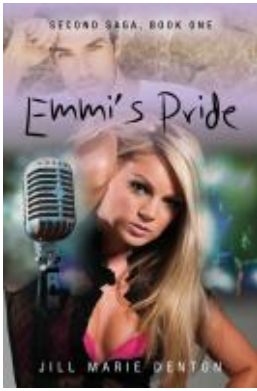


SECOND SAGA, BOOK ONE

Emmi's Pride

JILL MARIE DENTON



Emmi Vendetta is a woman of tireless ambition; an unapologetic perfectionist, pushing her band Second into greatness. Emmi loves pushing boundaries, but coming face to face with crush object Simon Piers has her concerned if she can continue her tough girl façade. Simon is all she hoped for, but Emmi can't detach from career and won't risk her tough persona. How can she choose between her heart's need for him and her mind's need for success?

Second Saga Book One: Emmi's Pride

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**Second Saga Book One:
Emmi's Pride**

Jill Marie Denton

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First Edition

To those who refuse to accept unhappiness though it may be easier, for those who won't accept second best, and to your success as you grasp life by the shirttails and hold on for dear life.

Chapter 1

Tuesday, June 3

Having nothing on the agenda, at long last, was going to be glorious.

She had just three months left, and then a well-deserved break from the endless highway.

She was convinced she'd tire of boredom after years of tumult, going from state to state on an endless tour, but she'd always have her side interests. The law, cooking, learning new instruments, those were companions enough, let alone the endless hours of writing lyrics and practicing vocals for their inevitable return.

And if the press left her alone for two minutes about her weight, she could stop leaning on the treadmill like a crutch.

The dressing room at the Manhattan television studio was bigger than she'd expected, illuminated with unforgiving white light from above the floor to ceiling mirror. Pale carpeting stepped on before by the rich and famous gave little spring as she crossed to her own reflection. The lipstick red silk suit, with a hem abbreviated to inches above her knee, was sexy enough for the audience but not so slutty that it appeared she, and not her music, was on sale. Piercing violet eyes always caught onlookers by surprise, like two lavender jade cabochons afloat on a pool of milky skin. Her hair was brilliantly shiny, like golden locks of sunshine. Flat ironed until pin straight, it narrowed her features and made her look dourer than she felt.

But this show wasn't her idea, and playing the part was as integral to the game of stardom as any song she'd ever write.

She hated these press junket tours, and this was the last stop, The Tonight Show. In five hours, she'd be on a flight to Japan, spending twelve long weeks touring Asia and Europe. But first, one last interview to make sure Second was in the American public's memory before they set off. Jimmy's presence on social media ensured her interview recap would go viral during their journey, and their pertinence on social media was more important than ever.

She'd been approached by Jimmy's people months before in California, and she'd ducked the invitation for long enough to have Jimmy himself on her phone, begging for a few minutes in her company. In front of a TV camera, of course. At least he'd taken a moment to introduce himself in her dressing room when she arrived. He'd seemed nice enough and was her biggest fan.

Everyone was her *biggest* fan.

Just hurry up, she muttered angrily to herself. Television wasn't her favorite afternoon activity.

Caught between modesty and humility, she never understood why anyone enjoyed the never-ending spotlight. Sure, it was par for the course, but as often as possible, she preferred the solitude of a textbook or the quiet of her office. As the singer, manager and front woman, it was her job to introduce, to cajole, and to impress. But that could be done easily enough from her leather office chair, without paparazzi meddling or incessant camera flashes.

She tugged down the hem of her suit jacket and lowered the zipper a few inches. Under the red, she wore a black velvet bustier, as much for confidence as sex appeal. Just enough skin showed to meet the persona of a rock star, but she still looked business enough to feel comfortable handling the interview like a professional. The stiletto Mary Jane heels were most modest in her collection, and added a good four inches to her height. She was favored higher by the press in heels higher than these, mainly, she figured, because it helped to distribute her weight better.

