

Second's drummer Destiny is a love 'em and leave 'em type, scarred and love starved but not apologetic. Unfortunately for her and her staunch MO, Leif's not a quitter. When his taste lingers on her tongue, can she really turn her back on him?

Second Saga, Book Four: Destiny's Passion

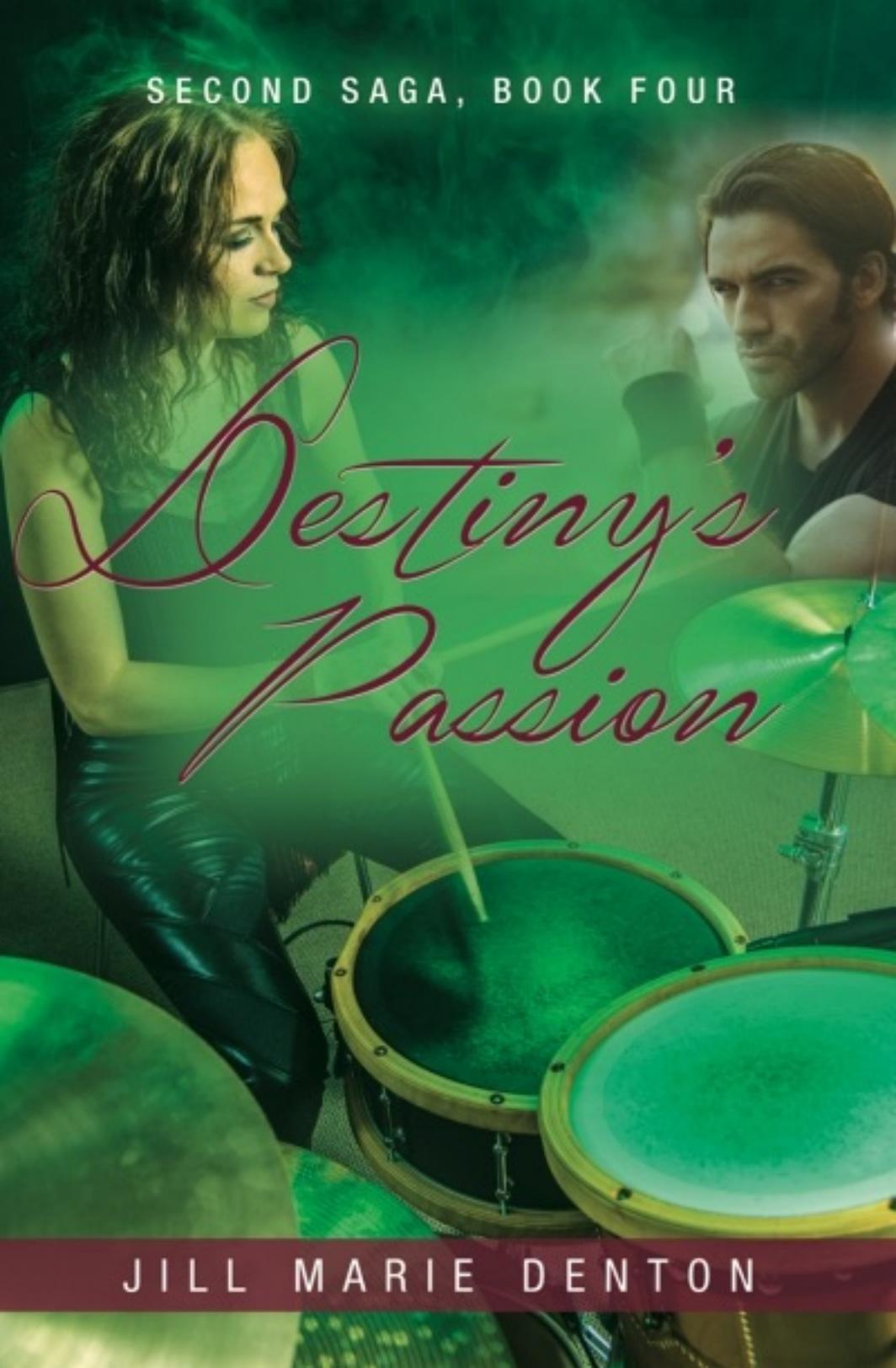
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SECOND SAGA, BOOK FOUR



*Destiny's
Passion*

JILL MARIE DENTON

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Chapter 1

Monday, December 29

The downtown penthouse was a mob scene, with bodies pressed in every square inch of open space. The roar of rock music, eager chatter and ice clinking in glasses vibrated the space as camera flashes and sweeping lasers lit the faces of entitled fans and roadies. Half-consumed drinks were held high and bodies crammed against the glass wall of windows, showing off the glittering Chicago skyline.

The three virile males of First Main played host and schmoozed with the flirtatious females who desperately fought for their individual attention. For single guys with some musical talent and a fresh record deal, tonight's post-concert party attendees were their harem. Liquor flowed, paper rolled with herb was smoked, and the night powered on long after their final encore. Their North American tour had ended in the arena on the south side of town a few hours before.

