

Deis, bassist for rock band Second, has talent in spades. Sultry and exotic, she commands attention on and off stage. As an accomplished pediatric physician, she's also in high demand in the medical field. Balancing the two is becoming trickier now that Charlie Taylor's on the scene. The dark, charming lead singer of White Light is on the prowl.

Second Saga, Book Three

Deis' Purpose

by Jill Marie Denton

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SECOND SAGA, BOOK THREE

Deis' Purpose

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Chapter 1

Friday, November 28

DeAnna Sarafian awoke with a start, the violent vibration in her pocket interrupting fleeting dreams of more peaceful places. Instead, she awoke in a place of panic, pain and death for the patients she fought to save.

The cot in the pediatric hospital's doctor's lounge was far from ideal sleeping conditions. A quick check of her petite Rolex showed only twenty-six minutes had passed.

"Good enough," she muttered aloud to no one, sitting up with a scowl.

She'd survived on far less before.

Volunteering for that swing shift in the emergency department had been a terrible choice for her internal clock, but it had been a terrifyingly rewarding evening. She'd managed to paddle a teenager back after a fentanyl overdose, to talk a young mother through necessary but painful injections for her toddler, and to suture a boy back together after he fell on a kitchen knife, all in a few hours' time. She'd saved all but one of the department's intakes.

But the emergency department wasn't her place. The previous sixteen-hour shift proved it in spades.

After that quick nap, she had another shift before her. Fortunately, this one was in her home department of pediatric diagnostics. Figuring out what ailed the hospital's most precarious patients, the ones that mundane medicine just couldn't cure, was more her speed.

And when she wasn't diagnosing extremely rare pediatric cases, she was playing bass in Second, the band she and her friends formed two decades ago.

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Lifting the still buzzing phone from her pocket, she turned off the alarm and checked incoming messages. She'd been conversing with Emmi, her oldest friend and Second's lead singer, about their mutual friend and Second's guitarist Rai. Her recent engagement to the suave British comedy writer Stephen Cooper was front-page news. Emmi, despite her best efforts and insane workload as the band's manager and lawyer, had also fallen head over heels for another Brit, superhero actor Simon Piers, the month before.

Moving Second's home operation to the UK had resulted in more than just better music for the quintet of friends. It had resulted in love for two of them, too.

At this moment, though, Second's bassist DeAnna, nicknamed Deis many years before, was a disaster. Her blinks were sluggish and her pockets were filled with used gloves and spent syringes.

When better rested and better dressed, she loved being on stage with her friends and helping to keep Second a family unit. She also wrote many of the hit songs the band chose as radio singles and was commonly used in their marketing efforts as a sultry and exotic Armenian-American front woman in their all-female ensemble.

DeAnna became Deis when Emmi first realized her potential. When anyone asked who'd be willing to head up a group or to coordinate just about anything, "De is" was Emmi's casual reply. Her maternal instinct and ambition were to blame there, two traits her friends continued to exploit in the subsequent years. The new name became her calling card, though, something that defined her as much as a pediatric physician as a musician and producer.

Emmi, Rai, Deis and their cohorts Destiny and Marilyn had spent years on the road furthering Second's success while working through their college educations all the while, much to the detriment of their social and family lives. But, as Emmi always drilled into their heads, fame is fleeting but family is forever.

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"It's forever until you drop dead of exhaustion," Deis scowled to the empty room.

She rose, stretching long arms and legs before slipping back into her tattered clogs. Refastening her long chestnut locks into a tight bun, she exhaled a heavy breath.

"Come on, girl. One more. You've got one more in you."

She was blissfully close to being done with her rotation. Months of work were coming to an end. Her final twelve hours here at the hospital would no doubt center on problem solving, mystery unravelling and never-ending parental consent forms.

Eleven hours later, she was called back to the lounge. With no reason given, she headed to the vanilla room with caution and suspicion.

She was prepared for the worst. The birthday texts had been flooding in since dawn broke.

Sure enough, the third-floor doctor's lounge was an explosion of yellow crepe paper, golden balloons and confetti-topped tables when she stepped in, her caramel eyes narrowed.

"Surprise!"

Deis released a rehearsed scream on cue, her hands swept dramatically to her mouth. The other doctors, in starched lab coats and khakis, leaped out from behind doors and chairs, goofy pointed hats on their heads and noisemakers whirring to life in their fingers. With a good spirited laugh, she swatted at the closest conspirator.

"We couldn't send you off without cake!" Doctor Carolyn Peters declared, sweeping forward to capture Deis' forearm before the birthday girl could escape. "Come on, it's marble."

"Ooh, my favorite, though I'd swear it's actually yours," the besieged pediatrician pointed out with a smirk.

Dr. Peters, the chipper brunette in horn rims, escorted the birthday girl into the maelstrom. Helplessly cornered, she eased into

the awkward attention. It was her last day here in the monogrammed coat, after all. She wouldn't miss the workload, but Carlyne was another story. She was a valuable peer in a male-filled specialty and she'd been a source of kindness and empathy on the toughest days.

Even now, the jubilant doctor was encouraging the others to enjoy the cake they felt obligated to decline. The hospital's contest for weight loss was still in full swing and Carlyne was angling to win by temptation. Deis was a few days behind on workouts and said no as politely as she could. Yoga only did so much.

After the cake was cut and the guests had dispersed to their units throughout the building, Deis helped plate leftovers for the young patients who were healthy enough to enjoy.

"So, you're off to London tomorrow, you lucky dog. You're not going to fall in love while you're there, too, are you?" Carlyne jibed with a wink.

"Not on my agenda, no, but I don't think it was on Emmi's or Rai's, either."

One of Dr. Peters' crutches, as Deis well knew, was checkout-aisle celebrity gossip. The picture of Rai, smiling like a lunatic and posing with the Hope Diamond-like bauble on her finger caught Carlyne's attention, and Deis had been peppered with inane questions about the engagement ever since.

"And Emmi's leaving Simon's side somehow, headed back here to America to work with some band of upstarts. I read that somewhere online, I can't remember. How she can walk away from him for even a moment, I'll never understand. He's unbelievable, all dark and muscled. She'd better keep an eye on him. I have no idea what Rai sees in that tall, lanky nerd of hers."

Deis hid her disinterested eye roll, turning to dump the dirty cake board in the tall trash bin. Patting crumbs from her long jacket, she turned back to her friend while the prattling continued. She'd miss the

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normalcy of this place, and of her accomplice, the pediatric surgeon, drama queen and insufferable chatterbox Carlyne.