She was curvier than the media preferred, and their opinions on that were frequent and vivid. Her measurements were higher than your average starlet, but she never felt as oversized as they'd claim. In fact, the swell of her breast, the curve of her waist and fullness of her hips, hugged in pencil skirts and narrow dresses, drew positive attention from the fans. And that was what mattered to her. All this presence, all the glitz and preparation, was for the fans. The existing ones and the ones she'd soon earn.

Three hard raps on her door meant her time waiting was over.
Show time.

Clearing her throat, she gave herself one more reaffirming glance over her shoulder as she headed out to the stage.

The low roar of the audience was distinct before she reached the wings. The show was on a planned commercial break, though the show was taped ahead of time. Her makeup artist from earlier whisked by her, heading backstage and chattering into an earpiece frantically.

She eavesdropped a moment, and surmised that she was behind, a makeover past due for the comedian due on after Emmi's appearance.

Stagehands rushed around, moving props and readying for her segment. One stopped and smiled nervously as he reached to fasten her microphone to her collar. He looked like the average roadie, heavier-set with a tumble of unkempt brown hair. When he noticed she had no collar, his fingers fumbled toward the black velvet and hesitated just enough for Emmi to chuckle, take the microphone and affix it herself. She smiled sweetly and touched his forearm before he dashed like a frightened rabbit. She imagined that their interaction would be the subject of much bar room gossip later when he'd finally finished up here.

The stage manager approached her, smiling widely and nodding approvingly at her selected outfit. She sighed to herself as she turned away, glad she'd appeased yet another on her long foray to television. Passing her weight from one foot to the other, she continued the wait with arms folded.

The roar of the crowd erupted into applause as she heard the host welcome a future in-home audience back from commercials. He began her glowing review. Accomplished songwriter and musician, smart and beautiful, all the words she'd read over earlier in the day on email. She demanded to know what was to be said well ahead of time. No details slipped through the cracks. The audience was silent as he stood and held arms out, announcing.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the lead singer of Second and the girl that got away, Miss Emmi Vendetta!"

Emmi's Pride

Grown men hooted as she emerged from the red curtain and onto the corner of the stage. They all clapped and a few rose to their feet as she walked halfway toward them, put her right foot in front of her left, and in a practiced move, she bowed slightly in gratitude. Her silky sweep of hair fell forward. She'd never wave her arms and laugh the way others did. A little humility had to be maintained, if for no other reason than her pride. She had to maintain the air of maturity, dignity and responsibility she'd earned in years of schooling and the public eye.

Jimmy met her a few feet from the interviewee's chair and embraced her lightly, as they'd rehearsed. He whispered in her ear, something about how stunning she looked, and she smiled as graciously as she could as she was led to her seat.

She managed a few smiles while he pelted her with questions. In how many states had she passed the bar exam? Would she do his next physical? Rhetorical to the audience: How amazing would it be to have Dr. Vendetta greet you in the exam room?

She was well-rehearsed and charming, her leg crossed to show a bit of outer thigh. She knew the game and how to play it, though she kept her flashy showmanship for the musical stage.

His last set of questions was the hardest to answer.

"Emmi," Jimmy began, leaning in a little. "How is it that you never seem to have a man nestled against you? Doesn't seem fair."

She smiled in a way she hoped was perceived as sly. "Well, you're already married, so not much chance for me is there?"

He swooned a bit, the audience giggling at his rosy cheeks. “She’d understand. I’d pay child support.”

Emmi laughed jovially. “Sorry, can’t separate a family. Guess I’ll just have to go on dreaming.”

“But Emmi, I know for a fact that you’ve been chased by the biggest guys in Hollywood. They clamor to you at those award shows and the after parties, they barter for tickets to Second shows. You attend festivities alone, dodge cameras. How can you avoid ever being seen with your boyfriend? Don’t say you don’t have one,” he nearly begged.

“They do not,” she feigned denial. “But I don’t have time for a boyfriend, Jimmy.” The audience sighed a little. “Honestly, just my band mates for company. I’m too damn busy. I guess when the stars align and send me a mate, I just hope I’m not stumbling over him and making a fool of myself.”