Across the penthouse, in a room sequestered from the madness, Destiny piled the rest of her stage clothes into her worn suitcase. The Irish-American beauty, on loan from Second during their hiatus, had been on the road with the clever, youthful group for the past month, playing gigs coast to coast while their ailing drummer recovered in a hospital in Tampa. She'd seen more hotel rooms and sleepless nights than any of her band mates in her thirty-five years but adored the freedom and wanderlust lifestyle afforded by being for hire in her spare time.

She'd be flying east in the morning, to this "Haven" place she'd heard so much about. It was time to see and play with her girls again. Second's album was ready, the tracks perfected, and with the Grammys coming up, she was terribly behind. Soon, two of them, guitarist Rai and bassist Deis, would be wives, and the third, lead

singer and manager Emmi, was headed that way with her handsome superhero-actor boyfriend, Simon Piers. The photos of their rings had invaded her email, and she laughed aloud at the idea of it. Her oldest friends, the objects of her familial adoration, were growing older and settling down.

But for Destiny McIlwyn, Second's vivacious and freewheeling wild child, commitment was a bridge better left uncrossed. She considered having to clear plans with someone or having a kid to tuck in before heading out to a show to be utter fallacy. In the drummer's mind, it was unfathomably, unquestioningly ridiculous. Commitment and family were two foreign concepts, ones she didn't have the time or the wanting to appreciate further. The life she'd made for herself was more than she'd ever dreamed of, and she planned to enjoy every moment of the limelight while it lasted.

On an exhale, she lifted her emerald eyes to the city outside the broad windows. Bent fingers tucked flowing crimson curls behind her ears as a broad smile curved her rosy lips.

This city was such a magical place. Their first opportunity for recording music happened right here. Philadelphia and its suburbs were her first home, but it was bittersweet to end the tour with the lads of First Main here. She laid her palms on the windowsill and leaned out, taking in the shifting taxis and brightly lit corner bars below. She cherished the idea of spending the few hours before her red-eye flight down in the pub with her fans and a few cocktails. Maybe she'd even find a lad worth her time, but knew she'd be under Emmi's careful time-sensitive work schedule soon enough and denied herself the pleasure.

Instead, she flipped on some music to drown out the cacophony of the nearby party and poured herself a Long Island iced tea, her go-to mixed drink, from the stocked bar. It was her third since the concert ended, and she'd need at least two more. It was gone in a few quick gulps, the dewy glass sliding down the bar top with a deft wrist flick.

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She'd imbibed almost daily for the past decade, usually on her own and behind closed doors. She could tolerate it better than her mates and enjoyed it more than she cared to admit.

Perhaps imbibing wasn't the right word, she thought with a smirk. Getting shitfaced was more like it.

Emptying the last of her belongings into the front pocket of the suitcase, she found the First Main CD she'd brought along for study. She'd been impressed by their raw talent, their bluesy guitar and their intricate drum solos. She'd also been enthralled by the boys themselves, and their spectacular physiques, eyeing them up a few times from behind her drum kit.

The oldest of First Main was eleven years her junior. She'd been reckless and bloodthirsty at that age, too, but Second had always been her priority. It had been her job to keep the band in check, to keep her Second sisters in unison as their college efforts and outside concerns threatened to tear them apart. As the oldest, she scheduled those bar gigs that turned Rai to liquor, the club shows that had Emmi dressing too provocatively at way too young an age, and the late nights that had Marilyn's parents worried sick. Under her careful eye, and with her heavy hand, they moved from eager adolescents into a successful band. Transitioning the crown to Emmi had been a welcomed reprieve after years of sleepless nights.

She opened the liner notes, took in the sidelong glances of First Main's seductive photo spread. They were pandering, sure, and it was degrading, but the coed girls lapped them up like warm milk. Even now, they lined up outside her door for a moment in their company, in skirts that were barely legal and heels too high for this Midwestern winter and its icy streets.

And a few eager male fans begged for a moment of her time when she emerged momentarily to stock her bar with complementary bottles. She shrugged off their attention, unimpressed by their sloppy bravado, backward caps and pudgy torsos.

She never shied away from a fitting gent, though her target audience was a much narrower group than before. She was past the point of college guys but not ready for a silver fox. The middle of the road, the late twenty-something guy with no need for dedication, was perfect. The ones with fiery eyes and mystic fingers, those were her diamonds in the rough. She liked them young, fit, impressionable and a little intoxicated, with the burning passion and reckless abandon that the booze brought about so easily.

She replaced the CD after lust grew stronger than the buzz behind her temples. Rising to prepare another, she heard two strong pounds on the door.

“No guests,” she hollered back, grabbing a stir stick.

“We’re not,” Dean, First Main’s front man, announced through the nudged open door.

Turning with her drink, Destiny waved him in. Behind Dean was guitarist Chris, who stepped in with a smirk and closed the door behind. He twisted the lock with a grin while Dean stepped over to their borrowed drummer.