The hospital had been much more demanding on this rotation, and while she enjoyed caring for these junior patients, she was ready to move on, to take a break of sorts. As normal as it felt to work full-time amongst doctors, this workload plus managing Second's stateside home and studio Spire was taking its toll. Keyboardist and producer Marilyn flitted in and out on endless assignments, leaving the manor house and its housekeeping entirely to the beleaguered bassist.

Every time the Eastern Shore Children's Institute called, though, as they often did, Deis acquiesced. As a top trauma center and the country's highest rated children's' hospital, located a few dozen miles from her childhood home, they recruited the absolute best, and Doctor DeAnna Sarafian was honored to be included among them.

After her early graduation from med school, she applied for a sought-after fellowship at this very hospital and was chosen over thousands of other bloodthirsty candidates. She'd made so many sacrifices, had endured so many sleepless nights to meet the hospital's residency requirements. But now, in her opinion, the debt she owed the hospital was fully satisfied. She'd spent a collective total of four years in the pediatric diagnostics department here, sliding in hours of service when Second's music paused or when emergency cases popped up.

Now finally, after months of hearing about its wonders, she'd see their British home, Haven, for herself. The freshly built manor and shiny new studio spaces were calling her name. Rejoining the music efforts and having a break from the often heart-wrenching field of pediatric diagnostics was just what the doctor ordered.

"Did you remember to say bye to Carlos?" Carlyne asked, interrupting her thoughts.

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“No, I figure I’ll stop in as I’m leaving. He’ll be disappointed. I don’t want him to have a lot of time to stew.”

“He’ll definitely miss you,” she agreed, standing alongside the freshly wiped table with her arms crossed. “We all will, but he’s your biggest fan.”

“I’m fortunate that he recognized me at all. I had an in. Otherwise, he’d have deteriorated until he couldn’t say no to treatment any longer. His parents were getting desperate.”

“Imagine his delight when his attending turned out to be in his favorite band, and the hottest one in the band, if you ask him.”

“He’s just fixated.”

“Which guy around here isn’t? With you gone, I actually stand a chance of getting a date again.”

“Oh, shut up, Carolyne.”

She laughed, stepping over and taking Deis’ arm companionably. “Let’s go say bye and get my social life back up and running, shall we?”

She waited until she’d clocked out to visit Carlos. Outside his door in her tan suede overcoat, she looked to the floor with dampened palms. This was the part she dreaded most.

His television pumped out the telltale sounds of high-velocity cartoon violence, simulated gunfire and dramatic music. His favorite show was well underway as was his treatment. She felt sorry for interrupting it, debated internally, talked herself out of cowardice and stuck out her chin.

Tapping on the doorframe, she peeked around at her pre-teen patient.

His beaming face greeted her as he reached for the remote. “Doctor Deis!”

“Hey, buddy.” She stepped inside, her smile automatic and genuine as she settled into the black chair alongside the bed.

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A plain blue kerchief wrapped around his bald head. He was wearing his favorite Captain America shirt, emblazoned with the round shield the hero carried. On the nightstand was a foam Hulk fist, a plastic tumbler in the shape of Iron Man's helmet and assorted action figures ready for action or lying on their sides, previously vanquished in battle.

If not for Emmi's interest in such nerdy things and her coaching sessions about them, Deis would've been clueless about his source of inspiration. Instead, she'd been able to entertain and enthrall him in conversations about their superpowers and personalities with a little help from her blonde manager and friend.

The monitors perched over his head beeped monotonously with an IV bag of cloudy liquid hanging alongside in a sling. It was nearly empty, maybe ten minutes of chemo left to go.

"How are you feeling?" The doctor asked with the broad smile. "You're almost done already. Not as tired today, huh?"

"Nah, I sleep better now. They give me the juice later in the day like you asked them to."

"Glad you let them give it to you at all. You're turning into a softie."

"I want to go home," he confided, muting his television before turning to her fully. "How much longer do I gotta be here?"

Deis sighed. "I don't know, dude. You're doing well, but you've got a tough disease. It could be a few weeks or a few months. It's too soon to tell."

His eyes slipped to his lap, his lips turning down. "I hate cancer."

Deis reached for his little hand, gripped it. "You and me both, kid."

"You going home?" He asked, his tawny eyes inquisitive on hers.

There was such hope in them, a kind of dependency she hadn't felt since she was a kid herself. He still saw a future and envied the strength of his idols, even though she knew it likely wouldn't be

enough. His prognosis was dismal, but he still believed. And she held onto hope because he did.

She squeezed his palm in hers once fiercely. "I'm leaving for London tonight."

She watched the news confound him, worry him as his eyes clouded. "Like, in England? On vacation?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly. I'll be staying there a while."

It took a few seconds, but he pulled his hand back and hid it under his blanket. "You're leaving me. You're leaving me for good."

"I have to, Carlos. Work's waiting for me there."

"But you work here, too," he argued, his eyes narrowed. "You have work *here*. *I'm* here."

"I worked here, yes, but my rotation's over. It's time for me to do music for a while."

He huffed, pouted and crossed his arms, jerking the IV cord. The nearly empty bag of cloudy liquid swung dangerously.

She rose instinctively to check the flow. After flipping his forearm over and reassessing the injection site, she eyed him patiently, sitting back in the chair.

A knowing smirk teased at his lips at her reaction. "You're still acting like my doctor. Why can't you just be my doctor?"

"It's been a pleasure being your doctor and your friend. You watch the best TV shows. You get the best snacks. But you know how I really make a living. I know you do."

His lip tucked in tight. "You guys are awesome. I watch the YouTube videos."

"That means a lot to me. And Emmi needs me in London. Besides, I could use a few weeks away from all you sick jerks."

She reached under his arm, tickled where she knew it would work and watched him squirm. He tenuously held the chuckles back with staunch, boyish pride.

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"I'll miss you," Deis admitted with a somber look. "I'm not supposed to have a favorite patient but you're it."

He nodded slowly. The defeat in his eyes dropped a twenty-ton anvil on her heart.

When she rose, walking to the door, she checked over her shoulder to see him staring at his own lap, limp and dejected. With a deep breath and heavy heart, she turned to leave.

"Doctor Deis?"

She turned back, tipped her head as he continued.