The rest of the interview went fine and she was warmly sent from the stage. Again she bowed primly, as the band did every time they greeted or left an audience. Side by side, they bent their necks and lowered their eyes in gratitude for the accolades they’d been so fortunate to find over the years. It was a well-practiced move she’d implemented the year before.

She did her bow alone this time before retreating backstage.

In the green room, she zipped her suit jacket back up to cover the bustier and pulled her long hair back in a tight ponytail. The time for formality was over and it was back to business. Exchanging her microphone for the wireless earpiece she wore, she dialed the bassist

Deis on her wrist phone. She was halfway down the hall toward the elevator when that brief update call ended. Deis and the rest would just have to meet her at the airport since she was running late already. Her massive bodyguard, Dante, was following close behind.

She was waiting for the elevator when an exceptionally tall man stepped to her right. She glanced over and was level with his ribs. Six foot six at least, she imagined, and lanky like an overgrown tree.

Good Lord, he'll have to duck to get into the elevator, she mused with a hidden chuckle.

Her bodyguard stood to her left, looking directly at the man with a puzzled look on his face. Before she could ask why he looked confused, the voice of the oak tree beside her uttered, "Emmi Vendetta?"

Mmm. British accent. Quiet sigh on the inside.

"Yes, that's me," she turned to him, craned her neck up to see.

He exhaled deeply. "Wow, what a pleasure. I'm Stephen Cooper, and I love your music."

A hand twice the size of hers was offered and she took it lightly. Golden brown hair cropped above his ears, thick lenses covered eyes like bay water, and with the fair skin of a real Londoner. She'd be meeting many more like him in the near future.

Then it hit her.

"You're Stephen Cooper. Steve, from the sketch show on HBO, right? You and Bernie, that shorter guy with red hair, you're hilarious together"

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“I’m flattered you’ve seen the show.” His cheeks reddened charmingly. “It’s nice to meet you. I’ve got tickets to your concert at Wembley in a few months.”

She nodded graciously. “Well, thanks for helping us sell out the place. It’s the biggest venue we’ve ever done.”

“Here doing Jimmy?”

“Yes, though thankfully I’m done.” She switched her shoulder bag to the other arm as the elevator door slid open.

The three stepped on together, and turned toward the door. She could see now, in the reflection of the shiny brass, how tiny she seemed compared to the hulking Dante and gigantic Steve. She giggled on the inside at all the self-deprecating remarks she’d made about her size earlier. She was practically a munchkin between two pillars.

Steve continued as the elevator descended. “I’ll be there with Bernie and his girlfriend Jane. She makes my fan status seem pretty pitiful. I guess she saw you live three or four years ago in Chicago.”

Emmi smiled fondly. She’d loved playing those clubs in the Windy City. “I’m glad she took the time to see us then, too. It’s been a whirlwind since those days.”

“Well, it’s a gift for her birthday, those tickets in September. She’s already planning her outfit. I’m sure she’ll faint straight away when I tell her I ran into you.”

“New York’s a huge place. I guess you were meant to see me. Are you the comedian on Jimmy’s show?”

“Right again. Heading down for some food before they call me in. Craft Services sucks for vegetarians.”

“Jimmy’s a carnivore,” she replied. “The deli on the corner does an awesome roasted veggie sandwich. Dante ran out for me an hour ago.”

“I’ll take your recommendation. And while I have a minute with you,” he turned to her while the doors to the elevator opened on the ground floor, in the immense lobby lit by towering window panes. “I have to ask a tiny favor.”

They stepped out into the lobby and Dante was handing her a pen before he could even ask for his favor. She knew the routine. But he only smiled and looked down. “No, though I’d be honored for an autograph.”

Emmi handed the pen back and looked at Steve, brow raised. “Right back at you. But what is it you want from me?”

“I’d win Friend of the Year, and certainly some brownie points from Bern if I figured out a way to get us backstage. Any way you can help a fellow desperate celebrity?”