“Why are you in here all by yourself?” The dirty blonde singer asked. He’d shaved his flowing mane early in the tour, but with eyes as gray as storm clouds and firm arms colored by tattoo sleeves, the fan girls swooned anyway.

“I’m headed out in a few hours. London’s calling,” Destiny replied, leaning a hip against the wet bar as Chris approached. The guitarist narrowed his amber eyes, hooking his thumbs in his low-slung jeans’ pockets. They slipped down just a little to reveal firm muscle at his hip, and as her eyes slipped back up to his face, he tossed back his shoulder-length onyx hair, jingling the little rings in both ears.

“Having you with us made all the difference,” Chris declared. “Half the audience came for you.”

“The rest came for you.” She turned back to the bar, poured three shots of whiskey in tiny glasses and handed two of them over. “Here’s

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to a successful tour, and all the shows you'll play when Jared heals up and gets his ass back in gear."

The three hands joined in a clink and the ounces of whiskey disappeared down throats in celebration.

"So, you've got some time?" Dean asked, stacking the shot glasses on the bar.

Destiny nodded, leaning back against the wood. "Car's due at five a.m."

Chris and Dean shared a glance before both sets of eyes settled back on her face. There was conspiracy brewing, an unasked question in their gaze.

Destiny was no stranger to the look or to their scheming. A quick glance at the now locked door gave them away. She had a reputation, one she never shied away from or felt ashamed of. Her need for physical satisfaction was as legitimate as any other need in her life.

When primal desire called, she was the first to answer the phone.

"If you boys don't ask," she began in a murmur, finishing off her drink before setting the glass down. "Then you won't receive." She lifted a lemon wedge and after dipping it in sugar, she placed it between her lips, sucking the flesh away with a flutter of lashes.

Dean released a shaky breath, stepping past Chris. "You're the hottest chick here. You know it. We know it. We haven't shown our gratitude for your help."

She flicked the lemon rind to the dish and took a brazen step toward the singer with her sultry eyes fixed on his. "The check cleared. You don't owe me."

Chris stepped to her right. "It's not about money. We know you like other forms of... compensation."

"No doubt about that." She maneuvered so they stood side by side. "And you two are here to deliver, huh?"

Dean nodded and Chris hummed in agreement.

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“You know about my gentlemen’s agreement, then?” Destiny asked, her focus skipping between the ashen clouds in Dean’s eyes and the bright gold in Chris’.

In unison, they both chanted, “Just this once, for as long as it lasts, and never spoken of again.”

“Well prepared. I’m impressed. And you two are okay with compensating me at once?”

They shared another look, turned back and narrowed their gazes without a word.

“I accept your terms. You both are extraordinary specimen and I’m sure you have a plan in mind for me, but do I get a little freedom to start us off?”

Dean grinned. “Do your worst.”

With a smirk, she approached the singer. “Oh, I plan to. But I’m curious about something, handsome. I hear you’ve got tattoos hidden all over. I want to find them all.”

His brow lifted, standing like a statue as her fingers played with the button of his jeans. Her fingers slipped between skin and waistband, traipsing a trail from front to back. She encircled him as he inhaled sharply, taking in the sweet scent of her as she edged dangerously close. Grasping the now untucked hem of his shirt, she lifted it with a step back and tossed the cotton away, fixated with the nautical star over his right pectoral.

“That can’t be it. Where else are they hiding?”

She dropped to her knees in front of him, drying his mouth in an instant as she tugged at his belt loops. His fingers slipped into her crimson mane, tucking strands behind her ears as she dragged down his zipper and undressed him in torturously slow sweeps of fingers. She nipped at the color she found on his calves, thighs and hips as she rose. His hands fell away as she planted a tiny kiss on his lips and stepped away. “Oh, those are fantastic.”

“And you, good looking,” she murmured to Chris, whirling to face him. “I hear you’re pierced in fun places. I know about this one.” She eased a fingertip over his lips. He drew it in carefully, rubbing the barbell in his tongue against her nail with a sizzling look in his eyes. “Mmm, very nice. But where are the others, I wonder?”

She swept under his tee, skimming the clenched abdominals she found. Dragging the tee up revealed his wide shoulders and rings in both nipples. With a hungry purr, she flicked them and watched him shudder. Dragging her nails south, she unfastened his jeans, shooting them down his legs with a flick of her wrist and slipping her fingers down to nestle his Prince Albert between her thumb and forefinger. He was quivering and ready, the metal bar pressing into her palm.

“Fascinating,” she swooned, lifting her palm to lick the wandering fingers. She grinned wickedly as he exhaled a shaky breath.

Dean stepped up behind, his fingers sweeping her hair to the side as his lips and teeth grazed neck and shoulder. Her eyes rolled up slowly on a moan as Chris stepped forward, sandwiching her between their chests. His palms gripped her hips and his eyes were on fire. Reacting instinctively, she skirted a palm up his chest as the other reached back to hook an arm around Dean’s neck, stroking his velvety hair.

