipping the heavy coat back on, he changed into a new, sparkling pair of gloves from his stock. Jogging up the stairs briskly with starched tails flapping, he strode to Emmi's office, knocked politely, folded his hands and awaited permission.

"Come on in, Henry," the voice chimed from inside.

At her desk with papers in both hands, her violet eyes flicked up at him, pink lips curving in that confident and vibrant smile he delighted in. The lipstick red suit made her skin shine like opal. A piece of his heart swelled in adoration of the radiant blonde. He gestured to her empty glass, and she nodded, finally acclimated to his propensity for silence. He snatched it, ready to retreat for a refill.

"Full house, Henry," she remarked, her eyes on work. "Before you dash, I need to share a concern with you. Sit a second."

He did as commanded, setting the glass back on the wooden coaster. His eyes were the darkest brown but alight with concern under arched, strong, and shadowy brows. His hair had grown out into a sway of obsidian silk from forehead to the tops of his ears. His sharp jaw and cheekbones clenched as she let silence fill the space, finishing whatever paperwork she was buried in.

In time, she exhaled and set down her paperwork. "I just wanted to let you know that our newest guest is going to be a bit of a challenge."

I just spoke with Anna, and I can promise you she'll be harder on you than on the chef."

His heavy brows narrowed, but he tamped down the panic with brute force.

She chortled and sat back casually. "She won't abuse you or anything, but she'll make your job a living hell. She probably won't want you to do your job at all. Anna tells me she laid down the law in the kitchen already."

He looked to his lap, concern and timidity shading his face. He doubted he'd be able to stand up to the object of his affection if she insisted on confrontation.

"Please understand. While we were all here enjoying having the minutiae taken care of, she was handling herself just fine at Spire and on the road. She's always been stubborn. She fights with me when I give her direction or try to help her with what she considers her work. She has since we were kids. I can relate to it, but given your diligence and willingness, she's going to refuse your services at some point."

Glancing back up at his head mistress, he exhaled uncomfortably and touched his forehead in thought. A stray eyelash clung to his index fingertip as his hand lowered back into his view.

*Damn it all, his relentless thoughts tossed in. Time to change gloves again. That's six pairs today.*

"Henry, it's nothing personal," Emmi interrupted his fretting, stepping around in those mile-high heels she adored before leaning back against her desk. "She's a hardheaded kid sometimes, and that's coming from me, of all people. She means well, but she's had to take care of herself for most of her life. Having such a big family and so little time with her parents will do that."

He gestured with his fingers, asking permission to speak, and she giggled with a nod. "You can talk whenever you like. I feel like a tyrant, like you think I'll cut your tongue out if you try."

"Never, miss," he replied, his northern Welsh accent sneaking out. "I'm just a man of few words."

"Well, I'm waiting for some of them."

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“If she cannot accept service, am I to comply with her wishes or yours? I have an obligation to the household and made a promise to you above all others.”

She dropped to a crouch alongside his chair, her uplifting gaze on his. “Let me be clear, you wonderful man. Your job here is to maintain order and keep us happy. You know how to serve Rai, Deis and myself perfectly and it’s much appreciated, more so than a paycheck or day off can say. Destiny, I imagine, is enjoying having you around, too. She lived on tailored service at the best hotels before coming here. But Marilyn is the most defensive of her privacy and workload. Just between us, if her space is orderly, it doesn’t matter to me if it’s your work or hers. This place needs to be drama-free. With the Grammys on Sunday and all the preparation for our tour, I just want peace on Earth for a bit, however that needs to happen. Got me?”

“Aye, miss,” he confirmed with a bow of his head. “I will do my best. And I’ve taken the liberty to prearrange the cleaning and return of all designer garments next Monday, after Second accepts its awards and brings them back to Haven.”

“I had no doubt you would, and thanks for the vote of confidence.” She winked, standing and stretching in her trim skirt suit. “The fitting is scheduled for Tuesday, downtown at the designer’s studio. I’d like you in attendance, and to care for the garments personally once he hands them over. I’ve lost ten pounds since this crazy performance prep started, but I still think Rubio will still have trouble fitting me into that little number he picked out. Damn designer sizing,” she grouched agreeably, sitting back behind her desk. “And I’ve opened credit accounts at the stores you and Anna go to most, with funds guaranteed and without a signature requirement from us. You should have no trouble keeping Haven supplied and maintained while we’re away on tour or otherwise.”

Henry stood and bowed. “Very kind of you, miss. And Miss Ruby, is she to tour America as well?”

“She’s coming with us for the first seven weeks, while White Light opens for us. She’ll come back with her father when their shows are

done. We'll be gone another month or so after that. Two more shows were added on yesterday."

"Please advise Mr. Taylor that I would be honored to care for the young miss at any time he is occupied," he volunteered, but lowered his gaze as Emmi looked up from her papers. "Assuming, of course, that both parent and stepmother are agreeable to such terms. The stables called and are inquiring as to whether she can participate in spring lessons. I've taken the liberty of adding her name to the summer list, also, with a deposit from my own stipend."

"That's very kind of you," she repeated back to him, her cheeks lifted jovially. "They have a few shows to do while we're gone, and with his old babysitter away at college, that would help him quite a bit. And Ruby chatters incessantly about riding, so I'm sure Charlie and Deis will appreciate your generosity. I'll see to it that your deposit is reimbursed to your pay account."

"No, please, Miss Emmi, I insist. She has given me so much joy. I wish it to be her birthday present, though I am a bit early. I'm honored to provide something she'll enjoy."