He’d asked so meekly, so shyly, he slithered right under her guard. How could she deny that request? Plus, she’d seen every episode of his show and loved the comedy specials she’d seen. He was a nerd, awkwardly intelligent, the way she often saw herself.

“Tell you what. We have an insane security staff, as you can plainly see.” She gestured to Dante, whose dark Ray-Bans were already covering his eyes, his massive biceps bulging as he crossed

his arms. “They keep us very safe. We use token phrases to limit the backstage access. No one comes back without my direct approval.”

Control was paramount. Very little passed under her nose without scrutiny.

Steve gulped at Dante and looked back to Emmi. “Impressive.”

“Indeed,” she smirked, offering him a business card. “Here’s my email. If you would, send me one four hours before the show. I’ll give you instructions. Follow them carefully and we’ll see you backstage.”

“Emmi, I,” he stammered. “This... I’m so grateful. I hope the tour goes well, and Jane’s going to flip!”

She smiled as Dante whisked her away, into the crowd gathered outside the lobby doors. She called over her shoulder. “Guess I’m off. Good luck on Jimmy. You’ll be great!”

The paparazzi were ruthless in New York, and it seemed all of Manhattan knew her plans. She smiled as demurely as she could, ducking into the waiting limo, ensuring her earpiece was still in and speaking casually as it hummed.

“Did you hear that, Deis?”

The small voice in her ear practically sung in response. “Steve Cooper! I expected him to be funnier somehow. Think you stunned him simple?”

Her phone had rung as she’d stepped off the elevator and grabbing for the pen turned her wrist so she’d answered the call before she realized it.

“Good thing he didn’t know you were listening in. I’m sure he’d have been even more nervous.”

She chuckled into Emmi's ear. "What a pathetic ruse to get backstage. He obviously couldn't wait to see you again. Please. 'Friend of the Year?'" she retorted. "He wants to get backstage just as much as Jane does."

"Stop it, Deis. He can put me in his pocket."

They chatted while Dante confirmed airport arrangements on his tiny cell phone. By the time they arrived, he'd managed to have Emmi escorted through the back areas to avoid airport onlookers in the terminals. She'd miss him during her trek through Europe. There weren't many she could trust with these types of jobs.

The private plane, chartered to send them to LAX, was waiting at the tarmac as she'd demanded. It was hidden in the shadow of a Boeing 747 headed to Brazil.

"Dante, my hero," she turned at the top of the steps up to the cabin door. "Don't do anything stupid. I don't know how I'll get on without you."

He merely took her hand, kissed her palm lightly and bowed his head. "It's always a pleasure," he said with a thick Caribbean accent. "How do the Japanese say?"

"Sayonara."

He repeated in his accent and had her chuckling. She blew him a kiss and the door closed behind her.

He waited until the plane was airborne before walking off. He would always have a place in his heart for the blonde angel he'd been honored to guard.

Chapter 2

Friday, July 4

Another plane ride later, Second was in Hong Kong.

The night before, they'd played to a sell-out crowd in Sydney. Bands she'd once idolized were now opening for them on their world tour. It was absurd.

In their hotel suite pre-show, overdone in red fabrics and gold trim, she was using her tablet to pour over videos of their past performances on YouTube.

"Jesus, Em," Rai scowled from the bathroom mirror. "You trying to pick every show to death can't be good for your blood pressure."

"No way to know how to improve if you don't take criticism," she remarked without looking up. The video she found was very unflattering, an upward shot from practically underneath the stage. The amateur videographer on his earthquake-shaky cell phone commented that he could practically see up her enormous nostrils.

She giggled at that one.

Deis strapped her foot into a heeled sandal and tossed her hair back. "You know she has to know everyone's opinion. Keeps her from deluding herself into thinking we're actually *good* at this."

Emmi flipped over to her Netflix app on her tablet, settling on an episode of a steamy series she'd seen a few times before. "I know you only give me the business because you love me."