"Emmi's a doctor, too, right?"

"Uh huh, why?"

"I'm okay with you leaving, and I'll keep taking my medicine like I'm supposed to, but only if she comes and visits me. And I want a selfie with her. My friends all think she's hot, but none of them will believe that she came here just for me. Pics or it didn't happen."

The doctor's eyes narrowed. "Carlos, are you blackmailing me?"

"I did the same thing to get you as my doctor. And it worked, didn't it? Besides, my friends are stupid. You're way hotter." He grinned, lifting his replica Captain America shield between them.

"You conniving little pipsqueak."

She slid back to his bedside, reaching out to tickle around the barrier while he cackled.

Back at her suite on Spire's second floor a few hours later, with bags packed and travel documents ready, she did her best to relax pre-flight. Red-eye travel over oceans shattered her internal clock, which was already upside-down from her endless shifts at the Institute. She imagined arriving to find Haven in havoc and having to set it back to rights without pause.

Emmi was spending a week between Haven's door and Spire's in Bora Bora with Simon. With feckless Rai left alone in that manor

house, she feared there would be artwork lying in the halls and instruments leaning against every piece of furniture.

Releasing a deep breath, she assumed the downward dog position on the pristine white yoga mat. With eyes closed and peaceful music full of bells and gongs floating around her, she wrestled back the hells of her day, the panicked looks on children's sick faces, the overbearing parents in the emergency department. Alone in her meticulously organized space, and with another full breath, her heart lightened like a helium balloon.

Before finding yoga, the only anti-stress activity in Deis' life was more work. She and Emmi shared the same work ethic, nauseatingly intense and unwavering no matter the outside distractions. Take on more, achieve more. But when music commitments overlapped with caring for terminally and chronically ill patients, anxiety crept up slowly, building up like bricks until it boxed her in. With yoga, she could finally ease out from under it, coax the angst away and find respite in the few minutes of time she found for herself.

She completed her routine in the lotus position, the music shifting into quiet piano. With eyes still closed, her mind flashed back to her teen years, the endless hours in her room studying, memorizing the endocrine system and learning the implications of drug interactions. Her mind was so logical, so analytical, even back then. Strumming a borrowed bass guitar became an escape from the studies and exemplary expectations. The hollow, soulful tones made the instrument seem lonely, like it needed her somehow. In time, the instrument and the player needed each other.

Her parents, strict and dutiful Armenian emigrants, mandated flawless grades, but they deigned to let her play music after she wept desperately for a bass of her own. Despite the musical interest drawing away some of her attention, she knew four languages by her thirteenth birthday, took her MCATs at sixteen, a year before Emmi, and graduated the top-rated pediatrics program at twenty-one, all

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while performing for audiences three or four nights a week for cash. Confused for a patient at the children's hospital, she'd faced criticism, ridicule and dismissal in the medical community in the dozen years that followed.

But music had always been there. As a balm, it soothed the rough edges of her life and raised her self-esteem. On stage under hot lights, she was a goddess. She commanded the audience's undivided attention. There was no self-pity, no unachievable expectations and no condescending self-judgment. Her parents had encouraged her musical skill as another form of superiority, demanding that, if she intended to dedicate herself to song as well as medicine, she needed to be the best at that, too.

Instead of railing against it, she accepted it and dealt with it, practicing until her fingernails chipped and her lower back ached for days on end.

Keeping her parents proud wasn't as important as it once was. As they aged and as she progressed, as her photos graced magazine covers and as medical texts published her dissertations, their pushing eased back to lackluster nagging.

Their latest kick was the toughest yet. When would they be grandparents?

She could fetch any man she wanted. She'd make such beautiful, smart and eloquent children.

But only if she married before menopause.

Her eyes snapped open with a huff. So much for relaxation.

In the mirror over her antique walnut dresser, she peered at her reflection. The oval glass displayed glittering amber eyes, flecked with gold like her father's, below a cascade of slightly wavy, mink brown hair. Smooth skin, naturally tan like her father's, was uninhibited by the heavy stage makeup she often wore. From her mother came the slight chin, high cheekbones and narrow build, accented with petite breasts and subtle hip. Yoga kept it all toned and

missing the occasional meal kept her weight low enough to please the media.

Unlike Emmi, who was frequently vilified for her curvy, zaftig shape, Deis' photos were rarely critiqued. The fashion industry had come knocking a few times over the years, had approached her about the possibilities, but her sensibilities, workload and dignity had her laughing off the requests as politely as she could manage.

Hot shower, flat iron, almond-scented lotion, huge cup of black coffee. With the post-yoga routine complete, she waited by the door for her ride. Her bags were labeled and ready. The airport was waiting.

Not long after, seated in the first row of first class, she watched Spire, the hospital, her hometown and recent history fall away as the plane ascended.

Chapter 2

Sunday, November 30

“We’re fine. Stop palpitating, woman,” Rai barked into her cell phone.

“Oh, I couldn’t palpitate if I tried. Too much rum in me for that.”

In fact, Emmi had spent the last fifteen minutes gloating in the guitarist’s ear about the wonders of the island paradise. Glass panes in the tropical hut’s floor revealed fish swimming beneath her bed, their adjoining pagoda had a fireplace in it, and the sea was bathwater tepid versus the winter chill in England.

In the background, Simon called out saucy demands and Emmi was gone with a giggle and a click.

Eyes rolling, Rai replaced her cell phone on the kitchen table while Anna-Lena, the stout chef de cuisine of Haven, eyed her inquisitively from the stove. She covered a huge pot, billowing with the scent of beef and vegetables, with a metal lid the size of a manhole cover.

“Had to go, did she, little bird?” Her heavy voice, tinged with an enduring Eastern European accent, carried across the immaculate kitchen.

“Sounded like Simon had something to show her.” Rai lifted a brow and had the chef wagging her finger.

“Obscene. Those two, gallivanting off to the Pacific like lusty teenagers. It does my heart good.”

“I guess she deserves some time off. I just wish she hadn’t left all her work to me.”

“Do what you must and only that, little bird. No more.”

“Oh, and she left me here with the Armenian Diagnostic Machine,” Rai glowered. “Thank God she’s been laid up since she got in.”

Anna refilled Rai’s teacup. “Sleeping like the dead. Henry’s itching to launder her sheets. He’s already snuck in to unpack and hang her things. Brought an embroidered lab coat along with her, he tells me.”