"Maybe I pay you too much if you can afford to buy riding lessons for my future niece."

Henry's hands tucked behind his back as he dipped his head in silent reverie.

"Thank you, Henry, and if Marilyn gets to be too much, tell me. I can step in."

He lifted her empty glass, bowed dutifully once again, and left her to work. Returning to his room, he replaced his gloves before toting Emmi's glass to Anna's kitchen. Setting it on the counter, the chef stopped stacking clean dishes and retrieved the pitcher.

"I bought mint seeds from a grower in Greece," the chef told him. "Keeping Emmi's voice lubricated last fall nearly depleted Britain's mint supply. I won't risk it this year."

"Smart of you. Source some cucumber and tomato seedlings if you would. Oh, and basil and oregano to plant here. I suppose Italian is best. They speak of a layered dish of cucumber slices, tomato, red

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wine vinegar and those herbs. The sisters must miss their garden vegetables during such dismal winters.”

“Certainly,” the chef acquiesced, returning the pitcher to the fridge. “Best basil is from Asia, but that’s an Italian dish for sure. And the key lime tree seems to have survived so far. I intend to request a lemon tree from the same grower. These girls love their citrus, they do.”

Henry considered them all. His heart swelled seeing them smile at anything he and the chef accomplished. He wiped the rim of the glass with a linen side towel before dropping in a slice of lemon. “I asked about the little gem. She’ll likely be back with us once Light’s done their touring.”

“Fantastic,” the chef gleamed, resting her stubby fingers on the counter of the island. “And the stable?”

“I’ll insist if the Taylors do take up residence, as I suspect they will.”

“I heard Doctor Deis intends to move back home and take her little family with her. Rai and Steve are to stay here.”

A defeated look contorted his face before he could hold it back.

“I know we’ll miss the princess, but the little bird told me that she and Steve have discussed having a family of their own. More children will follow.”

“I do hope so,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Did your last employer not have children?” The chef asked, settling onto her normal seat at the end of the table.

He stepped toward her, placing the glass of tea in the freezer to chill. “They were all grown. Their youngest was ten when I arrived. She was a sickly woman, and he ran his enterprise at every moment.”

The chef considered as she rolled silverware in white cloth. “Steve is eager to be a father, of that I’m sure. And Rai would be a brilliant mother. She’s taught Ruby to play Chopsticks, you know. The Taylor gene must be a musical one.”

“To have them here would be brilliant. And I do hope Destiny will consider returning after the tour, with this Leif fellow she fancies.”

“I’m sure they’ll all find their places. Such is life as a woman matures. She finds a place for a nest, builds it and guards it with her life.”

“And your nest?”

“Ah, my nest fell from its branch,” the chef smirked. “Now this place is home. It suits me fine. Now off you go with that tea. And beware the newest tenant. She’s a feisty one, she is.”

He fetched the frosted glass, holding it in one hand and resting it on the other hand’s straight fingers. “I’ve been given fair warning. I’m going to rip the bandage off straightaway.”

“Good luck with that,” the chef replied blithely to his back as he strode back upstairs.

After returning Emmi’s glass, he approached Marilyn’s closed door. In his typical way, he placed two gentle knocks dead center and waited for a reply.

When no voice came back, he tapped twice more.

Another half-minute passed before he twisted the knob and stepped inside to find the suite empty. Her bulging suitcase was on its side on the carpet, still sealed and tagged from the airline. The bedding was rumpled, the curtains opened wide and the cord of her phone charger dangled off the nightstand.

With a defeated sigh, his prepared speech ruined, he lifted the heavy case, setting it on the luggage rack by the closet door. Setting the bed to rights came first, then he coiled the cord and tucked it under the charging phone.

The zipper of her suitcase was half-opened when she returned, his fingers still on the pull. Shock and anger clouded her face. “And what are you doing?” Her voice was sharp, shrill, as she swallowed up the distance between them in huge strides, forcing him to take a step back.

He bowed politely, folding his hands as a fierce blush snuck to his cheeks.

“I asked a question. Were you going through my things? Wait,” she paused as her eyes shifted to the bed, the nightstand. “Were you cleaning up after me?”

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He nodded once; his lips sealed.

“Oh, Henry,” she breathed, instantly softened with outstretched palms. “Please don’t. I know it’s probably a compulsion for you, but I’m okay, really. I have privacy issues,” she confided in a flurry of words before closing her suitcase zipper hastily. “It’s a long story. But I really can’t let you clean up after me or anything.”

He stood silently, watching regretfully while his idea of physical perfection raked unnerved fingers through her short crop of blush-streaked hair. He swallowed hard, releasing a slow breath to calm his pulse as she skittered around him.

“I know you cleaned up after us at the hotel, but you worked there,” she defended, striding away to pace before finally hopping up on the edge of her bed, messing it up all over again. “You work here, but you *live* here. It’s different. I can’t have you toiling over me.”

He could only lower his gaze, his mind racing with his lips pressed together.

“I know you’re not mute,” she sighed shamefully, hating that she’d chastised him. “But I’ll be damned if I’ve heard you say a single thing. Is there a reason you don’t speak?”

When he dared to glance up, her inquisitive gaze was centered on him. So cool and warm at once, it jumpstarted his heart into rapid lurches again. With a careful breath, he took a single step toward her. He cleared his throat, tried for casual banter but found only the overly formal retort he so often resorted to.

“A butler says no more than necessary. He has no business doing so.”

She couldn’t help the giggle, the absurdity of his demeanor tickling her. “Henry, stop with the starched routine around me, would you? It’s freaking me out.”

