

DELIA LATHAM



*Solomon's
Gate*



Book One

DESTINY'S
DREAM

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DREAM

by

Delia Latham

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

DESTINY'S DREAM

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Unless noted, Scripture references are from the King James translation.

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Dedication

To “He whom my soul loveth”

— my husband, Johnny

Praise for *Destiny's Dream*

In *Destiny's Dream*, Latham writes a story with a nice blend of humor and romance and a neat little thread of intrigue. You won't want to miss this first installment in the *Solomon's Gate Series*. Latham knows how to weave a wonderful story and balance it with biblical truths to inspire and challenge the reader. *Destiny's Dream* belongs on every reader's bookshelf.

~ Sharlene MacLaren ~ Bestselling Author

What fun! Delia Latham weaves a merry thread of humor through the mayhem of her characters' lives. *Destiny's Dream* will leave readers looking over their shoulders to catch a glimpse of their own guardian angel's wings.

~ Bonnie Winters, author of
Daughter of Lot and *Daughter of Scarlet*

This book was a delightful read, with a cast of quirky secondary characters, a sweet romance, and snappy dialogue that kept me reading.

~ Lacy Williams, 2009 Genesis winner
- Historical Romance

Destiny's Dream guides readers on a journey from tears to smiles, from longing to fulfillment, and from white-knuckled suspense to happy sighs of contentment. An engaging tale with all the elements of a satisfying story.

~ Virginia Smith, author of
Third Time's a Charm

Is a little respect too much to ask at a parent's funeral?

Apparently it is for Destiny May. Her mother's "going away party" is crashed by a totally irreverent stranger. Clay Gallagher is built like a small mountain and far more vocal than is fitting. When it turns out he's not even at the right funeral, Destiny demands retribution in the form of an escape from the day's dreary proceedings.

Their relationship has some kinks - starting with Destiny's determination to found a Christian dating service in their conservative town of Castle Creek. Clay has little respect or patience for such a frivolous profession. But when Destiny is threatened by an anonymous caller who deeply resents her and what she does for a living, Clay makes it his business to keep the saucy redhead out of harm's way.

Trouble is, spending time in her company weakens his defenses...and Cupid's arrows are known to fly straight to the heart.

Prologue

Daddy and Mama owned one piece of furniture when they set up housekeeping all those years ago.

Passed down from Daddy's parents, that cherished heirloom had survived the historic Dust Bowl disaster of the 1930s. It kept its dignity throughout the long, arduous trip to California when the May ancestors fled Texas along with so many others forced from their eastern homes by the smothering onslaught of blowing dust. Even now, its beauty shone through the scars inflicted over the years by too many moves from house to house and room to room.

Destiny May knelt on the floor beside the beautiful old sleigh bed, worn now to a rich, lustrous sheen by time and a lifetime of lovingly applied lemon oil. Gently, she picked up the thin-veined, work-worn hand resting on the patchwork coverlet and cradled it within her own. A lone tear made a damp trail down her cheek as her mother drew in a slow, painful breath...and then another. Any one of those struggling intakes of air could be the last.

She wished Jeremy and Jenna were here, but the three siblings had agreed not to partake in a morbid death watch. Mama shouldn't have to feel them waiting for her to die. Jeremy continued his normal military routine, dropping by whenever he could, which was seldom. Jenna's husband and twin girls took up much of her time, but she also came in for the occasional hour or so at the bedside. Each of them would spend as much time as possible with Mama.

Until time ran out.

“Destiny.”

Sitting up a little straighter, she gave the frail hand a gentle squeeze. “I’m here.”

A tiny smile eased the lines around the sick woman’s lips. Her breathy whisper tore at Destiny’s heart. “I have worried...about you.”

She shook her head and spoke past the large lump in her throat. “You shouldn’t, little Mama. I’ll be fine.” She swallowed hard, then forced out the words the nurse from hospice had encouraged her to say. Now seemed like the right time, but knowing so didn’t make it any easier. “It’s OK for you to go when you’re ready, you know. I’ll miss you every day, for always and ever, but I’ll be all right. We all will.”

“I...know you will...little girl.” Her mother opened her eyes for a brief couple of seconds. Their once-vivid green had faded over the years, and a long illness made them dimmer still. Yet at this moment, they seemed to gaze straight into Destiny’s soul. “Jesus...told me so.”

Destiny sniffled, but smiled into the tired old eyes. “ Jesus told you I’d be fine?”

“Yes. He spoke...to me. A scripture.” A deep breath rattled in her throat as she forcibly pulled it up from her weak lungs. “He said...’This one...is Destiny’s.’”

Now the tears came in an unquenchable flood. Leave it to Mama to pray for her children even as she awaited her final escort to heaven. Destiny took comfort in knowing her mother had awaited this day with joyful, eager anticipation of looking on the face of Jesus Christ, her beloved Savior. “What scripture, Mama?”