“Oh, I’m not surprised. You never know when they’ll need a doctor at the pediatric hospital here. God forbid she just does music for a while.”

“Sometimes one task makes a person better at another. You are a swimmer. Imagine working with that demon Robbie without your outlet.”

“If medicine is her idea of an outlet...”

“I’d be, what, a glutton for punishment?”

Deis stood in the doorway, hands on her hips and her brows lifted at her cohort. Anna chuckled, caught red-handed, and retreated to her stewpot without another word.

“Well, yeah,” Rai shrugged, lifting her mug. “If you soothe work stress with work stress, that’s pretty pathetic.”

“I’ve been called worse things,” Deis tossed over her shoulder, stepping to the chef. “Anna-Lena? I’m Deis.”

Anna bowed slightly in greeting. “Lovely miss, welcome to Haven. Your breakfast is ready, and lunch is nearly done, whichever you prefer. I’ve taken the liberty of brewing your coffee and preparing your infused water exactly as Emmi instructed. Henry, Haven’s butler, will deliver your meals unless you choose to eat here in the kitchen.”

With a palm on the chef’s shoulder, she smiled pleasantly. “No need to deliver anything. I have no intention of missing your meals. I’ve lived on Marilyn’s terrible leftovers, cafeteria food and vending machines for months now. That was when I remembered to eat at all.

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Today, I'm eating whatever you made. Tomorrow forward, just try to keep the calories in check. I'm on a high-protein, low-sugar plan when I can be."

She sat at the table and watched Anna serve her a flawless stack of blueberry pancakes, two sausages the size of chubby fingers and a mug of Colombian coffee, just as she preferred, black as night and just as deep.

"It might just kill my waistline but I'm going to love this place." Deis lifted a fork and inhaled deeply.

"Anna, there should be a candle on those," Rai added. "Her birthday was Friday."

Shock mixed with shame on the chef's face as Deis held out a palm. "No, that's not necessary. I've had thirty-three sets of candles already. I'm good. Really."

"I'll bake a little something."

"This is more than enough sugar, Chef," Deis argued with a head shake, digging unceremoniously into breakfast.

As Rai explained White Light's progress, Myopic's upcoming recording sessions and her work with yet another up-and-coming band, Deis continued to plow through her meal. It was an odd relief to be away from the hospital, away from Carlos, though her mind often flashed back to him, his IV, his replica shield. She was still thinking of how to coerce Emmi into visiting. She'd have to offer up some sort of boon.

Rai's phone rang mid-conversation and she leapt up to answer it outside earshot. As Deis watched her flee with a brow raised, Anna stepped over to fill her mug.

"That must be Steve. He calls twice a day, late morning and just after dinner, like clockwork."

"Frankly, I'm shocked. She wouldn't commit to a movie show time a year ago. Now she's in magazines with this older, dignified and

cultured Englishman. He must've cast a spell on her or something. I didn't remember him being so insistent."

The dutiful chef nodded, cradling the carafe in both hands. "Magic is in the air here. This Haven, it's a beautiful place. Two overwhelmed and lonely women found love inside these walls. It does an old woman's heart good."

"I know you're not referring to yourself," Deis replied dryly.

Anna smiled warmly. "I'm not thirty-three. Go on and finish your breakfast, miss. When Rai's done, she'll have you down in that studio working it off."

Deis shot her a conspirator's wink. "You think she can boss me around? Oh, Anna, you don't know me at all."

Downstairs, Deis ogled over the futuristic equipment in the generous studio space. Haven's studio trumped Spire's and that was an achievement. Spotlessly clean, meticulously organized, it was a combination of Henry's tireless efforts and Emmi's careful design. With state-of-the-art brands, handmade instruments, custom acoustics and warm mahogany details, it was posh in the truest sense of the word.

Rai stood back with her arms crossed as Deis examined every microphone, every key on the piano and keyboard, every string on the guitars. The room was perfectly scrubbed. There were no faults to find, but Deis was a former tenant of her immigrant mother's life-sized dollhouse, immaculate down to the last detail, and that air of perfectionism had emanated off the bassist ever since.

"Have we passed muster, Lieutenant?" Rai quipped.

Deis grinned, stepping over to lay an arm over Rai's shoulders. "Indeed, cadet. That butler is a gem and that boss of ours, I've known her twenty-plus years and she still amazes me."

"She's a one-of-a-kind pain in the ass, but she sure can design a space."

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"No arguments."

"But this peace is short-lived, isn't it?" Rai lifted a brow. "You're going to argue with me, aren't you?"

Deis turned to her. "Why are we arguing already? I just got in."

"I'm sure Emmi gave you instructions. She gave me a bunch, too. Should we compare notes?"

"My instructions were clear." Deis' thumbs hooked in her skinny jeans' pockets, a smirk curling her rose lips. "I don't think there's anything to compare."

"I knew it. Damn it," Rai moped, flopping down into the leather chair alongside the soundboard. "I'm stuck with that devil drummer Robbie."

Deis planted a condescending kiss on her head. "Sorry, dearest. I'm with Myopic when they record next week, and I'm supposed to lay bass tracks on our new songs until then. I'm only here three weeks, so I'm not taking on White Light's resident asshole. He's yours. We'll call it 'continuation of care.'"

Rai huffed in a little tantrum. "Of course, because I've been so stellar at it up until now."

"Oh, shush," Deis scoffed. "It's my first night back in London. Why don't we live a little? Forget about Robbie. Show me around. We should catch up with everyone. And I should see Steve again. He was eyeing Emmi last time I saw him. He changed his tune pretty quick."

Rai spun the seat, her eyes narrowed biting. "Oh, I'm not taking *any* chances with you, hot stuff. You're not getting anywhere near him alone. I don't trust hot Middle Eastern bassists near guys I plan to marry."

"He's on set with beautiful actresses all day," Deis contended, turning away from Rai's accusation without care and heading to the ascending stairs with Rai glowering at her back. "Aren't you worried about them, the ones you haven't known your whole life?"

“He works with that goof Bernie, not hotties.”

Bernie Overland, Steve’s mentor and comedic foil, was certainly not as attractive as a leading female would be, but his shock of red hair and boisterous cackle certainly garnered attention. Steve and Bernie made fast friends with Emmi the prior summer, negotiating a backstage visit at Second’s September Wembley show as a gift for Bernie’s better half, Jane. That was the last time Deis saw the two lads.