“I’ve not changed since the hotel, miss.”

“Ugh, you ‘miss’ everyone, too? I’m Marilyn, Mar, whatever, but not ‘miss.’ I don’t call you Butler or Mister. I won’t answer if you call me ‘miss,’ how’s that?”

“As you wish.”



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She smiled, bemused, and shook her head. “You’re impossible to argue with. But please, don’t wait on me hand and foot. I know you’re going to want to, but I live here and so do you. I’m used to doing it myself. I’ll ask you when I have trouble, I promise, but let me do stuff for myself, okay?”

“As you wish.”

“And you’ll also eat with us when we all sit together for meals,” she added, hopping back to her feet. “I don’t know how often it happens, but as a member of this household, you’ll eat with us. And Anna will, too. It’s important to me. I guess having a big family did that to me, but I can’t stand the idea of you eating on your own, hiding away someplace, when we’re all together.”

“As you wish. But I dare say, Marilyn, that your demands are numerous. More so than your housemates, in fact, though you tell me to not serve you.”

She sidled closer with an appreciative grin. “You’re quick. I like it, especially with that smarmy little accent of yours. I can’t help being complicated. And I bet there are all sorts of fun layers to Henry under that formal wool suit, huh? Did you know you’d be a butler as a child, or did you grow into looking so good in tails?”

His eyes lowered as bashfulness set in. “I... I must be off. Your sisters are awakening.”

“How...”

“I hear them stirring. I know Haven’s every sound.”

He stepped past her toward the door, his pulse pounding in his ears. She’d been too close and had smelled too strongly of rioting meadows and spring rain to keep neutral a moment longer.

He turned back to bow to her before slipping out to the hall.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marilyn considered their banter long after his retreat, finally calming enough to relax on the plush bedding. The linens smelled like verbena in a summer garden. He’d smelled similarly when she’d flirted without

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shame, but a touch of peppery spice ebbed off him, too, and that comforted and intrigued her.

She'd noticed him as an entity back at the regal hotel, but here in her home, doing the menial chores her friends delegated and blushing at her obnoxious flirtations, he felt more human to her somehow. He was also stunningly handsome in a stately, dapper kind of way, a detail she'd ignored back when her then-boyfriend occupied her thoughts.

She'd forgotten how his dark amber eyes turned up while he worked and how his brows descended when he listened. He stood a full foot taller than she, his meticulously shined shoes' heels adding another half-inch to that. And his disciplined form, the broad shoulders and firm torso were carefully downplayed by the tailored wool. There was no doubt after his questioning byplay that, under that veneer of reserved silence, quick logic and a learner's mind were waiting for a chance to emerge.

And his eye for detail was undeniable as she glanced over at her coiled and clipped charger cord, centered perfectly under her resting phone. As she lifted it, she tossed the coil aside, unraveling it with a wicked, childish chuckle.

A waiting text message made her phone vibrate when she palmed it.

*Hey, how was your flight, keyboard babe?*

She rolled her eyes to the heavens, noting the name above the message. Ben. She debated not answering but knew he'd just pelt her until she did. This was an old routine.

*I recall asking you not to text me again. Momentary lapse?*

Within ten seconds, a response made her cell vibrate where it rested on her leg.

*No, just had a question. But you never could resist me.*

*Conceited ass. What do you want?*

She rose, pacing the plush carpet. Emmi had avoided this beautiful manor for most of September because of the guy she was condescending to deal with. He'd assaulted her, after all, and Simon had to rescue her. She'd seen the aftermath.

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Another nagging buzz interrupted her misery.

*You're in good company for Best Rock Album. Looks like the Grammy could go either way.*

She huffed, typing with pounding thumbs.

*And that wasn't a question. Do you have a point? I'm too busy for this.*

She dropped the phone and rubbed her eyes. The response came too quickly to unclench.

*I'm going to be there to accept that award. Is she still mad?*

With an incredulous headshake, she typed feverishly.

*Hell, I'm still mad. You hurt her, Ben.*

His reply made her cringe.

*So, she wouldn't want me to say hi, then? She'll have that bullying dope of a boyfriend with her anyway. I could go without another broken rib. Thanks for the favor of sending me there just to get my chest smashed in.*

She fumed, pacing the floor with the phone in both hands. Same old argument from him, and the same guilt for replying to it.

*You tried to rape her. Don't pin that on me. And keep your distance.*

She tossed the phone to the mattress, pulling her cropped hair at the very idea of them in the same room again. Emmi had already given him her heart and her attention years before, only to have him abuse her when he decided to show his face again.

Weeks after he'd fled in the wake of Simon's rage, he'd cornered her, forced her hand in that Tulsa bar. Media had been there, interviewing his band on their successful album with their new label. He sidled over, knowing she'd never strike out or do anything questionable so close to paparazzi. And he knew full-well that she'd never address his sleazy attack on Emmi in front of cameras or show the media any animosity.

And the media would never be told anything about what he'd done, per her boss's strict orders. Simon had intervened, Emmi's injuries had healed, and Second had dismissed Ben and his bandmates without consequence. The sisters agreed to move on, but the guilt of asking

## *Marilyn's Promise*

Emmi to invite them to Haven in the first place still lingered. Without her meddling, he would've been an ocean away. Instead, her oldest friend's assault and the scarred memories it left behind were all her doing.

Her heart cursed him for getting away with it all. Vowing to keep her promise to Emmi, to move on, she ignored his last message, snubbing his blatant arrogance.