“Your turn,” Dean whispered at her earlobe, turning her knees to jelly.

He tugged the zipper down Destiny’s back and peeled away the black mini dress, revealing red lace, dark stockings and garters. Chris crouched to flick her navel with the bar bell in his tongue. His hot fingers held her hips as Dean pinned her wrists gently behind her back.

“Say stop if you want us to,” Dean murmured, nibbling her earlobe and the tender skin below. “No argument.”

Instead she groaned, her skin ablaze as Chris used teeth and fingernail to whisk away the silk on her legs. When she writhed in

pleasure, bowing her body against the guitarist's tongue, Dean released her wrists, unhooking her bra and reaching around so his palms could take the fabric's place. With his arms wrapped around her torso, he kept her still as Chris tore away the lace panties between his eager mouth and her skin.

Suddenly she was lifted in both sets of arms and tossed to the mattress like a toy. Dean moved to her side, fascinated by the pleased grin on her striking face. He stroked her cheek, neck, chest as she tipped her chin back and purred like a kitten. His mouth replaced his fingers, devouring breast and collarbone. Chris moved to the end of the bed, crouching down to brush his pierced tongue over her toes as she writhed.

Dean's mouth swept over every bare inch and Chris's tongue licked a hot line from heel to calf. Her breaths quickened as both men consumed her whole. Suddenly eager for flesh, she grabbed at Dean's shoulders, directing his lips to hers. She slipped her fingers along muscled chest, over firm shoulder and down his tense back as his mouth swallowed her pitiful moans.

Chris' tongue slid up inner thigh, edging closer to her center with each passing second. And when he bent her legs up and began the assault, hot metal against tender flesh, her body rose on a long, deep moan, breaking Dean's control of her mouth. Dean's grin moved back to her breasts, his palms pressing her down into the bed, keeping her still as she desperately tried to wriggle free. The blazing heat spread suddenly, drastically, from their mouths into her soul. And each moan spurred them on through pleasure and into surrender as they obsessed over her every quiver.

When the heat grew too fierce, when the edge neared, she broke free, clutched Dean and exploded like a firecracker. She arched against him as his lips swept over neck, groaning at the quickened pulse he found there. Chris pinned her legs, fighting to finish her off as her head fell back and every muscle tensed on an unending groan.

Dean wiped her dewed forehead, smirking as she panted against his chest.

He propped her against the headboard as Chris climbed up her body, his tongue lapping her salty skin from navel to neck. His fingers skimmed back into her damp hair, brushing it away as his amber gaze centered on hers. The blissful haze and anticipation in them curled his lips into a sinful smirk.

"We've got more to do," he whispered against her mouth, edging his tongue between hers to taste lips and teeth as she twitched with aftershocks.

With damp palms on her hips, they dragged her limp frame toward the edge of the bed where Dean stood waiting. Her legs encircled his waist as she sat up, swirling her tongue against the ink on his chest. His fingers swept down into her hair, tugging back to lay her flat on the rumpled coverlet. Chris settled by her side to capture her lips, swirling his pierced tongue against hers. Feeling the fire of his mouth, the demand of his teeth, her hands snaked up into his thick hair, down his arms and over his ringed nipples as he groaned.

Dean found a stash of condoms in her nightstand drawer and slipped one on. Grabbing her hips and bringing her to the edge of the bed, he pulled her against his middle, slipping inside. Her head fell back, her body limping as he tugged her against him again and again. Her protracted moans made each stroke deep, intense and brutally needy.

Chris continued to abuse her mouth, swallowing her grunts as his fingers exploited tender spots under her breasts, at the small of her back, in the hollow of her neck.

And when Dean groaned, cursing his fading resolve, his body bowed, releasing into her. He let go of her hips before collapsing to his knees in a fit of violent quivers.

Chris rolled the ravaged vixen onto her side, fitting alongside her and continuing his assault on her mouth. She reached down, found

him just as excited as before and rolled him to his back as his eyes turned up in surprise.

She grabbed another condom and began trailing her lips down over his nipples, chest, navel and hips. He narrowed deliciously south of his waist, where muscles tensed with each illicit moan he set free. Her tongue found the groove and followed it to thigh. He purred, slow and deep, as her tongue rubbed and tasted the Prince Albert piercing. After carefully rolling the condom on, she tossed her hair back, climbed up his body and sat on his lap, pressing her hot center to his.

"I've always been curious. Now I get to try it out," she whispered, lifting and sliding him inside. With a shuddering moan, her head fell back, both palms turning to fists as the piercing edged in deeper.

Dean retook his position at her back, on his knees to feast on damp neck, shoulder and nape as her palms slipped back and around his neck.

Chris' palms gripped her hips, guiding and supporting as she rose and fell in smooth strokes. The endless friction of piercing against tongue-tortured skin sent rippling waves through her body. When his fingers pinched her nipples and swept down over pale torso, she bowed back into Dean's strong arms.