“I’m sure they have their share of female devotees.” Deis replied amicably.

Rai chased Deis to the top of the studio’s stairs and into the atrium. “Seriously? You’re going to give me a complex.”

“He gave you this,” Deis grabbed and lifted Rai’s left hand. The cobalt diamond the size of a dime glittered from its place on her third finger. “I heard all about the sabotage and surprise, too. You guys are golden. Nothing’s coming between you two, least of all me.”

They retreated upstairs to their suites without another word, ready to celebrate away from Emmi’s watchful eye.

Both musicians settled into the plush seating area above the crowded downtown nightclub at a little past nine. The square room on the mezzanine was private, roped off with red velvet and flanked by bouncers in all black. Rhythmic, thumping music erupted from speakers. Sweeping lights illuminated dancing patrons, their faces dim and mysterious in the voluminous crowd. The club smelled of beer, men’s cologne and old wood. It was the kind of place Rai enjoyed but the kind that made Deis awkward and suspicious.

Between their shared leather sofa and an identical, unoccupied one across the way was a squat table, topped with trays of cheese squares, berries, grapes and thin crackers. Their hosts had yet to arrive but had seen to the pleasantries.

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"How did we beat them here? I thought they left an hour ago," Deis asked Rai, her tone raised over the din of pulsing music below.

"They're heading in from Brighton. Some meeting there. I expected Jane to beat us, though."

"Hey, I'm here, I'm here!"

The joyous female voice rung out as the late-thirties female headed up the stairs with a pint glass in her thin fingers. Deis recognized the trim brunette in a pink V-neck sweater, jeans and boots instantly as Bernie's better half. Jane was a serious Second fan and a delight to be around. She embraced Rai with easy comfort. When she turned to Deis, blissful hazel eyes twinkled genuinely.

"Deis, it's so nice to have you back in town."

The bassist smiled back in kind, taking Jane's free hand to bypass a hug primly. "Thanks for entertaining us."

"Oh, it's an honor. You've entertained me much more, I assure you."

Jane set her beer down on the table as the back-entrance door slid open, two gents in full laughter sauntering in. The room exploded into life as Jane ran to and hugged Bernie sweetly. Steve sidled to Rai, lifted her several inches off the floor to even their statures and kissed her fiercely, possessively, in a way that made Deis' heart ache.

She'd forgotten how Steve Cooper towered over them all, how his dirty blond mop and blueish eyes captured the light and how welcoming it was to be around him and his cheerful friends.

"Deis!" Bernie shouted, stepping over to wrap her up despite her body going to stone in his arms. "A vision, as always."

"Hi Bernie. It's... nice to see you and Steve again." She gasped motionless in his tight embrace.

Once he peeled himself away, Deis turned to Steve as he dropped Rai onto the couch like a heavy sack. "I'm not allowed to be within five feet of you, apparently, but hello."

“Welcome back,” Steve greeted, already stepping up for a hug, but resorting to a handshake as Rai cleared her throat a little too loudly behind him. Deis backed up with palms out like a suspect.

He dipped his head down to murmur to Deis alone. “Progress on the whole trust thing is a bit stymied.”

“Good luck with that,” Deis remarked sarcastically, stepping over to drag a worn armchair alongside the two couches, now occupied by two nauseatingly adorable couples.

“How long are you sticking around?” Steve asked, his arm tossed around Rai.

“Three weeks or so, unless Emmi has such a good time with Simon that she doesn’t come back.”

“Oh, the honeymooners,” Bernie jested, laughing with Jane.

“Honeymoon?” Deis’ face grayed. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, no worries,” Steve interjected with an outstretched hand. “Them being married is only British tabloid fodder. And there’s a baby on the way, too, apparently, if you believe their atrocities.”

“Oh, that,” Deis sighed with relief. “Good Lord, I know I work too much, but there’s no way I could’ve missed all that.”

“It’s ludicrous,” Jane remarked around a swig of beer. “The media’s been gamblin’ on when your nuptials’ll be.” She gestured to Rai with her half-empty glass.

“No hurry. He’s mine and that’s fine for now. Besides, I doubt the boss will give me time off any time soon.”

“Emmi’s the workhorse, so stop complaining. Simon had to steal her away from here,” Deis quipped, referring to the Bora Bora vacation scheme. “There’s no way you’re working harder than she is. During her last vacation, she built Haven. If he didn’t drag her off to someplace without Wi-Fi and fax machines, she’d be sneaking in work there, too.”

“Of course, you’d take her side over mine,” Rai grumbled. “She’s been running me ragged for weeks.”

Deis' Purpose

"She also balanced recording a top-selling rock album at home while managing your sister's health down to the tiniest detail at the downtown hospital. Or am I wrong?"

"Don't remind me."

Earlier in the month, Rai's sister Kara ran away from home, straight to Haven with a serious opioid addiction problem and a stolen credit card. Emmi's medical expertise and penchant for security kept the entire fiasco from turning into a giant PR nightmare. Only after detoxing and promising Steve she'd keep on the straight and narrow for Rai's sake was she given clearance to fly home without her sister's overbearing scrutiny. As a former addict herself, Rai was dead set on keeping Kara on the sober path herself, but thanks to Steve's handiwork in negotiating, Rai was free to stay in London with him while Kara completed her treatment stateside under his strict guidelines.

Steve turned to Deis. "Kara emailed. She kept her appointment with your colleague last week."

Deis nodded. "Her therapist audited my psych course in college, and I have no problem asking questions and evaluating the doctor's approach. I feel confident she's receiving the best care."

"She'd better be," Steve added, finishing off his lager. "That was the only way to keep my fiancée here where she belongs."

"I heard," Deis commented, the glass of white wine resting in her fingers. "It seems to me that she's taking sobriety seriously. I think seeing Rai happy is the bulk of the reason, but it works all the same."

Bernie burst into laughter suddenly, causing Deis to bobble her drink. While he recounted some dizzying tale of onset drama, Deis' mind drifted off, back to the emergency department at the Institute.

The four-year old patient's heart had stopped. Sirens, shouting, code blue. Nurses scrambling and parents wailing in the slow motion of her memory.

Clear, paddles, shock. Silence.

Clear, paddles, shock. Silence.

Nothing but the hollow, high-pitched squeal of the flat line on the monitor.

Little girl, curly red hair. Type 1 Diabetes.

Thirty seconds. No pulse. Too long.