Another ragged breath raked Destiny’s heart like sharp, cutting talons. Her mother’s hand clutched her own in a grip as tight as the older woman’s weakened condition allowed. “For He shall give...His angels...charge over thee.” A smile brightened the tired old eyes. “To keep thee in...all thy...ways.”

"Of course. I know the verse." Destiny whispered the words as she brushed salty moisture from her face.

Her mother's lips curved upward in another weak smile. "It is...yours now...Teeni. Remember it...always."

"I will. I'll remember."

"Promise."

Despite her determination to be strong for her mother, the tears refused to be dammed. A little sob choked her voice, but finally she forced an answer. "I do. I promise. I won't forget. Not ever."

"Good." The frail hand relaxed in Destiny's grasp. A long pause weighed heavily in the room before she spoke again. "I will...go then. My chariot...awaits."

"I love you, Mama!" Destiny gave up on trying to still the wrenching sobs that scraped her throat.

"I love...you. Sweet girl." Mama pulled in one more weak, shallow breath, and let it back out as she spoke her last words. "See you...at home."

Moments later, when it was obvious the precious old saint had taken her leave, Destiny whispered into the peaceful silence of the room. "You were the best mother any child ever had."

Easing her mother's hand back onto the quilt, she stood and looked down at the beloved face, peaceful at long last. Amazing. Twenty years seemed to have disappeared along with that final breath.

She bent to kiss the lined forehead, glad beyond measure that her mother had been able to drift off to her final rest in the only bed she had slept in for over fifty years. She tucked a strand of thin white hair behind one ear and echoed her mother's final words. "See you at home, Mama."

Turning, she walked toward the door with tears still chasing one another down her cheeks, but a fluttering whoosh of air stopped her. She whirled around, her wide gaze flying first to the bed. But Mama still lay in peaceful repose, a sweet smile fixed on her face.

She crossed the room and shoved aside the curtains. Perhaps a bird had flown through an open window. But the double glass panes were snuggled together and locked at the base.

Puzzled, Destiny cast one more quick glance around the small area. "Maybe I imagined it," she murmured.

Feathery softness encircled her, sending comforting warmth around her shoulders and down both arms. She sucked in a startled breath. She swayed, but found herself supported by an invisible strength, gentle and yet unbending in its support of her weight. She could almost believe herself hugged by a pair of massive wings.

But then the warmth faded away, leaving her standing in the middle of her mother's bedroom feeling a bit silly. Massive wings, indeed. All that talk about angels had left her with her head in the clouds.

One last glance at Mama's face, then she stepped out of the room and eased the door shut.

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"If she plays that song one more time, I swear I'll scream!"

Destiny had nothing against "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," but Miss Willard had played it through at least half a dozen times. Destiny was fairly certain the old lady had been born on that organ bench and would most likely die there. For pity's sake, surely by now she knew a few other songs that would be appropriate for a funeral! She cast a weary glance toward the prim organist with her customary, tight white bun and the face of a thousand wrinkles. *How old is she anyway? I'm pretty sure she was at least ninety when I was kid—and that was twenty years ago.*

A grin danced at the corners of her lips, and she bit down hard on the offending body part even as she raised a hand to cover it. What on earth would people think if she burst out laughing at her mother's funeral? Her nerves felt like a rubber band at the crucial breaking point. With her emotions stretched to the limit, it would be so easy to lose control. *Get it together, Destiny May.*

Her gaze drifted from the rail-thin organist and bounced off the beautiful, flower-draped coffin. Thank God Mama had requested a closed casket. The private family viewing the night before had been hard. She couldn't imagine trying to get through this service with her sweet mother displayed up front like a mortician's trophy.

She heaved a silent sigh of relief when Pastor Paul Porter stepped up to the podium. The organ fell silent at long last, and the minister began the service by reading the obituary.

Across the aisle, Jenna wept softly, her beautifully coiffed head resting on Dr. Bob's broad shoulder. Of the two May girls, Destiny's sister had always been the delicate one, and dapper Dr. Bob Clevenger was the perfect foil for his wife's femininity. Destiny watched as he wrapped Jenna in a comforting hug on

one side, while resting his other arm across the back of the pew behind their four-year-old twin girls. She realized why her brother-in-law had chosen just that position when one of the twins—*Was that Cassie or Carrie?*—snickered and whispered something in her sister’s ear. Dr. Bob tugged none too gently on a long, blonde ponytail, instantly achieving silence in the family row.

Down that same pew, Jeremy sat dry-eyed, his expression one of stoic grief. His fingers wound through those of his dainty little wife, Mary Lynn, whose round belly proclaimed their pending parenthood. Dressed in Marine regalia, and bearing himself in rigid military posture, Destiny’s brother looked every inch the modern-day hero, and she couldn’t help a little twinge of sisterly pride.

