

CHAPTER 1

As unlikely and unbelievable as it may sound, Marilyn Monroe invited me into her bedroom.

Few people can say that.

But I can.

*In an instant, the script of my life went into “rewrites.” My black-and-white world turned Technicolor with a dizzying sequence of **FADE INs** and **FADE OUTs**.*

And it went something like this.

FADE IN:

- **SEPTEMBER 8, 1958**
- **FIRST DAY OF ON-LOCATION SHOOTING IN CORONADO, CALIFORNIA**
- **INTERIOR, MARILYN MONROE’S COTTAGE (DAYTIME)**

I was guided into the star’s room.

I saw nothing but Marilyn Monroe’s face.

Everything else faded away.

“I’d like to introduce Miss Penny Parker.” My escort backed away, leaving me front and center.

“She’s going to be with us during our time here at The Del.”

“You’re the contest gal...the *winner*.” Marilyn blinked in slow motion, just like in her movies.

“Yes. Yes, I am. But I’ve never thought of myself as much of a win—” I stopped speaking and wished I could eat those last words.

Marilyn hummed as her eyes took a walk all over me. “They told me I’d have an extra pair of hands during this shoot. How lovely.”

I glanced down at my hands.

“Not your hands, honey. I meant how lovely to have *you* with us.” Marilyn scooped some of her platinum bangs to the side and took a step forward.

I repeated the same words in my head. *Don’t blow it. Don’t jinx it. Don’t blow it. Don’t jinx it—*

“The pleasure’s all mine, Miss Monroe. Truly.”

I was so determined to not come across as some silly star-struck spectator and I was successful for all of about ten seconds.

My eyes stretched wide open to the size of hub caps as I added, “God Almighty. You’re so much more beautiful than your photographs and movies.” My words exploded like popcorn tap dancing in hot oil. Her stunning beauty, however, made me instantly feel the opposite of beautiful. “Did that just come out of my mouth? I’m so sorry. I think and speak at the same time...and usually I speak more than I think.”

I’d blown it.

I’d jinxed it.

After a few awkward moments of silence while my heart rat-a-tat-tatted in my eardrums, Marilyn flashed a wedding-dress white grin. “I can see we don’t need to coax you out of your shell.” She added, “We’re going to get along famously. I’m certain of it.”

Marilyn turned on the ball of her bare foot. The glamorous, camera-ready waves of her hair followed her with a momentary delay and a slight ricochet effect. Marilyn studied her reflection in the sliding-glass door and then in a floor-length mirror. She peeled open her white terry-cloth beach wrap and dropped it to the ground.

“Penny, give me your first impression. What do you think of this swimming suit?”

A not-so-subtle wave of Chanel No. 5 passed over me, along with an undercurrent of sweet vanilla.

I took a few steps forward and my right foot collided with a coffee table leg that I didn’t see because I couldn’t stop looking at her. When I did gaze down to see what caused the clinking sound, I spotted three nearly empty white-ceramic custard cups settling back into their places. Oddly, there were no spoons.

“I’m such a klutz. And that just scared the bejeezus out of me.” I put some fingers over my lips. “I sure hope The Del doesn’t have a you-break-it-you-bought-it policy or I’ll be broke before I leave this room!”

I shrugged and squinted like a child who just spilled a glass of milk.

Marilyn licked the spoon in her hand—which I hadn’t noticed until that moment—and winked at me. We exchanged a knowing-sort-of look. It was clear who’d emptied those custard cups.

“You’ll have to excuse my lack of manners today.” Marilyn shifted the spoon to her left hand and reached out her right one. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Penny.” Her skin was as soft as a grandmother’s kiss.

“Well, what do you think...about this getup?”

I inspected Marilyn’s front side, then glanced at her backside. Was she expecting me to say *va-va-voom* or something like that? I just couldn’t. “It’s just awful. Doesn’t do a thing for you.” I shook my head.