*Oh, I will from her and that thug. But how about a drink after?*

## Chapter 2

Monday, February 16

Monsieur Mystère was everything Marilyn remembered from her youth and even more vivacious than she'd seen on their video call. Clad in all black with a distinctive handlebar moustache, the magician made a grand entrance as he strode into Emmi's office. Henry followed on his heels.

"Ah, *Mademoiselle Vendetta*," he beamed, granting Emmi a colossal smile. "*Bonjour*, and so good to see you again, *mon chère Marilyn*."

He embraced the pixie, kissed both her cheeks traditionally and sat where she instructed.

"*Bienvenue á Haven, monsieur*," Emmi greeted with an outstretched hand before sitting behind her desk.

Henry poured their guest a snifter of brandy, as he'd requested of the butler on the drive from Heathrow. His stomach stirred at the lothario's cooing, though Marilyn acted like a fascinated child.

"Many thanks," he replied in his thick Parisian accent. "*Une belle chateau*, so fitting for such lovely women."

Emmi bowed her head at the accolade. "Thank you. Did you have a chance to review the contract I sent last night?"

He opened his jacket, removing the folded document from an inner pocket. "But of course. Please find my autograph and accept my services exactly as requested."

"Excellent!" Marilyn exclaimed. "I've been a fan of yours since I was a kid. This is a real honor."

"The honor is mine," he replied suavely. "And have you, also, accepted my terms?"

"About that, *monsieur*," Emmi replied. "I read through this and can agree with it on behalf of Second, but the Grammys stage crew will be aware of the technicalities. I cannot promise they'll keep your secrets."

## Marilyn's Promise

"I have seen to those matters personally," he answered with a flicked wrist. "The committee returned my signed contract this morning. We are all careful, are we not?"

"We have to be," Emmi answered, dismissing Henry with a smile. "Now then, let's hear the details. We only have a few days to learn it, and less than forty-eight hours with you here to show us the ropes."

The magician crossed his leg with a sly grin, the snifter resting lightly in his grasp.

"Oh, *mademoiselle*, the trick is so well-planned, so elusive, even I am in awe of it. The audience will be speechless. You both must be quick in this brilliant illusion of mine, for every second counts."

The singer and keyboard player sat in silence, fascinated by the magician's cunning plan. Both blondes hoped that his confidence wasn't misplaced, as neither was trained in theatrics or magic. That fact became clear as his flippant description of the complex maneuver terrified them both.

Their original plan to have choreographed dancers on stage to help execute the stunt had been altered due to the magician's insistence on secrecy. Instead, Emmi's white aerial silks would be pulled on either side by levers. The cloths would flip her, putting her back to the audience then force her down through a trap door during the final seconds of their performance. In the moment Emmi slid from the cloth, a disguised Marilyn would leap into it, lifted back upright on the stage by her wrists, in her friend's place, while other cloths and lighting obscured the view. The keyboardist would complete the last bit of the song's performance, tangled in and concealed by the cloths. This gave Emmi less than ten seconds to traverse the backstage area and hop into the prop bed just in time to have the spotlights focus on her as she woke, suddenly and disappointedly, from her lusty dream sequence.

Emmi sat back with a sigh, overwhelmed but excited at the idea of it all. She'd sought the best illusionist in Europe for a reason, and his proposal exceeded her wildest expectations.

"And all this will happen inside fifteen seconds," Marilyn assumed aloud. "I'm supposed to take Emmi's place in less than a second?"

Second Saga, Book Five

“Not *supposed* to,” the magician corrected. “You will, *mon chère*. And the audience will gasp, they will climb to their feet and be amazed at the fantastic thing that happened before their very eyes.”

Dubious but ever the optimist, Marilyn offered a hand. “*Monsieur*, consider it a deal. Emmi and I will meet you at the studio in two hours.”

“Ah, *fantastique! Très bon, mademoiselle*. I am off to prepare.”

Henry followed the magician to the front door, on orders to personally escort him to his hotel suite. And beyond the town car’s partition, the magician gloated endlessly to the butler-chauffeur.

\* \* \* \* \*

The band descended on the acrobatics gym later that day. Mar was astonished to see the magician, wearing a smooth black leotard, dangling in the aerial silks. He counted steps, his curled moustache furrowed as the cloth spun him and slammed him down into the foam matting. His forearms braced for the fall, but all five women winced at the smack of impact.

Marilyn rose to every challenge, *Mystère* commanding her every movement. She hopped onto the fabric, spurred by his coaching, again and again until her muscles ached. Meanwhile, Emmi hung from another, doing pull-ups with frustrated grunts. She could do four now, but the fifth made her arms shake so violently, she dropped before her chin reached her knuckles.

“That sucks so bad,” she grumbled, stretching to touch her toes with a wince. “The fabric is so much harder to use. What the hell was I thinking with all this? We’re rock stars not acrobats.”

“You knew it would make an impact and it will,” *Destiny* reassured her, sitting her down on the mat and massaging her shoulders. “This dude is convinced you two can do this switcheroo and fool everybody. I’m a little concerned. You’ve got to practically be on top of each other.”

“Fortunately, we’re beyond personal space issues by this point. And we can’t move on to the next step until we nail this one.” Emmi slumped in her friend’s grasp. “I’m like a damn brick shithouse after all

this workout stuff. The treadmill on the steepest incline is like a treat nowadays.”

“Just don’t lose your curves, Madame Shithouse,” Destiny snarked.

Rai spent an hour lying on her side in the aerial cloths, doing endless side crunches to strengthen her already muscled core. Deis swung by her fabric-wrapped ankles above the pads like a pendulum, her bass strapped to her chest. She giggled as blood rushed to and reddened her cheeks.