Chris' resolve faded, his body emptying as a feral growl escaped his lips. Her muscles squeezed around him, a second orgasm tearing through her and reducing her to a quivering mess. As she collapsed to the bed alongside a desperately panting Chris, Dean dipped down and kissed her deeply once more before backing off. Once Dean was out of the way, Chris tugged her hair, bending her neck back to savagely capture her lips once more.

The guys redressed at the foot of the bed in silence as Destiny panted. A warm wave of exhaustion took over as her body unclenched.

And when they escaped the room without a look back, her eyes drifted closed.

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There was another magical moment to add to her Windy City collection.

Chapter 2

Tuesday, December 30

Her plane touched down at Heathrow as scheduled. Dante was waiting past the security checkpoint, his snug black suit impeccably pressed. His massive arms crossed as he watched the brilliant redhead in her long white trench attract far too much attention on the other side of the security barrier. He insisted on a more private arrival, but she'd ignored his travel arrangements as usual.

Destiny took her time, in no hurry to confront Second's bodyguard, instead waving to onlookers and signing a few autographs as she traversed the airport terminal. Once she passed through the plexiglass wall, she turned on a winning smile, embracing the gigantic, enraged Caribbean man.

"I've missed you, Hercules," she began sweetly, taking his arm as he whisked her through the gathering crowd and down to the waiting car.

"Emmi will not be pleased."

"Eh, let her bitch."

His head was on a swivel as he roughly pushed them past the screaming media on the curb, swinging open the company's town car door and tossing Destiny inside with a flick of his wrist.

She slid across the seat with a huff, waiting until the car was in motion to pour herself a drink from the impressively stocked bar. "Jesus, Dante. All they wanted was a signature, maybe a selfie. No need for all the hostility."

"My job, Destiny, is to ensure your safety." His accent was stronger than she recalled, and his tone was gruff, impatient. "You ladies cause utter chaos."

“Our burden,” she smirked, downing the three fingers of whiskey in a swift gulp. “And handing over an autograph or two looks much better than being above it all.”

“Above it or below, I will see you safe.”

His glare told her the conversation was closed. She was much happier with his silence anyway.

She enjoyed another drink on the way, checking email and contacting Beth, the band's social media manager, to update her profiles. Though Emmi approved everything on their social media accounts, Destiny was in touch with their rep more than any other band member. As the band's biggest socialite, she was mentioned more than the others in the gossip mags. But Beth, with all her skill in hacking and diversion, did immaculate work, ensuring nothing too risqué or improper made it to the masses.

As Haven's trellis gate came into view, she dropped the phone to her lap, her ruby-painted mouth agape. Dante provided his retinal scan and the black sedan passed through the gate. White-tailed deer pecked through the snow beneath leafless trees, so close to the car that she could nearly touch them. Beyond, she saw the stone and brick of the manor house, sprawling and sparkling, dusted with fresh white. In each façade window, a thin candle glowed in the early morning light.

The car pulled into the front circle and stopped at its apex. She couldn't help chuckling at the immense velvet bow stuck to the main door. Christmas had come to Haven and someone had taken a moment to mark its arrival. It sure as hell wasn't her bandmates.

Dante stepped out first then held the door open for the dumbfounded drummer. The driver, in his chauffeur's suit and hat, carried her bags inside, leaving the guard and guest outside to absorb the rest of the property.

“My God,” she puffed, huddled in her coat as she gazed over the lawn to the gazebo, snow-coated columns and dormant rosebushes.

“This place will come alive in spring. Emmi’s designers outdid themselves.”

Dante merely nodded once in agreement, nudging open the front door and ushering her inside. When she stepped into the atrium, astonishment became incredulity. Carved cherubs hung overhead, marble floor gleamed below, and the central fountain trickled, aglow with golden inset lighting shining from above. Warm in the welcoming home, she slipped her jacket from her shoulders, revealing the black mini dress she’d worn the night before, along with thin-heeled, thigh-high leather boots. Tossing it over the couch she found in the sitting area beyond the foyer, she rushed immediately to the beer cabinet and shelf of antique liquors.

Rai approached from behind to observe her oldest friend without a sound. Still in awe of her Irish beauty, all fiery red hair and porcelain skin, the Korean American guitarist watched Destiny’s black-tipped nails skate over the beer tap handles, reading and nodding approvingly at the selections. Dressed like she’d just stepped offstage, she looked like a high-priced escort in this fine mansion.

“Welcome to Haven, hot stuff,” Rai finally uttered.

Destiny’s excited scream echoed through the first floor as the two embraced like high school girls. They laughed and they squeezed, behaving like they’d been apart for a decade, and Destiny swooned obligatorily over Rai’s ring.

Their best friends Emmi and Deis emerged from the studio space a moment later, smiling widely and group-hugging the new arrival.

“My girls.” Destiny blinked slowly, emotion flooding her face as her arms circled around them all. “Getting engaged, moving on and leaving me in the dust.”