Rai emerged, pulling her straight black hair back into a high ponytail. Her dark leather vest, with nothing underneath, showed off

her ivory skin, and the slim jeans in deep purple were holding on tight. At five-one, she was a firestorm of talent in a tiny bundle. The long almond-shaped eyes of her Korean decent narrowed at Emmi and her high-tech tablet.

“She’s not even watching concert footage. I can tell from that glazy look. She’s cooing over that English guy, Simon something, again.”

Deis stepped around, lifting the tablet out of Emmi’s hands before she could protest. “He is *smashing*, darling.” She giggled at her own horrible impression. “You always did like ogling guys instead of actually doing anything with them.”

“Excuse me,” Emmi dryly replied. “I’ve done plenty, but the news doesn’t need to know my exploits. Any of our exploits, actually. I’d appreciate it if you all would just focus your crap on someone more deserving.”

Deis grabbed her in a forced hug. “Our little peach,” she said. “Manager ad nauseam.”

Emmi smacked Deis on the ass, the little dress in vibrant red shimmering as she rushed off. She was like an Arabian goddess, or so the magazines claimed. Deis was Armenian by birth, American by citizenship. A long, gorgeous brunette with golden topaz eyes that spoke quietly of sunshine and dreams. She could’ve modeled but chose to devote her life to medicine, children and music. As talented on bass as on diagnostics, she was Emmi’s medical cohort and fellow songwriter.

Rai grabbed her guitar case from the corner, throwing the strap over her narrow shoulder. “We about ready, boss?”

Emmi closed the tablet and rose, stretching. “As we’ll ever be. My costume is supposed to be there before we are. Marilyn and Destiny are there already, or so I’m hearing.”

She tapped her earpiece to turn down the volume. She could hear the fellow band mates barking stage commands to the roadies fluently in both English and Chinese.

The concert went off beautifully, with the three costume changes Emmi had planned not only winning praise but shocking the audience. She had been careful to push the envelope with the outfits she’d chosen for herself and the others, at least while they were on stage. Deciding not to change the way they performed just because women were viewed differently elsewhere in the world, they performed to the sell-out crowd the same as they’d done in California the week before. Two songs in Chinese made the audience erupt, but they played as flamboyantly and passionately as ever. Emmi knew Second needed to please the fans who expected the shows they saw on social media, those that followed them so devotedly, whether social mores permitted it or not.

Pre-dawn, on a tour bus that was speeding along a foreign motorway, she reopened her tablet. Her eyes were heavy but her mind was restless. Inevitably, she found it impossible to sleep after a huge concert. She reviewed concert footage from the night before, noting missed cues, stage directions they’d bypassed, or little errors to be

corrected before the next show. Perfection was a stubbornly sought-after goal that she chased with abject devotion.

Disinterested after a few minutes, she ended up back on her preferred TV show of choice. She'd appreciated the show's plot and scenery, certainly. And yes, there was a certain actor she admired. Physically, of course, but also for his acting chops in his few episodes. Something about his style caught her eye. There was something dangerous about the wave of chocolate hair, the touch of gold in his irises when he seduced some costar. She'd told herself she'd meet him in person one day, but until then, at least she had some eye candy. She'd always preferred the dark and handsome type.

If she ever did meet him in person, her predicament of leading such a private life to the media would most likely end. How would she resist that confident smile, those mysterious eyes?

That wasn't going to happen easily or soon.

She flipped on Netflix and was shocked when she saw his face again. She felt her heart squeeze when she read the show details.

He was starring as one of her favorite superheroes on a new series, and the whole first season was ready for viewing.

The gamer nerd in her did backflips. The character was a streetwise, tough as nails professional by day, vigilante by night in New York. She knew the story. She knew the characters. She felt like she knew the star.

The first episode flowed into the second, and too soon, all ten episodes were over. The short run did entertain her long enough for them to finish their Eastern European leg.

England was only four days away.