When her turn to rehearse finally came, Marilyn gasped as the cloths tightened around her wrists and easily lifted her above the mat. With all her strength, she tried to separate her arms, to pull them down to her sides, but her biceps couldn’t handle the strain. She dangled by her wrists, rested a moment, and then bent her elbows, trying to pull herself up an inch at a time.

“Keep pulling,” the squat British acrobat instructed from below her hanging body. “Tighten your core, do reps until you see progress.”

“Progress?” she shouted down breathlessly. “You want progress?”

With a heavy grunt, she grabbed the cloth above her wrists with both hands and pulled her body up with a vengeful growl. The acrobat cheered encouragingly and lowered the drapes so her feet just touched the mat. She kept a tight grasp on the material and pulled her legs up, forming a ninety-degree angle with her belly muscles clenched. Her toes pointed as she grimaced like a woman lifting a minivan.

Emmi stood, her mouth agape and eyes locked on her accomplice’s brute strength.

“Damn, get it, Mar!” Destiny proclaimed behind her. “When did you pick up this little skill set?”

“I did gymnastics when I was half this size,” she wheezed, dropping to the mat. Sitting up slowly, she turned to her friends. “I guess it’s still in there, but not without my hands. Can you pull yourself up by your wrists, Em?”

The singer nodded, rolling her shoulders. “Maybe once or twice, but it burns like hell. I thought my arms would break the first time.”



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Destiny strapped into her drum set's new harness, ready to get started. "My turn. Let's hope this thing works. It's got to be better than smashing my chest into the rims like last time."

Emmi and Marilyn watched the drummer balance herself on the fabric cradle. It lifted her slowly as the drum set rose on the cloth-trimmed platform. When her harness clicked into the kit's set up, her legs balanced the drums as she'd hoped, and the pedal was within reach of her pointed toe.

"Oh, this is much better," she called from above. "Still ridiculous compared to doing it flat on the stage, but way better than before."

She attacked a riff, percussion exploding around the cavernous gym while Emmi turned back to Marilyn. "You'll have to go through makeup and all, too. They'll have to wig you and put contacts in. The TV camera will be in tight."

She nodded. "I think that'll be the easy part. Come on, boss. We've got hours of pain left."

The magician walked them through the transition over and over, taking Emmi's place or Marilyn's, to critique their motions down to the finest detail. As challenging as the entire routine would be physically, this split-second transition was the crux of the whole performance. One false move and the gig would be up, the magician's reputation would be destroyed, and the audience would see the illusion for what it really was, a cheap trick attempted by amateurs.

Rai, Deis and Destiny completed their workout and rehearsals as the sun began to set. As time with *Mystère* was a precious commodity, both blondes stayed at the studio until night descended on the London cityscape. The manager of the gym stayed, running the cloth mechanics, and a single paramedic, entranced by the opportunity to watch the girls rehearse, stayed to oversee on unpaid time. Both stayed silent as the women fought through their instructor's merciless lessons.

\* \* \* \* \*

## *Marilyn's Promise*

Henry arrived at the gym a few minutes after nine, a brown wicker basket heavy on his arm. He felt awkward driving Deis' SUV, but he was given no choice. The company car was in for routine repairs, Rai had returned the Mercedes originally bought for her sister, and Marilyn's rental was sitting in the gym's lot already. Assured by the bassist's faith in his driving abilities, he set off to find and feed the two missing sisters.

He pushed his way through the studio's front doors in his floor-length, sweeping overcoat, the odor of foam cushions and aging carpet foreign to his senses. He distractedly marveled at the display cases filled with golden statues and accolades for the instructors and gymnasts. Like a tourist in a new town, he explored the lobby first before continuing through the deserted building to the double doors between him and the gym floor. Beyond the glass slats, he could see his mistresses standing and facing a mat, with the magician standing behind saying inaudible words with wild gestures.

When he saw the performer fiercely push Marilyn forward to the mat, he rushed inside and shouted without thinking, drawing up three sets of curious eyes.

"Henry? What are you doing here?" Emmi called out, stepping over to him in a cropped tee and shorts so tight, he averted his eyes to stay decent.

He handed the basket to his boss with a polite bow, his mouth firmly closed. Shame swept over him as the magician gripped Marilyn's hand, helping her up. He hadn't hurt her, and he hadn't meant to. He realized foolishly and too late that the shove was staged.

Emmi accepted the heavy load. "Worried about us? We'll do another hour or so, and then we'll be home. There's only so much abuse we can take in a day. And that appointment with the designer was pushed up to nine in the morning, so be ready at seven. Traffic will be a bear."

He nodded once, keeping his eyes low as Marilyn skipped over. Her bright pink sports bra and cropped leggings barely contained enough skin to be legal in his eyes.

“Aw, did you bring us stuff?” she asked sweetly. “That’s nice. I could use a few minutes. I hope that makeup they use for red carpets covers bruises. We look like lepers.”

Henry had spotted the purplish skin from the door, easily defined on her porcelain complexion. Emmi bore bruises of her own, on wrists, knees and arms. Both women had heavy dark circles under their eyes, and his worrying heart broke in half as they sank to the mats.

Emmi was elbow-deep in the basket, pulling a pressed sandwich out in each hand as soon as it was set down. Marilyn eyed the food. “The chef’s forgetful, I guess. I told her not to make me any food unless we were all eating together.”

Henry lifted the cell phone from his pocket, borrowed from Rai, unlocking the screen as the girls watched. Turning his palm toward them, he showed off a snapshot of the phone’s owner, plus Anna, Deis and Destiny all holding up sandwiches of their own.