“You chose the dusty road, my friend,” Rai jibed. “Still have your gentlemen’s agreement, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Destiny admitted. “But only made with gentlemen I deem worthy these days.”

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“And with the ladies?” Emmi lifted a brow. “Seems to me the deal’s been struck with them, too, over the years.”

“It’s the men who try to come back for more.”

The assembly groaned pitifully at her arrogance, waving her off as she bellowed in laughter.

Emmi warmed the waffles Anna prepared before leaving on vacation. Serving them at the table, surrounded by her friends and confidants, Destiny told the tale of First Main’s tour and her escapades along the way, including the sordid tale of the two handsome rockers the night before.

“Sounds to me like you got all the ‘compensation’ you needed,” Deis noted. “You little hussy.”

“But I’m your little hussy,” Destiny grinned, dragging a knife through her breakfast. “I can’t help my needs. And from what I hear, you had needs of your own with that handsome singer of yours. You naughty doctor, you.”

Deis shrugged. “True facts, but he played hard to get. I had to take what I needed.”

“Yeah, in the ICU with the nurses right outside.” Rai supplied.

Destiny choked on a gulp of coffee, held it down tenuously as Emmi gaped wide-eyed at her fellow doctor.

“You didn’t tell me that,” the blonde manager gushed. “*Jesus*, Deis.”

The drummer cackled, proud she’d diverted the attention and that her sisters were equally guilty. “And you, boss. You seduced the hell out of that handsome actor of yours. Telling him you wanted a taste of him in that dressing room after shooing us off? You knew he wouldn’t turn that down.”

“You said what?” Rai launched up from her chair, standing with her hands on her hips. “Damn it, I didn’t know that. Fuck me!”

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It was Emmi's turn to laugh. "What? I did, and I also tasted him the entire way to the airport, before deftly stealing his sunglasses for myself."

"Damn it to hell," Rai sunk back to her chair with a headshake. "I was here in town, too. How'd you know?" She tossed at Destiny.

"I ask the important questions. And you all learned from the best."

"We learned from the oldest," Deis argued.

"Well, that just makes me a cougar in training. I'm not afraid of getting old, as long as I can still play music, satisfy my needs with the occasional bit of company, and make a little money. Worked for dear old mom and it'll work for me."

"How is Foxy Roxy doing?" Rai asked.

Teenage Rai practically lived at her friend's downtown condo. Momma Roxy McIlwyn was the drummer for a local band, together almost thirty years and on the road forty-eight weeks a year to keep their mortgages paid. When Destiny turned ten, her mother judged her old enough to be on her own and left her in the apartment with her dinged-up guitar, second-hand bass and aging drum kit. While Destiny gravitated to the drums as her mother had, Rai fell in love with the guitar. She loved the way it fit in her arms, the way others' fingertips had smoothed the wood over years of dedicated use. The year before Emmi and Deis joined in on the fun, she spent hours plucking strings while Destiny copied complex drum routines well into the night. The memory always made her smile, and that ancient Fender was now part of their stateside home's instrument collection, cradled in a velvet case in Spire's studio.

"She's the same as always," Destiny huffed. "I saw her right after our tour wrapped up. She's screwing some Australian businessman in New York on the weekends, working as a studio musician in DC now full-time. I'm lucky I turned out so normal considering how much time I spent on my own."

“She was the reason we knew our way around instruments at that age,” Emmi chimed in. “My parents were too strict and Deis’ were worse. Being left at that house on our own ended up being a blessing.”

“And she knows it, too, believe me. I guess the neighbors weren’t our first fans. Now, of course, the media wants her stories about me, but at least she admits that she doesn’t have many of them to share. Wasn’t around enough.” The sleep-deprived redhead downed the rest of her coffee. “That’s why I got myself fixed and swore off commitments. At least I’m willing to admit that I enjoy the road too much to leave some kid behind while we tour.”

“Speaking of,” Deis shifted the conversation. “Emmi’s working on a deal so White Light could open for us on the tour next year.”

The boys of White Light had become their proteges in the recent months. Dessie had heard all their names, knew their reputations, but had yet to meet the lads. Carefree Liam on guitar, humble Devon on bass, short-tempered Robbie on drums and hottie Charlie Taylor, the future Mr. Deis, on vocals. Second’s bassist had fallen head over heels for the handsome front man and his beautiful daughter, Ruby Tuesday. Fortunately, those feelings were mutual.

“Ah, that’s best for the fam, eh, step-momma?” The drummer beamed, her emerald eyes on Deis. “She’s adorable. Looks just like him. She squeezed her little face onto the webcam during that meeting you skipped.”

When Deis reddened, pouted guiltily, Destiny rolled her eyes. “Oh, fix your face, woman. Charlie was in a coma. We all survived without you.”

“You certainly know how to make me feel important.”

“We’re all important,” Emmi added diplomatically. “And having Ruby along with you means you can play without worrying as much. With Charlie managing them now, I had to step up and negotiate as their agent. I’m still waiting on confirmations. I was as firm with my

offer for them as I was with Second, so we'll see. We all might be staying home a while longer."