Destiny’s pew was empty except for her. There simply hadn’t been room for another body across the aisle, and since she had no husband, boyfriend, or pony-tailed twins, the logical choice had been for her to be the one apart from the family. Neither Jeremy nor Jenna seemed to have noticed the separation, or that Destiny, after five years of caring for their invalid mother to the exclusion of everything else in her life, now sat alone while last words were spoken over the parent they had all adored.

“Mind if I sit here?”

At the whispered question, Destiny looked up—way up. Her gaze traveled past a broad chest and massive shoulders into a pair of smoky gray eyes under a thatch of not-quite-shaggy black hair. Without waiting for an answer, the latecomer slid into the pew next to her, and she hurried to scoot over.

“Sorry I’m late. I couldn’t find the church.”

She nodded and gave him a polite smile, racking her brain for the man’s identity. One of Jeremy’s old pals? No, she was sure she would have recognized any one of her little brother’s friends—especially one the size of a small mountain. An old beau of Jenna’s? That didn’t sound right either.

“How late *am* I?”

She shook her head and held her thumb and forefinger just slightly apart. Despite the seemingly endless repetition of Miss Willard's favorite funeral hymn prior to the service, it had actually just begun.

"Great! Then I don't feel quite so bad."

Would he never shut up? She could almost feel curious eyes boring into the back of her neck. The man spoke in a whisper, but still...he spoke. Deliberately, she edged away, embarrassed by the newcomer's inability to disappear into the setting, like everyone else. She would love to turn her back on the big guy, but she'd look rather ridiculous facing away from the podium and her mother's casket.

Pastor Paul eased into his message, the stale reading of the obituary finished. "Miss Margie was a faithful member of this congregation for many years." He looked across the somber audience. "I don't believe I ever saw her without a smile, even after she became too ill to get out of bed. I can say with assurance that this lady wouldn't want to see a bunch of long faces today. Miss Margie would much rather we rejoiced in her promotion to Glory!"

A strange little half-laugh, half-sob caught in Destiny's throat, and she dabbed at her eyes before a tear could fall. She had promised herself no crying in public, and besides, Pastor was right. Mama hadn't wanted a gloomy affair, specifically requesting that the service be conducted as a "farewell party" — a celebration, not a lamentation. Destiny swallowed the choking sob and pinned a calm smile on her face. *For Mama.*

But her annoying neighbor hissed into her ear. "Who does he think he's fooling?"

Destiny gasped, but it was lost in his rude chuckle. "That old biddy forgot how to smile years ago. She was suspicious of anyone who *did* know how." A crooked grin accompanied the unexpected wink he bestowed on her. "I can't imagine the old dame anywhere near Glory *or* Amazing Grace!"

Shocked beyond words, Destiny glared at the obnoxious stranger. How dare he come in here and state such falsehoods

about her saintly mother? Who *was* the big oaf, anyway? Well, she couldn't very well make a scene in the middle of Mama's last farewell. Instead, she sent him a glance that should have turned him into a Popsicle. Then she fixed her outraged gaze on the preacher, tuning back in at mid-sentence.

"Miss Margie wasn't letting us off that easy." Pastor Paul's warm laughter rang out in the quiet room, and Destiny found her lips twitching upward again, despite her annoyance. She could only imagine the shocked expressions of the crowd behind her as the preacher refused to bow to tradition, speaking instead with the warmth and humor her mother had requested for this occasion. How she'd love to turn around and see their faces, but that would probably be pushing the bounds of decorum.

"She marched right up front, shook one finger at the congregation, and hollered, 'Shame on us! How dare we call ourselves Christians? We need to get on our knees right this minute and just hope God will forgive our sorry souls.'"

Now she heard a few chuckles behind her. Good. This was more Mama's cup of tea.

"Who's Miss Margie?"

Her exasperating pew pal again. He seemed incapable of silence. Destiny turned to face him, at the end of her patience. But the confusion on his face stopped her. She vaguely registered that he was rather handsome, in a basic, earthy kind of way.

"Someone should have made sure the preacher knew her name."

"Her name *was* Margie!" Destiny heard the irritated hiss in her own voice. She no longer cared, despite the curious stares and subtle frowns from her family across the aisle. "Would you please hush?"

"Sorry." He had the nerve to pat her hand before turning to face forward again. The slight upward tilt of his lips annoyed her, even before his sideways whisper. "I think you're wrong."

Livid, Destiny curled both hands into tight fists, wishing she could use them to turn that ridiculous smile upside down.

She was just beginning to relax again when he leaned her way. "Who's the lady in the picture?"

"What picture?" She forced the words through gritted teeth.

"The one on Aunt Betty's casket."