Turn it up. Clear, paddles, shock again.

Flat line.

“Deis!”

“Huh?” Deis snapped back to see Rai glaring at her.

“Welcome back,” her friend jibed. “I asked you a question.”

“Sorry, I... I was somewhere else.”

She refused to let herself be embarrassed. With an exhale, she reset her attention, wondering if she'd ever get used to failing her patients and living on without them.

Chapter 3

Monday, December 1

Hangover symptom number one, the nauseous pull in her belly, faded once Deis dragged herself to the shower, but the excruciating headache lingered like a virus as she dressed.

She'd had three glasses of wine, more than she'd had in months. Rai had her two beers, as per her contract with her sister after her own addiction issues, and had no doubt escaped unscathed. Deis, on the other hand, was pitifully out of practice.

Downstairs, enjoying a dish of Irish oats and fruit at a snail's pace, the suffering bassist perused the music Rai emailed her. Lyric, guitar and percussion were in place, waiting for her parts to be written in. She'd already dreamed up most of it and had envisioned the pace and rhythm. It was just a matter of putting pen to paper, music to the page and completing the sound. Bass was music's building block, the fundamental element in rock, and her parts would round out the overall feel of the album.

Anna refilled her coffee with the pity of a woman who knew a hangover when she saw one. Deis downed it quickly and desperately as it scalded her tongue.

Rai fluttered into the kitchen like a bee, her hair still wet from her post-swim shower. Laps in Haven's Olympic pool was Rai's morning exercise routine. All hums and energy, she snagged a mountainous cinnamon roll from the glass-domed tray and accepted the plate and coffee Anna offered with a perky smirk.

Barely functioning, scalded from the inside out by the Colombian magma, Deis watched Rai exhaustedly, hiding her disdain behind a thin veil. She imagined that having a man in her bed last night would've done wonders for her energy level, too.

Unwilling to start the day so peevishly, she rose and carried her empty mug to Anna. Rai and the chef exchanged knowing glances as the bassist retreated silently to the studio to start her day of recording.

Fortunately for the ailing bassist, the tracks came together effortlessly. Relieved that she'd make quick progress, she tossed off the rest of the hangover and focused on the music.

Rai's sarcastic and cruel lyrics on track four were inspired, and with her piece added in, the tune took on a crassly energetic tone. She'd have to record background vocals on three tracks once Emmi approved the bass lines.

Her voice mimicked Emmi's the closest. In the rare case that Emmi fell ill or couldn't pull off the right sound, Deis was her primary backup. It was yet another aspect of Second she appreciated, that they could each switch roles seamlessly and still maintain their signature sound. A twisted ankle, sprained wrist or sore throat never caused Second to miss a show.

A few hours later, the bulk of the writing work was done. After tuning the beautifully polished onyx bass guitar she found, she stepped into the booth, donned headphones and put her mind to task. She rarely had the opportunity to work without an audience or the frequent stops caused by her band mates. Her foot tapped out the rhythm as her fingers rapidly found their place, her head bowed down toward the sound.

Her eyes closed naturally. The soulful, humming strum of complex riffs took her mind off medicine, back to the primal pleasure of making music. Suddenly she felt at home, in the heart of sound, and insecurity and heartache ebbed as she ripped into the solo opening of the album's second track.

From outside the booth, a silent observer watched her pour herself into the instrument. The passion, the fire he felt through the glass was so tangible that he nearly reached out for it. Here was this

Deis' Purpose

exotically beautiful woman, ethereal with her golden-streaked hair, unpainted almond-shaped nails and long eyes that he knew glittered under stage lights though they were closed firmly now. She hunched over the bass, the pale green tank holding on tight and showing off toned arms and shapely physique over narrow, indigo jeans and bare feet. Reverence tangled with unabashed lust in his mind as she played through an intricate bass part with fluid grace and swift fingers.

When she ended the tune and eyed the sheet music on the stand beside her, a sharp explosion of applause had her grasping her heart and bobbling the bass. Her banshee scream echoed inside the glass cage.

He laughed, shame coloring his cheeks as she jumped to her feet. She gradually and markedly regained her composure with deep breaths and wringing hands.

Her breath was harder to catch, though. Imagine her surprise at being eavesdropped on by such a handsome stranger.

When she stepped from the booth, the bass hanging by its strap over her shoulder and her brows raised in demand, his apology tumbled out like an avalanche.

"I'm so sorry. I meant no offense. I didn't know how to interrupt properly. It was so brilliant, it would've been rude to disturb you. Apologies."

Sweet British accent, she thought. Thicker than Steve's, a bit slower and with a touch more twang. Raven hair in soft strands brushed over his forehead as they made their way south of his ears in a long, easy sweep that her fingers craved to touch. Piercing blue eyes, like sapphires nestled in pale sand, focused on her alone. That bright, conspirator's smile, sharp cheekbones, firm chin and chest under a white Henley and dark, loose jeans over heavy black boots made a very nice first impression.

She peeled her gaze away. It had been so long, too long, since she'd had such a visceral reaction to a man. It was demeaning and thrilling all at once.

"It's okay. I just wasn't expecting an audience. Clearly. I'm Deis."

Her hand outstretched and he took it in his rough palm. "Charlie."

Deis filled in the blanks instantly. "Lead singer of White Light. I've heard the recordings. You have real talent. Congrats on earning Emmi's support. You must have impressed her. That's an achievement right there."

"Thanks. Means a lot coming from you. We're all fans, and we owe Second in every way, though not well reflected by the behaviors of certain band mates of mine."

His voice was like rolling thunder, bold and deep. She giggled a little too lightly and coyly before she could rein it in. "Robbie and Liam. Yes, I've heard. Apparently, you're the tie that binds now that your manager's moved on to greener pastures."

He shrugged, wide shoulders lifting easily as his thumbs tucked into his back pockets. "He was too young to manage us fools. I'm the oldest and I stand in front, so it just happened that way. When did you get in from the States?"

"Saturday, early." She lifted the guitar from her shoulders and placed it back on the custom lacquered stand. It was so beautiful that she took a moment to appreciate it. "I'm still not through being impressed by this place yet."

"Light's certainly not," he admitted. "Doubt I'll ever be. It's more than we could've asked for."

Deis turned to him, lifted a brazen brow. "You'll work for it. Don't think Emmi's the type to ease up. She'll never lower her expectations. It's a never-ending race to perfection."