With a glance around the palatial estate, Destiny murmured. "There are worse places to be when the axe drops."

Destiny kept the mini dress on for the photo shoot that afternoon, topped with a huge malachite cabochon pendant to match her eyes. Emmi decided on her violet corset, the newest in her collection, tightly laced over black sleeves, her amethyst tennis necklace shimmering and an abbreviated hemmed skirt to show off her long legs and stiletto heels. Rai accepted the stylist's advice, slicing an old black tour tee to reveal strips of skin, with an orb of amber on a golden chain around her neck and red leather pants below. Deis wore immaculate white lace, sheer over her naturally olive skin, with bands of nude fabric underneath just wide enough to hide behind. The giant garnet, like a ball of fire, swung from the platinum necklace.

Emmi had spared no expense in securing Melinda DuChamp, the finest profile photographer in the world. The narrow brunette in hornrims introduced herself to the band with handshakes and accolades. Makeup artists dabbed away sleeplessness and anxiety in makeup chairs while the photographer set up shop. Her reputation preceded her, and Emmi would stand for nothing less than the best for their album's pictorial.

Deis, the most naturally photogenic, sat first for individual shots. A wind machine blew her hair like a gale as she parted her lips and tipped her shoulders intuitively.

Destiny rubbed Emmi's shoulders from behind as they watched their yoga enthusiast friend contort and pose. "Not sure why she turned down those modeling gigs. She'd knock them all dead."

"Her mother could still walk a runway today," Emmi remarked. "You should see her folks now. Charlie flew her parents over for the

holiday, and if that's how she'll look in twenty-odd years, he'll be one lucky guy."

"How soon do you think she'll start a brood?"

"Eh, give her a few years. She's a new stepmother. Let that sink in for a bit."

"So, Rai's first, then," Destiny assumed aloud, tugging and adjusting the corset strings so Emmi could breathe a little easier. "I figured you'd be, but Simon's holding out."

"No hurry. Our careers are too much right now, and he's landing roles left and right. He's leaving the day after tomorrow, back to New York for more work. Steve's going, too, to shoot a pilot for a show of his own. So, we'll see about your prediction."

"When it happens, it happens." Destiny laid a companionable arm over her manager's shoulder. "I'll be Aunt Dessie, and that's just peachy."

"Are you going soft?" Emmi peeked over. "I've never heard you talk like this. Imagine, stalwartly single Destiny looking forward to an extended family."

"For you, not for me. I just realized that I'm in my mid-thirties recently. Where we've been and where you all are going is starting to sink in. I'm proud of all of us. Same girls, twenty years later, and we made it. It's big in my mind."

Emmi stood to rope an arm around Destiny's middle. "It's your work. You jumped in, saved us nerds, gave us a shot at greatness."

"Nah," she shrugged off the compliment. "I gave us a place to play, some instruments to practice on. You earned your greatness."

"Ladies!" The photographer called. "Let's get the group shots done."

The four band mates neared as the photographer reset her camera, restaged the backgrounds. It felt odd doing the session without Marilyn. For the first time in their history, she'd be missing from the group shot. But saddled with work back at Spire and having

to fill in for two Philly bands meant her schedule was an utter mess. She'd be flying over the Atlantic once the production work was done and the shows were over, but for now, they'd have to use photo editing to superimpose her picture along with their individual shots.

Destiny smiled sentimentally, cheek-kissed each cohort in turn, as Marilyn would do, and brought them all into a tight mass as the photographer snapped dozens of shots.

That night, the drummer laid in her impeccably soft bedding, staring at the tulle canopy overhead and listening to the frosty wind sweep against the manor's stone walls. It was so peaceful here, so serene, that she was content to lay motionless, unhurried for the first time in weeks. There were no afterparties, no sound checks, and no media circus to contend with. Emmi's idea of Haven was rapidly becoming her own.

Her eyes relaxed on the sheer fabric tented over her. Memories of childhood, of the first time she encountered Emmi, swept in. That was all the way back in primary school. Destiny was the only student in her class that had been held back, and since she'd started a year later than the others, Destiny was two years older than her classmates. She'd grown faster than the boys, too. She towered over them as her frame filled out, much to their delight. Disinterested in school but naturally savvy, she quickly grew bored of lessons, choosing to gossip, play and flirt instead.

On her walk home on a windy October afternoon, with Rai alongside, she watched confrontation unfold on the corner of the schoolyard. Two boys in her class, showing off to older girls nearby, cornered two cowering females against the chain link fence. The two recoiling girls, with heavy backpacks on and fear in their eyes, huddled together as the boys stooped over them with sick grins twisting their faces. They threw barbs and chuckled at each other, peeking back over their shoulders at the older co-eds to eye the

female response. Rai narrowed her young eyes judgmentally before sending a confused look to Destiny, who was instinctively edging closer. Her mother Roxy was tough, unwavering in her beliefs, and as her daughter, such blatant bullying made her sick. Heat rose to her cheeks, fury building in her heart.