Lying down as best she could in the first class seat on the full plane, she closed her eyes to the low monotonous hum of the engines outside and the subtle rush of forced air above. Destiny was already asleep to her right, her ruby hair tied up in a loose bun and her emerald eyes covered by a gel-filled mask. The Irish princess looked like a makeup ad. She resisted the urge to put toothpaste in her palm and tickle her nose, instead snickering at her exhausted thoughts of sorority-level pranks.

As the youngest, she always felt she had the most to prove, and dealt with the most ribbing of the group. She was used to the lifted brows, the judgment, but retribution was a sweet temptation.

Instead of miring over her unfulfilled mischief, she pulled out her cell phone. She began paging through song lyrics she was working on when an email alert tinged.

Opening it, she couldn't help smiling.

Emmi, hope all's well wherever you are. Jane is getting more excited by the day, since Bernie couldn't hold his tongue and told her about your generosity. Yeah, I told him but it's still his fault. I think your largesse will be appreciated more by him than even me. Though he'll never compete with this gift in all his years. Looking forward to the show. And no worries, I'll email again as you instructed. I couldn't help sending this one. Look how excited she is. Cheers. Steve.

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Under his quick sign off was a cropped photo of Bernie Overland standing alongside who she assumed was Jane. She held up concert tickets and smiled brightly like they were winning lottery numbers. Bernie's genuine smile at his love's excitement was as evident as hers.

She closed the email without replying and closed her eyes. She drifted off to sleep intending to dream about her concert plans in Paris the next night.

Instead, she saw Jane's face and rejoiced in the happiness of their fans.

Chapter 3

Thursday, September 4

The hotel suite in London was magnificent. Finally, she'd found a space that felt like her wing in Spire, their home and stateside studio space. Beautifully shined antiques in walnut, fireplaces in each room, lush fabrics and jewel tones filled in every corner. From her windows, she could see the river, the ancient cathedrals and just enough traffic to feel a part of it all. The morning commute was underway, and she could hear a few distant horns down below.

Their butler's name was Henry, and he lived a flawlessly groomed life in tailed waistcoats. Emmi guessed him in his late thirties, early forties at most, over six feet tall with a sway of ebony hair, strong jaw and dark, alert eyes. He drew her baths, lowered the treadmill and raised it again after her run, and even insisted on having her taste her tea before walking away. While she felt odd asking for every little thing, but it was the hotel's requirement that they enjoy every amenity offered without having to lift a finger in return. She wasn't sure she could live this way, but after the final concert of their European tour, she could see herself spending a little time in comfort, well taken care of here. At least seven days would pass after the Friday night concert before she would even look at work again.

Marilyn strode into her bedroom, spinning with her arms out like a princess. "We're almost done!" She chimed. "We've *never* been almost done!"

Her platinum hair floated around her shoulders as she glided over the plush carpet on bare feet. Petite like Rai, but with the narrow nose and dignified forehead of her French ancestry, she was reminiscent of a pixie in spring.

Emmi looked up from her day planner. Seated at the large, ornately detailed desk by the hollow fireplace, she was delightfully distracted from work as Destiny sailed in, holding the sprite's hands and spinning with her in absolute joy.

Deis and Rai sauntered in behind, shaking their heads and raising judging brows. Their excitement was muted but still evident from their broad smiles.

Emmi replied with her eyes down, fixated on the Wembley contract she was reviewing, again. "Henry can open some champagne. Mimosas all around, with our big English breakfast. Then we rehearse until dinner."

Groans resounded. The dancing stopped abruptly. Four sets of eyes glared as Emmi stood and stepped away from her desk chair.

"Don't look at me like that. We have permission to do three covers that need practice, some choreography revisions, and this is a big arena. I'm sure you'll want the right modulation, right, Mar?"

Marilyn rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

"And Rai, I'm sure you need time to revise those Queen riffs, don't you?"

Grumbling, Rai returned, "I did practice, Mistress."

Silent, waiting for the rest, Emmi laid her hands on her hips.

"But," Rai continued. "I could use more, I guess."