His grin lifted his lip, showed off the sexy, sharpened incisor underneath. "Oh, I bet. I've heard bits and bobs of your new album,

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her vocals, Rai's guitar, and now your bass line. We'll need a miracle to keep up but we're here for the long haul."

The taunting smirk, the gleam in his eye, lit a match in her soul. She stepped closer, her eyes fixed on his, replying with a challenging tone. "You want to keep up? Good luck with that. You'll need it."

As she breezed by and up to the first floor, he inhaled the perfume and promise she left behind, all honeyed and captivating. Her molten voice lingered in his mind as he followed up the steps a few calming, solitary moments later.

Emerging from the studio and up into the atrium of the manor house, he witnessed Deis and Rai in conversation. Outside earshot, he watched the two women nod in agreement to each other's' points after adding in their bit of dialogue. Rai's fingers tucked into her jeans pockets, her posture relaxed, while Deis' arms crossed over her chest, stiff and professional.

He was stunned to silence by them both. Rai was fascinating in a casual, approachable and unassuming way, with her diminutive Asian features, affinity for beer and well-worn attire. But Deis was something else. She was exquisite; an ideal, golden damsel. It was no challenge to watch them talk and flush his mind of every other thought.

And when she laughed at whatever Rai said, her cheeks rose into lovely little apples and showed off a dazzling smile he'd do anything to keep around.

How brilliant to discover that she was even more beautiful in person than in print.

Rai turned to him as Deis stepped away and began climbing the grand staircase. "Hey, Charlie. You looking for me?"

He nodded, intelligible words still outside his ability to find in the bassist's wake.

Rai took his forearm and led him back to the studio. "The pieces today are a little gruffer. You ready to dig down deep?"

“Just watch.”

With the Armenian vixen’s challenge issued, inspiration would be easy to find for his afternoon session.

Upstairs, Deis used Emmi’s well-appointed office to send off the tracks she’d finished. Waiting for file transfer, she meandered and eyed every antique her boss had collected. It felt royal, dignified, unlike her relaxing spa-like rooms back at Spire. There was a quiet formality here, and as she passed by the crystal vase of perfectly dried dahlias, forever a bright violet, she found her lips curling in a knowing smile. Simon and his heart were just as much a part of this space as Emmi now. He’d gifted the blonde singer those blooms months before and now she was off on an island adventure with her superhero and male counterpart. He was just as headstrong, just as conniving as she, no doubt her equal in so many ways.

The thought made her chuckle. She’d never imagined such a splendid guy for her overbearing friend. Emmi loved work, whether it came as a fixer-upper band or hopeless man, but flawless actor Simon seemed to bring out Emmi’s best without adding to her workload.

As she rounded the end of the hall to begin the descent down to the atrium, reverberating voices below stopped her dead. She watched Rai escort Charlie to the front door as they shared a laugh. He took her palm, kissed the back of it with a wink and laughed off her good-natured slap to his bicep.

Deis faded back into the shadows of the hall. A burning under her heart made her feel awkward, silly, like some covetous child.

Rai’s ascent was interrupted by Deis stepping out and into her path. “All done with Charlie?”

The guitarist and Light’s chief producer nodded, stopping at the top to eye her band mate curiously. “Yep, today was just some background stuff. You waiting for me?”

Deis' Purpose

"No, I just... I was just headed downstairs, but I didn't want to interrupt."

The twitching gestures, the averted, insecure eyes and the stammering made Rai's gaze narrow. She could read her old friend's tells like a poker pro.

"Come with me." Rai smirked, dragging the shamed bassist by her wrist. Inside Deis' west wing suite, Rai closed the door and leaned back against it. "What's going on? You're uncomfortable. You're never uncomfortable."

"Nothing," Deis waved her off and turned her back. "It's nothing. And I'm not uncomfortable."

"Hmm, let's see." Rai dashed over and hopped up on the made queen bed, her chin in her fingers like a police inspector. "You asked if I was done with Charlie. You didn't want to interrupt us. You were practically hiding up there while he... Ah hah, while he kissed me!" Rai's eyes brightened. "You think he's hot. Well, duh. He is. And his voice is like suede. You should hear it unmodified. It's a little gruff but, wow. Color me surprised, Deis' not completely dead inside."

"Shut up," the doctor snapped, flopping onto the red velvet stool by the vanity, her cheeks ablaze. "I've been attracted to men before. It's no big deal."

Rai shook her head with a wide grin. "I got it in one. *Damn* I'm good. And you haven't looked at a man with anything close to lust since you finished college. I haven't seen you flirt with any guy in years. Admit it, you're in a slump."

"A work-filled sabbatical," Deis corrected. "You try being social while doing twenty-hour shifts at a children's hospital. The only guys showing up there are dads with sick kids and pharmaceutical reps. And the doctors? Forget it. Most of them sleep with their pocket protectors in or with their assistants, or both."

Rai chuckled, lying back on the crisply seamed blanket. "Oh, Deis, you poor thing. It's so much fun to chase, to flirt, to watch a

man's libido fight with his logic. I'm done with the whole sordid thing. It'll be nice to watch someone else play the game for a while. Enjoy it."

"There's no game-playing in my plans. I'm here for work. Next week, I start producing Myopic. I'm headed back right after I'm done. Holidays with the fam. Besides, I know his name and that's about it."

"That's a good start." Rai sat back up, watching Deis pace the plush carpet. "Your bed's too hard. Steve would like it. I bet Charlie would, too, especially if he got to break it in."

"Oh, *shut up*. Seriously, or I will hurt you."

"You couldn't if you tried. And besides, what you don't know is he may, or may not, mind you, have asked about you already."

"He did not," Deis contested half-heartedly.

Rai nodded slowly. "Nothing major, but he opened communication about you at least. Now he can ask again. A stealthy, careful tactic but an effective one."

"And what did you tell him?"

Rai climbed to her feet, stretched. "I just answered his questions. He only asked two. Like I said, basic openers. Nothing a newspaper hasn't covered."

"Then why bother?" Deis lifted her cell phone off the nightstand as it chimed.

"Am I talking to a houseplant?" Rai asked no one in particular, spinning left and right with her arms out at her sides. "So he can ask more questions later. All I did was confirm his suspicions that you're a pediatrician and that you're not seeing anyone."

Deis whipped around, dropping her phone in the process. "He asked *that*?"

"No, but I told him anyway." The schemer grinned evilly.