“Clever chef,” Marilyn chortled. “It looks like we missed dinner, Em.”

“Looks like it,” she replied, handing over Mar’s sandwich and the fruit salad Anna had sent along, but Marilyn set the wrapped sandwich down without a second thought.

“What’s your problem?” Emmi asked, already two delicious bites into her meal.

“Henry wasn’t in the picture. If this is a family meal, I think he should eat, too. We’re all in this together. And I gotta follow my own rules or they won’t stick.”

Emmi watched Henry’s eyes roll, a twisted smile on her face as he snatched the sandwich away from Marilyn. After unwrapping the corner and tugging off his taut leather glove, he broke off a bit, popped it deftly into his mouth and handed over the rest with a dry look.

Pleased as punch to see him handle her difficult friend and bandmate, Emmi reminded herself to reward the creative, quick-thinking butler. She nodded toward the magician. “Did you bring anything for him?”

## *Marilyn's Promise*

Henry gestured to the basket, and she found a white box down inside, with dinner, breakfast and snack items inside, all French in origin and meticulously packaged in paper and ribbon.

The magician continued to work as the ladies refueled. Marilyn silently appreciated the servants' thoughtfulness as the sandwich staved off the hunger cramps she'd been suffering through. The magician had them rehearse once more while Henry packed up their remnants. After showing *Mystère* they'd mastered the timing, he was satisfied enough to let them be done for the day.

Henry insisted on escorting the exhausted, battered performers home. The magician was ferried to Henry's former workplace first, dropping him at the hotel's private entrance before ushering his mistresses to Haven. Rehearsals would restart after their gown fittings the following morning.

On the way home, Emmi and Marilyn were glued to their cell phones while Henry navigated the darkened streets of the London suburbs. Occasionally, he glanced into the SUV's rearview mirror to see Marilyn's face, her icy eyes lit by the phone's bright display. It was delicate and angular, with pink cheeks and long lashes, like a cherub moonlighting as a fashion model. Emmi was all curved elegance, sultry and intriguing, but her friend and cohort was spritely, petite and fine-featured, much more to his taste.

Careful to avoid her glances up, he kept his eyes moving. Emmi's voice rang out, interrupting his scandalous thoughts. "Final fitting is nine tomorrow, rehearsal from eleven until we're done. Wednesday, I'm meeting with Myopic and their manager to review the sales data from this last tour. I imagine Charlie will want to be in that meeting, too, since they took part in some of it. Henry, set up the conference room tomorrow morning after you drop us at the gym. The tech company's coming out tomorrow night to set up the new web conference equipment for that meeting. Rai will have to be our resident expert on it, I guess. Destiny's got Leif going to some meet-and-greet at Vapid at lunchtime, so she'll have to meet us at the gym afterward. Come Wednesday, we'll all be bunking at Haven until Saturday night's flight.

Henry, Ruby will stay in guest room one. I'm sure Leif will share with Destiny, Charlie's in with Deis, but Liam and Devon will be in rooms two and three. Set up room four just in case. Have Anna set up the guest lounge, enough to last until we all fly to California. I can't run out of beer or snacks up there."

"Dante's gonna freak out," Mar muttered from her side. "All of us are flying commercial from Heathrow to LAX? That'll be a circus."

"I chartered a private plane," Emmi answered, typing furiously on her phone screen with both thumbs. "It's flying us overnight, straight through. We'll get to L.A. just in time to check in, get fixed up and head out to sound check. We're last to arrive and first to perform."

"Want me to fly out early, run through everything with the techs before the sound check?"

"That might be a good idea. What am I missing?"

"Hair and makeup's set," Marilyn supplied, tapping her screen. "The guys' tuxes are being delivered directly to the hotel and the limo's booked. Beth's already been on the social media pre-Grammy nonsense. Apparently, we're the favorite for two of the trophies, but the fact that we're even nominated for Album of the Year has pop fans in an uproar. Other than that, I think we're good, girl."

Henry grinned as the ladies compared notes in the seats behind him. Efficient and beautiful, they made one hell of a team.

## Chapter 3

Tuesday, February 17

The following morning, Henry drove Deis' SUV, loaded with chattering females making all sorts of plans on cell phones, down the jammed streets of London's morning rush hour. He kept his mind on the road as Second's massive Caribbean bodyguard Dante eyed the other cars from the passenger's seat, his demeanor all intimidation and impatience. Between the nerves pulsing off the titan and the excitement of five performers behind him, it took all his effort to calmly navigate the beleaguering traffic.

The designer's studio was far enough outside the hubbub to afford a parking space on the workday. Dante was at the side door and rushing the girls inside before Henry could tug the key from the ignition. Wandering in behind them, he found a grand round room surrounded by mirrors. Cold, white lights hung on thin metal cords above their heads, and the stark, modern décor made his sentiments weep in sorrow. The space was vanilla, frostily unwelcoming and devoid of charm.

But the flamboyant gentleman dashing on his toes toward Emmi was warm and enthusiastic as he took her arms and kissed her cheeks. He greeted all five women the same, ignoring the butler and bodyguard as he nearly wept at the honor of dressing them. Unimpressed by the designer's translucent praise, Henry took a seat to the perimeter of the room, outside a ring of squat benches in perfect white. Dante stood against the wall; his massive arms crossed as he watched the women take garment bags from Rubio Bellini's slender fingers.