Rai jumped in and tugged her arm, pulling Dessie away before she could confront the thugs. But the next day in school, the irritation festered up again when she caught sight of them in the hall. She knew an occasion would pop up again and bided her time. And when she saw the two girls disappear into their advanced math class, she knew they'd be subject to ridicule once again. The bright were so often victimized by the jealous.

That night, she spoke to her mother on the phone. She was in Dallas, Decatur, Duluth, she wasn't sure now that her mind traipsed back. But when she told her about the bullying, her mother introduced a word she'd never forget. Hubris. It had been the only worthwhile lesson her mother bestowed in her daughter's thirty-plus years. When she asked the difference between confidence and hubris, her mother told her that confidence came from within, and hubris came from stealing someone else's confidence and using it yourself. Roxy brought up the inevitable consequences of stepping in but seemed disinterested in helping her child navigate the quandary any further.

Consequences were something Destiny resented. So, she spied, planned, concocted, waiting for the right moment to strike.

A week passed before she and Rai again saw the tyrants at work. This time, there were no older girls to impress and no witnesses nearby. Rai begged, pled with her to move on, but Destiny was unwavering as she thundered onto the scene, stepping between the girls and their tormentors. And when the two bullies raised their fists to the rescuer, she threatened to reveal their complex math cheating scheme to teachers and parents.

Second Saga, Book Four

No punches were thrown, no tears shed, as she made her first gentlemen's agreement that afternoon outside the school.

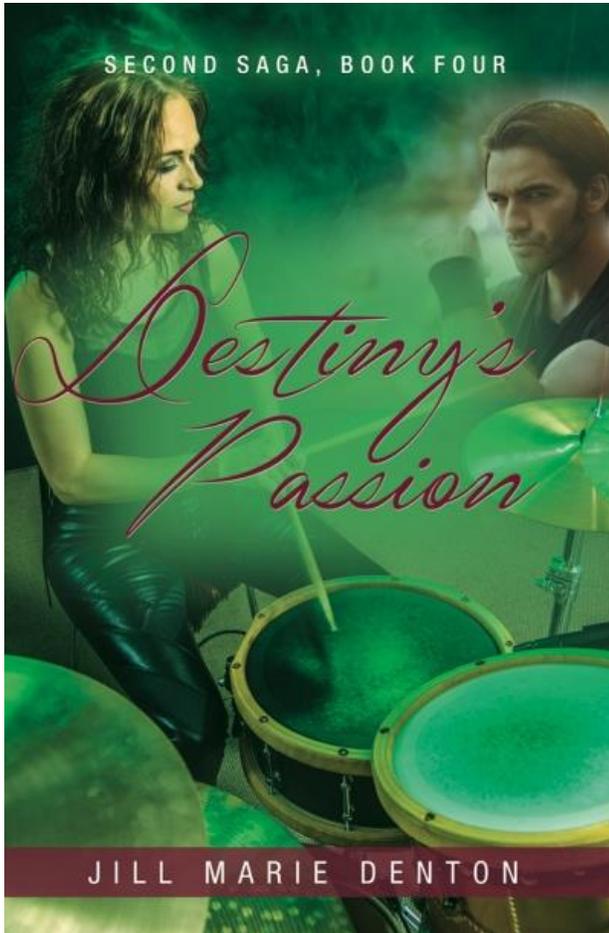
She'd adjusted the wording a few times over the years that followed, to better adhere to her activities, but the method was still the same. Learn something secret, use it as the upper hand, get their word as a verbal contract, and if they went back on it, unleash the secret. This simple tactic kept her safe enough and afforded her the freedom she so desperately needed. In all the years since, she'd only had to divulge one secret, and with Beth's help, his dirty laundry went public and was much more problematic for him than their tryst had been for her.

Destiny befriended those cowering girls that day, and the two, now named Emmi and Deis, were more than happy to join the music-making efforts with she and Rai. She'd proven to that blonde in the schoolyard, Second's future manager, that she could take care of herself. She'd shown them all what type of person she was, that she could and would take control, and that she stood up for those she cared about without hesitation. And none of them underestimated her in all the years that followed.

Soon after, Emmi introduced Marilyn into the mix and the band officially formed. They chose Second as their moniker and never looked back.

Destiny loved them all like sisters, as she knew they did her. Family was a concept she hadn't understood until their tour bus took to the road in her twenties. She never thought of her mother as be dependable but learned quickly that her friends would always be there. It was reassuring and comforting, to know their arms, their faith and their support was always right where she needed it.

With a peaceful smile, her eyes drifted closed.



Second's drummer Destiny is a love 'em and leave 'em type, scarred and love starved but not apologetic. Unfortunately for her and her staunch MO, Leif's not a quitter. When his taste lingers on her tongue, can she really turn her back on him?

Second Saga, Book Four: Destiny's Passion

By Jill Marie Denton

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