“Plus,” Emmi added as Henry brought in a huge tray of pastries. “Deis and I have a gala to attend this evening.”

“Why do I have to go?” Deis muttered, choosing a plain croissant from the platter, the healthiest option on offer from the butler’s white gloved hands.

“Because I promised months ago, it’s for the children’s hospital here, and there’s no way I’m going on my own. And we are humanitarians, damn it. Rai hates dresses, Marilyn has a Skype conference with that band in Seattle, and Destiny’s going to be doing whatever it takes to get those London producers to loosen their purse straps. Recording studios don’t build themselves.”

“Yeah, she’s going to be doing all sorts of sexual favors for investment money by daybreak. Though she’d probably do them for free anyway,” Rai retorted dryly.

A cinnamon roll flew through the air, aimed at the guitarist’s head but was deftly snatched from the air by Marilyn.

“Can’t leave these kids apart for a second,” she mumbled between crumbs, cooing into the glazy treat. “Delicious, delicious childishness.”

Rai, in a well-practiced move, smacked her hand up against Marilyn’s wrist, causing her to toss the half-eaten pastry in the air shouting, “Pastry check!” It tumbled and left a gooey trail on the area rug.

Emmi left well enough alone, sitting back down with a huff. She poured herself a cup of coffee and added sugar cubes. She’d need to request fake sugar or suffer the consequences before long.

“Deis, our dresses are being delivered by six, and you’re expected to address the crowd.”

“Damn it!” And a speech? What does she think I am, some sort of show pony?” She groused, storming off.

The satisfied grin was Emmi’s only reply. She’d been asked to say a few words, but what kind of manager didn’t delegate? Deis was the pediatrician, after all.

She made a mental note to tell Henry to strengthen up the coffee a bit and to scramble her eggs hard from now on as she picked apart a bear claw. She’d be working off quite a few calories today.

When the limo arrived at sixty-thirty, she was dressed to the nines. The flowing dress in amethyst-colored satin floated gracefully around her ankles as she stepped out to the elevator. Her guards by the door to the suite whistled as she and Deis moved past.

She’d review proper protocol with their manager the next morning.

Deis graciously accepted assistance from a style team and looked like she was headed to a Hollywood premiere rather than a fundraising event. She was going to wow everyone in her coppery gown of silk. With hair was pulled back at the temple, it flowed down over her bare back like melted chocolate. With a fresh golden tan, she was the goddess the media purported. She’d stun the crowd silent during her address.

Emmi refused the style team, doing her hair herself, and kept her makeup simple. Pink lips, silver shadow over her eyes and green

ribbon drawn through tight curls. In her silver clutch, she carried her wrist watch for her unseen earpiece, the tube of lip glaze, a few hundred Euros rolled into a trundle and Deis' notes for her speech.

The limo ride rushed the girls through narrow streets, beside bistros bustling with a late dinner crowd, art shops and office buildings older than any in America. She enjoyed the culture, the history, though she was wedged into Deis' side by the three guards along for coverage. One posted the front door when they arrived, one to the back entrance, and the last stood inside, watching their every move.

The ballroom in the old renovated chapel was decorated in blues, crayon-bright, with long bunting draping down old stone walls, tall bouquets of monkshood and blue-tinted daisies, and candles burning on ancient looking candelabras. It was a stunning mix of the vintage and the contemporary, like a portrait from the seventeenth century hanging into a New Age Manhattan condo.

She and her band mate stood out in their bright colors among the much more somber black suits of the crowd. Emmi couldn't have planned the reaction better.

She and Deis were greeted immediately by two board members of the hospital, and thanked over and over for their attendance and donation. Their presence also sparked the attention of a few dignitaries, actors and models there to show support and to be seen in their designer attire. She was gracious, with practiced precision, when a former Prime Minister shook her hand and welcomed her to the country.

Deis made her way to the small stage for her speech an hour after they'd arrived. Emmi stood near the back, turning down a flute of champagne from a carried tray. She never sipped at these events. She made it a point to never imbibe in public. A private glass of wine or mixed drink was all right on the odd occasion, and though she understood the social dependence and admiration for alcohol, she'd never preferred to give up control for a warm rush or social expectation.