“I agree, but I’m going to do my best to sell it out on the beach...and for the cameras. Even for me, though, it’s going to be a tough sell.” She giggled a bit. “At least I’ll look better in it than Jack. He’s wearing the same one, with a wig and ghastly makeup.” She leaned over and set the spoon down on the coffee table, next to the three custard cups.

A recent newspaper headline flashed in my mind: *Blonde Bombshell: Part Little Bo Peep, Part Mae West*. Without editing in my head, I said, “More Peep than West, except that arm hole. That’s *all* Mae West.”

Marilyn was either confused or had smelled something bad. She must not have followed the Peep/West comment.

“Sorry. Just me speaking and thinking out of order again. I was remembering a headline that described you as part Little Bo Peep and part Mae West.”

“I kinda like that.” She rested her open palm over her heart. The tips of her elegantly extended fingers touched her chest one at a time. She worked her eyelids like a skilled geisha with two painted-paper fans.

The dark navy-blue wool swimming outfit did showcase Marilyn’s legs. As for the middle of her, the swimsuit was a barrier to her beauty and her curves, except for the arm holes which were loose enough to show some breast if she turned just right.

“I’ve always admired Mae West.” While gazing at herself in the mirror, she scrunched her nose, making it clear she didn’t admire what she was wearing. “Beats being called ‘the tart with a heart,’ I guess. Hmmmm, girls back in the ’20s didn’t have it easy.” Marilyn pulled at the top’s white band of piping. “I don’t even want to know what this thing smells like—or looks like—wet.”

“You will. We *all* will.” I couldn’t believe I’d just said that.

“I know, I know. The script calls for me and the orchestra girls to be in the surf this afternoon. Splashing and playing around. Jack too.”

A stout woman in a simple black dress came through the doorway. “This is true. You will be in the water. And the wool *will not* smell of violets and roses. But you *will* give Mr. Wilder a performance that will awe him.”

“This is Paula Strasberg, my acting coach. Without her, I’d struggle even more than I do. She brings out my best. Don’t you, Paula?”

“The talent is all yours...a true gift. I am delighted I can assist you in honing your craft.” She turned to face me. We shook hands. It was a limp one. “You work in a dime store. Is that correct?”

“Yes ma’am. I do. But I believe I’ve been lingering around there far too long. Treading water, you might say. And you know what happens to someone who treads water too long, don’t you?”

“No. Tell me, please.” Annoyance dripped from her words. I must’ve been talking too much, at least in her opinion.

“You drown, that’s what. Working with you fine folks is just the lifeline I didn’t know I was looking for!”

I caught Marilyn as she shrugged and smirked.

Paula continued, “I assume you have been briefed on your role and, more importantly, what your role is *not*.” This time she pounded her words like a secretary on a typewriter. Precise. Paced. Punctuated.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve been briefed. And I’m a quick study. I promise, you’ve only seen the tip of this ice burg.”

“Ice burg or not,” Paula said, “you’ll do as you’re told.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to be an asset—and not an ass.”

Marilyn giggled. “Now that’s refreshing. You keep that up. I need more straight-talking people in my life.”

I looked at the floor while my cheeks flamed. I rarely blushed.

“People are much too controlled around me. It’s not like I’m in control of myself...or much of anything! Besides, I’ve been getting more selective lately about who I spend time with. You know, I can only give so much of myself. Honestly, I try to give to everyone, but I only have so much affection. I’m not going to waste mine on anyone who’s against me.”

She blinked in slow motion again, which drew me in more. I couldn’t stop staring at her. She was impossibly beautiful, even in that horrible wool swimming suit.

“From now on,” Marilyn confided in a girlish whisper with words spoken as if they were floating on pillows, “I’m saving my friendship for people who matter most.”

That’s what meeting Marilyn Monroe was like for me.

How destiny brought us together—well, that happened a week earlier while I was working at the Cornet Five & Dime. And it was just as unlikely and unbelievable as Marilyn Monroe inviting me into her bedroom.

FADE OUT