Much to his clandestine pleasure, Henry watched Marilyn step out from behind her mirror-covered dressing area first. Taking in the candy pink satin dress, with its V neckline, strappy back and crosscut skirt made his pulse skip up instantly. The designer scrambled over with his

hands pressed to his cheeks as she spun to show off the slight frame that made the butler dream so wickedly.

Destiny appeared next in a textured, form-fitting showstopper. Hunter green pebbled leather was his best guess at the fabric's identity. Cuts were missing across the chest and middle, exposing her narrow waist and compressed bosom. The fluted skirt swished as she stepped to Marilyn, and the designer rushed over to lift her ruby hair into an impromptu style, showing off the open back design. Porcelain skin was visible clear down to her waist, showing off a tattoo of a snare drum on the back of her neck.

Henry's head dipped as Deis stepped out into view. She curtsied in the ruby red silk that skimmed so close, it left little to his imagination. Stitched seams curved as they flowed over breast, in at the waist and out over hip. A slit cut the skirt vertically up to her thigh, and the neckline was a square that showed off face and shoulder like a picture frame. Destiny swooned at the flawless match in color between Deis' ruby engagement ring and her dress. Marilyn gaped, clearly impressed, from her position by the mirror.

Rai emerged from behind the mirror with a scowl. The sight of such an unreasonably miserable woman in such elegant fabric had Henry holding back a chuckle. In a black satin gown from neck to toe, but with a whimper in her eyes, she looked awkward and graceless. The scooped neck showed off her modest swell of breast, the narrow bodice clinging to her muscled middle as she wiggled uncomfortably.

"I hate this," the guitarist glowered. "Why can't I wear the leather one?"

"Because I get to," Destiny argued. "Besides, it's heavy as hell. We'd be dragging you down the red carpet."

"Eh," she argued back pathetically. "Rubio, need some help here, chief. I'm not feeling it."

"Oh, I have a superb idea," the designer with the intense Italian accent replied as he flitted away. "I know what will make you feel so much better, *mia bella*."

He snuck behind her, wrapping the studded gunmetal leather bustier around her middle and pulling it tight. She winced and gasped as he fastened the buckles around her ribcage. He then tossed a loop of heavy chain over her shoulder and tucked it in like a pageant sash. The fascinated butler watched as the modest, demure gown turned into an edgy statement of rebellion on the musician.

Rai's newfound affection for the dress was clear as he turned her back to face the mirror. "Oh, much better. I'll just inhale later. No worries."

"Where's Em?" Deis asked, her palms on her silk-draped hips.

"Here, but I need another second," Emmi's voice called out from the corner, still hidden behind a partition. "You think leather's heavy, wait until you see this number."

Rubio stood alongside the girls, his fingers tugging his lower lip in anticipation. When Emmi appeared, Henry climbed to his feet, his lips parted in awe as the majestic blonde took a step forward.

Sheer violet material hugged tight from a velvet choker around her neck to the top of her buxom chest where a corset tied her up tight. The boned bodice was completely covered in purple, gold, and green gemstones like a mosaic, over a skirt of violet velvet, the same material as was around her neck. It was cut high in front and low in back, showing off narrow leg and pointed heels.

Emmi lifted a sultry brow. "Think I can accept a Grammy in this?"

"Holy hell," Marilyn gawped, drawn forward as if possessed. "You look like a million bucks."

"Six-point-two million, to be exact," the snooty designer noted with a raised index finger. "This is a replica, but the original will be delivered to the hotel the morning of the show, fresh from the jeweler I scouted for such precise, important work. You will shine, my lovely." He approached the blonde, took her cheeks in his hands. "Your man will fall at your feet, and you will own the night. And I will own the runway. You ladies are smashing. Such beauty, it makes me weep."

With a scathing eye roll, Henry retook his seat, preparing to accept nauseatingly detailed care instructions for these works of art.



\* \* \* \* \*

Later, outside the gym, Henry parked the car at the curb, letting Dante and the girls out with hands dutifully on the wheel. To his surprise, Emmi stayed behind while the other five entered, chattering amongst themselves.

“Henry,” she began, sliding up into the passenger’s seat. “I need a minute of your time. Pull around back so we’re out of sight.”

He did as commanded, pulling Deis’ SUV alongside the luxury sedan Marilyn had left behind the night before. He turned completely in his seat and folded his hands as humbly as he could manage.

She touched his forearm lightly, her eyes softening. “You handled Marilyn so well yesterday, I was very impressed. Astonished, actually, and I wanted to do a little something for you.”

He shook his head with his lips pressed together.

“Stop it,” she scolded lightly. “You’ve needed this for some time, and Rai was going to do it if I didn’t. Accept a gift. It’s poor decorum not to, especially from an employer.”

She handed him a white, rectangular box with a fruit’s insignia on it. He looked up graciously and curiously at the same time. He knew enough of the brand to know a top-level cell phone was inside.

“It’s important that you’re reachable, especially when we’re overseas. This is for your use, work and otherwise, so I won’t be checking it or taking it back. The bill comes straight to me, along with ours, no arguments.”

“I,” the butler tried to quarrel anyway, but she interjected with an outstretched hand.

“I said no arguments. Now, after you’re done setting up the conference room, take some time and figure out how to use it. I sent an email to the preset email address, with all our cell numbers and contact info in it, so you can get ahold of any of us at any time. Welcome to the twenty-first century, and thanks for everything you do for us.”

She gifted him one more endearing smile before she dashed into the gym. Alone with the toy, he pressed it excitedly to his chest.

## *Marilyn's Promise*

\* \* \* \* \*

Exactly as commanded, he arranged the conference room and oversaw the tech company's installation as the sun sunk low in the sky. With Second rehearsing acrobatics, White Light practicing in the studio, Anna watching Ruby and all his chores completed, he was left enough time to retire to his quarters and play.