Dodging Deis' fists, Rai danced her way out of the room with rolling laughs.

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Left alone, she sat on the foot of the bed with a sulk. She knew Rai was trustworthy when it came to secrets. While the guitarist always dodged the uncomfortable, passed the buck, she was able to hold her tongue in the face of brutal questioning. And loyalty amongst Second's sisterhood was steadfast, especially against the media.

But Rai would tell the rest of the band, that gossipy hen. That would cause some troublesome ribbing, but she'd been devoid of female stirrings for too long. It seemed healthy to explore the lust she'd shelved.

And he was handsome. Emmi had been right about accents, too. Rai herself had fallen for some English gent. She was certainly allowed to admire.

And she was already being defensive.

With a sigh, she flopped down, closed her eyes and quickly passed into sleep again, still worn from months of hospital rotations and producing obligations at Spire.

"I sent her a message. She didn't answer and that's not like her. Is she still sleeping?"

Emmi's voice was edgier, more challenging than it had been on her last check-in call. Rai rolled her eyes at the kitchen table, waiting for Anna's lasagna to be served. Simon, even with his dark charms and sexual proficiencies, couldn't keep the manager at bay forever. The tiger was looming again, too far to supervise Haven directly but still ruling from afar.

"I checked on her. She's out like a light but she sent you the bass tracks. She's done the whole album already. She slept for a day and half, worked a few hours like a madwoman then crashed again."

"Those shifts at that hospital are too much," Emmi conceded with a sigh. "I feel bad sending her more work."

"More work? Myopic's not here yet and she's done with our tracks. What's left to do?"

“It’s not music. I received a message from the director of that London hospital that sponsors me, asking for a consult. Apparently, this patient’s related in some way to one of the board members and they’re pushing the case up the chain to diagnostics. She’s seventeen, so it’s a borderline pediatrics case. That’s her specialty.”

“So you’re telling me that you want that exhausted doctor upstairs to go back to work at a hospital here? That’s cruel. And her license is still stateside anyway.”

“They’ll sponsor her, too. I already checked. And this kid’s been in and out of clinics all over town. They need a diagnostician with some outward thinking and creative tactics. The doctors at the hospital are scared to misdiagnose with their jobs and reputations on the line.”

“So you’ll let Deis’ reputation take the hit? Either that or you’re overly confident that she’ll find something that no one here has. It had better be the latter.”

“Sure, but you know who’s always down for a challenge and isn’t scared to face a tough crowd?”

“De is.” Rai replied in a sigh. “I’ll have her call you as soon as she shows her face again.”

“Much appreciated. I guess I’ll owe her big for this one. Oh, and if this whole mess at the hospital takes longer than a few days...”

“Yeah, I know, I know. I’ll be doing Myopic, too.”

“You’re the best.”

Rai knew Emmi was grinning on some zero-gravity chair, on a pristine white beach half a world away and hated her even more for it.

“I know. And you’ll owe me, too, if that happens.”

“Deis’ a brilliant diagnostician. I have every faith that she’ll have it figured out in no time.”

“Unless she’s too busy with a certain dark-haired musician we’re both acquainted with.”

Deis' Purpose

"What?" Emmi's voice cracked. "Who? She's only been there a few hours. Dear God, tell me he's a decent human. She's been out of the game so long, she'd fall for the first conniving bastard she finds."

"He's no bastard. He is out of her league, though. No worries."

"No one's out of her league. You're gonna tell me, right?"

"Not a chance. This is way too much fun."

It was Rai's turn to grin as Anna laid a plate in front of her. The chef's brow rose curiously, intrigued by the gossip just as much as any eavesdropper, but Rai shook her head. Defeated, the chef turned back to the stove.

"I'll trust your judgment for now and beat it out of her later."

"I'm looking forward to it. Bye-bye, boss lady."

Rai hung up and lifted her fork, ready to dig in just as Deis stepped in with a yawn. "Welcome back to the land of the living. Chef made lasagna and biscotti."

Deis wordlessly sank into the chair across from Rai and yawned again, rolling her head over her shoulders.

"Still recovering?" Rai asked, digging into the layered pasta as Anna served Deis a meager portion. Alongside was a petite filet and a pile of bright green broccoli florets, plain as far as Rai could see. "And that's what you're having?"

"Apparently, and apparently," Deis replied to both inquiries drably. "I can't do enough yoga to burn off so many carbs. Was that Emmi on the phone?"

"Unfortunately. Simon is losing the war against her workaholism. She'll be back to Spire by the end of the week."

"Did she get to the bass lines yet?"

"Nope but she said she sent you a message."

Deis poked at her veggies. "I got it. I figured I'd better eat first. I'm sure it's just more work she needs done."

"It's a weird telepathy we all have," Rai mused with a chuckle. "Of course, it's more work."

“Is it the kind of work I want to do?”

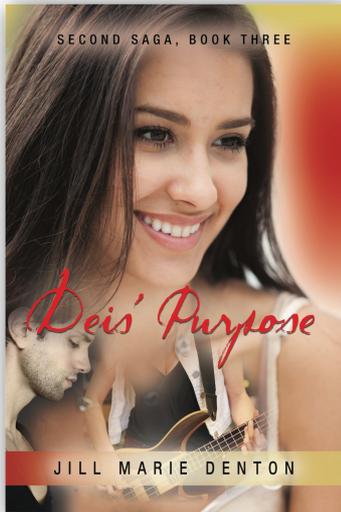
“It’s the kind you’ll enjoy but the kind that I’d run from at full tilt.”

“You’ll have to be more specific.”

Rai shot her the middle finger as Anna chuckled from beside the sink, dishtowel in hand, drying the dripping utensils and observing their byplay. The dutiful doctor was home, and it tickled her how they related so easily despite their varied styles and backgrounds. They were sisters in the truest sense.

“I’ll let Emmi fill you in, but she owes you big. That’s all I’m saying.”

Deis’ eyes lit up, remembering her favorite patient back at the Institute. “Perfect. I just so happen to have something in mind.”



Deis, bassist for rock band Second, has talent in spades. Sultry and exotic, she commands attention on and off stage. As an accomplished pediatric physician, she's also in high demand in the medical field. Balancing the two is becoming trickier now that Charlie Taylor's on the scene. The dark, charming lead singer of White Light is on the prowl.

Second Saga, Book Three

Deis' Purpose

by Jill Marie Denton

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