Deis was as stunning as she'd anticipated, capturing every eye as she reviewed the good work the foundation was doing and their upcoming projects. Emmi still carried her notes but Deis was thoroughly prepared to discuss the expansion efforts and research fund without them. She ended with a toast to all the children who had bravely fought diseases adults dreaded, and was greeted and thanked by dozens of onlookers as she left the stage.

Her ear came alive with voices not in the room as two of their guards were discussing an incoming paparazzi blitz. The word was out on their attendance. Both were asking them to retreat with as much dignity as possible and to cut their evening short before the reporters burst through the paltry line of security the benefit had hired.

That was her cue. No one hated invasive paparazzi more than Emmi, and Deis was quickly whisked from the circle of thanks by her manager's fierce grip.

"They're coming," Emmi said hurriedly, moving with Deis to the front entrance, where the limo would be waiting.

Not needing to be convinced, Deis hurried out the door and down the grand steps to the guard, poised at the car door. She knew not to argue with her manager about avoiding undue publicity.

Emmi was a few steps behind when she ran fully into a black-garbed wall of man.

The movement into her path was so sudden, so unanticipated, that she couldn't catch herself. Heeled feet slid on the granite as she toppled into the figure she'd nearly bowled over. She didn't have the chance to be embarrassed, to say a single word in defense. He was holding her biceps before she could regain her footing, kept upright by his warm hands. Fortunately for them both, his body was poised to catch her forward momentum. She gasped as he held her steady.

He was silent as she lifted her head and met his intense yet concerned gaze.

Holy hell. It was him.

Simon Piers, in all his dark and dangerous glory.

He was dressed in a flawless black suit, classy in a white shirt and matching tie. When he finally released her arms, all she could do was try to recover. No words would come.

For the first time in her life, she was caught utterly and foolishly unprepared. She'd seen him for months, on her tablet screen or when she closed her eyes. Her band mates all teased her about her infatuation. His chestnut hair cut modestly, eyes like molasses, body firm like she'd seen on Netflix, and that smile that crossed from one cheek to the other coyly. She'd imagined smiling charmingly and being

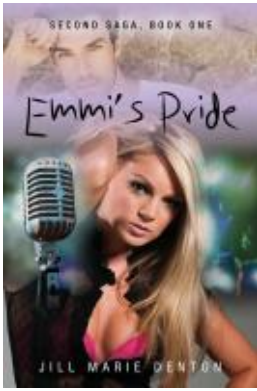
the confident rock star she could be when she met him. But now, with his body pressed to hers and in his grasp, she was wholly undone.

She finally caught her breath, which had whooshed out violently at contact, pulled herself together and met his gaze with as much pride as she could muster. How long had she been out of sorts? It felt like minutes. She feared her look came off as panic, or even amazement, instead of the quiet confidence she willed herself to portray.

Deis raised her voice from the backseat of the limo. "Come on!"

She glanced over his shoulder at her band mate, then back at him. He was smiling now, his eyes narrowed slightly at her torn expression. His breath was soft, slow, compared with her embarrassed panting. He had to recognize her, but didn't bother to add to her shame by asking for a thing. She managed a polite smile, averted her eyes hastily and continued down the steps without looking back.

As the limo drove away, he stood near the door, eyeing it escape down the narrow street. They were long gone and his mind was pouring over their momentary encounter, a grin on brazen display, when he finally ducked into the white-collar crowd.



Emmi Vendetta is a woman of tireless ambition; an unapologetic perfectionist, pushing her band Second into greatness. Emmi loves pushing boundaries, but coming face to face with crush object Simon Piers has her concerned if she can continue her tough girl façade. Simon is all she hoped for, but Emmi can't detach from career and won't risk her tough persona. How can she choose between her heart's need for him and her mind's need for success?

Second Saga Book One: Emmi's Pride

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