Decorated simply in burgundies and browns, the modest bedroom was the most masculine space in the manor house. He hung his tailcoat in the immaculate closet, tucked his trousers and white shirt in the cedar bureau and laid his gloves out, ready to resume work if need be. In a navy tee and khakis, he reclined on his narrow bed, lifting his new phone and beaming at the nicest gift he'd ever received.

The email app was simple enough to figure out, and he replied to Emmi's message after adding their emails and numbers to his contacts. He'd used the chef's laptop occasionally over the past months, to contact his brother in Wales or to order more uniform pieces when his needed to be replaced, but never again needing permission to access technology was a treat. This handheld model was more than he strictly needed, but the curious, creative side of his brain loved the challenge of learning all its tricks. With Marilyn playing chauffer, bringing Dante and her bandmates home, he had the opportunity to enjoy his night off in the glow of the phone's backlight.

And when eight-year-old Ruby, with her ebony hair and sapphire eyes, escaped the chef long enough burst into his room, he gathered her little body up beside him, touched the YouTube icon and cuddled her as she watched a cartoon show he'd enjoyed as a child. Her eyes fluttered only a few minutes in. Henry didn't have the heart to wake her, even when Charlie came looking for his daughter. Instead, her father fetched her favorite blanket, laid it over her and left the sleeping beauty in the butler's tender care.

When the band returned a little before midnight, the father met his fiancée and the rest of Second in the atrium. "Hey, beautiful. That's a sweet phone you guys got for Henry." He pressed a kiss to Deis' temple. "And he's already spoiled my girl with it."

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“How so?” Marilyn asked, removing her overcoat in a sweep.

“She found him on his night off, climbed in bed and put cartoons on. They’re both passed out.”

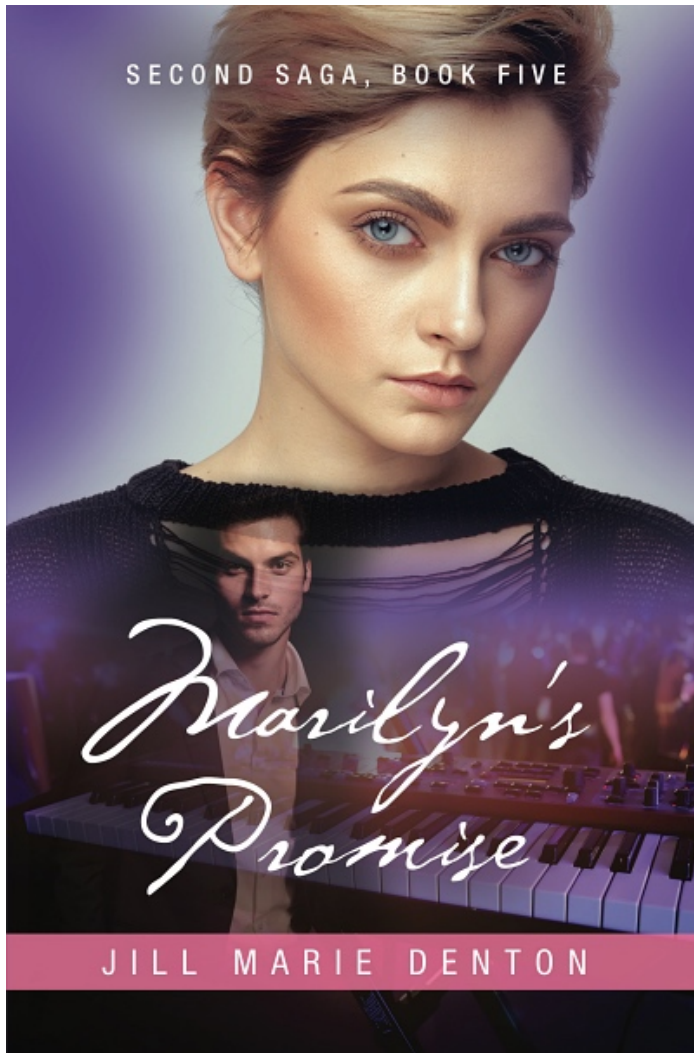
Unapologetically, Mar snuck down the servant’s corridor. Outside Henry’s quarters, she slipped the door open slowly, the dim light of the hallway drawing a diagonal line over his narrow bed.

After tucking her head inside, she spotted the butler’s masculine face at rest. Ruby’s tiny head was tucked into his neck, his chin resting on her forehead protectively. His hand wrapped around her shoulder, holding her pink and purple blanket warmly around her.

Marilyn’s heart bloomed as she watched their breaths lift and lower their torsos in unison. With a glowing smile, she retreated to her own bed, where the sight haunted her dreams.

In them, she imagined a blonde baby nestled in bed alongside her. As the sun edged through the clouds on the horizon, outside the open windows, a warm figure climbed into bed behind her, wrapping up mother and child with strong, protective arms. She felt his breath on her neck, knew the brush of his fingers on her arm when he comforted them both. The baby quivered on the plain white sheet, letting out a murmured cry as she brought the infant to her chest.

The couple bathed in the joy of their newborn, and she, in between the two loves of her life, sighed contentedly in sleep.



*Marilyn only needs two things: music and her friends. Henry only needs her, and nothing scares him more. It's time for Second Saga to end, and for Marilyn to get everything she never knew she needed.*

## **Second Saga, Book Five: Marilyn's Promise**

By Jill Marie Denton

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