A flash of awful understanding zipped its way through her brain, and for a moment she could not find her voice. When at last she did, she leaned toward her puzzled neighbor and opened her mouth to speak, only to be horrified by a gurgle of uncontrollable laughter. She snapped her lips together, shoulders heaving. *Please, God, just let everyone think I'm overcome with tears!*

He waited a moment before tilting his head toward her, his eyes still firmly fixed on Pastor Paul, who was bringing the service to a close. In his horrified whisper, Destiny heard the same terrible comprehension she had already experienced.

"Say it ain't so."

She couldn't look at him. If she did, she would laugh out loud. There'd be no stopping her. Desperately, she peered around him and across the aisle, where Jenna and Dr. Bob both stared back with raised eyebrows. Their disapproving expressions should have sobered her, but for some reason, their furrowed brows had the opposite effect. She turned away and took several deep breaths, finally gaining control of herself before sneaking a peek at the man beside her.

He studied the photo of Destiny's mother as if hoping to change the face he saw there. Finally, he turned to face Destiny, and she decided those gray eyes of his had to be the most expressive pair of peepers she had ever seen.

"That's not Aunt Betty up there, is it?" Two minutes ago, she would have taken great pleasure in his obvious humiliation. Now she realized, with utter amazement, that she felt sorry for him. She caught her bottom lip between her teeth and shook her head.

"Who, then?"

She drew a deep breath. "My mother. Margie May."

"Your *mother*?" He groaned as loudly as the occasion would permit. "I'm so sorry!"

"There will be no funeral procession." That was Pastor, making a final announcement. "Our dear sister requested no accompaniment of friends and family to the graveside. She asked that I invite you all, instead, to join her in Heaven. Her specific words were these: 'They'll find me on the other side of Jordan, close as I can get to the King.'"

It was over. At long last. The huge man at her side stood when she did and extended a hand, his expression so abject that Destiny couldn't hold back an impetuous giggle. She took his massive paw just as Jenna and Dr. Bob appeared at her side.

Jenna started in first. "Destiny May, what in the w—?"

"Gallagher?" Dr. Bob interrupted, his curious gaze on the big man still holding Destiny's hand.

Destiny's pew partner raked a hand through his thick, already disheveled hair and sighed. "Bob."

"What—?" Her brother-in-law shook his head. "Did you know Margie?"

"Long story, man. I'll bring you up to speed on the green."

"Bob?" Jenna's tight voice revealed her impatience with the whole situation.

Her husband pulled her into the circle of one arm. "Clay Gallagher, I'd like you to meet my wife, Jenna. Honey, I'm sure you've heard of Gallagher Investments."

Jenna's nod lacked any warmth or welcome. "Of course."

"Apparently you already know Destiny," Bob continued.

"I do now."

Destiny realized she was still holding Clay Gallagher's hand in a death grip. Mortified, she started to loosen her hold, but then her gaze fell on the crowd lining up behind her sister and Dr. Bob. All these people, waiting to greet her...kiss her cheek...pull her into suffocating hugs...offer their well-meaning condolences.

No. Panic shortened her breath and darkened her vision, and she knew without a single doubt that she could not do the expected thing and face this crowd. Not today.

"Are you OK?" The man Dr. Bob called Gallagher squeezed her hand, and she bit back a frantic cry.

Taking a fresh grip on his fingers, she forced a small smile. "Jenna, I can't be here. I have to go." Her voice shook, and she felt the tremble echoed within every nerve in her body.

"What are you talking about?" Her sister's eyes widened in shock. "You have to be here!"

Destiny shook her head, fighting off a wave of smothering panic, and bent to plant a kiss on Jenna's smooth cheek. "You and Jemmy can handle this one. Please..." She tried to convey her absolute need to escape as she met her sister's horrified gaze. "I'm sorry, Jen. I really can't do this. I just...I can't!"

She whirled around and tugged Clay Gallagher along as she dashed down the side aisle and out the door that was, thankfully, mere feet away. It was suddenly imperative that she not have to deal with all the friends and family who would be lining up to express their condolences. Just this once, Jenna and Jeremy could be the responsible siblings. When she was emotionally stronger, she would do whatever it took to make amends.

Breathless, she paused in the parking lot and looked up at the big man following her like a huge, confused puppy. "You know my brother-in-law?"

He nodded, his expression glum. "Not well, but we play the occasional round of golf. Hey, look, I'm so sorry about intruding on your mother's funeral like that. I feel like the biggest knucklehead around."

She choked back another burst of inappropriate merriment and shook her head. "It's OK, I think I understand. Look, Clay Gallagher, I don't really know you, and I don't as a rule go running off with strangers. But I assure you Dr. Bob won't forget who I was with when I left the church, so I feel pretty safe this time." She glanced around the parking lot, and every nerve

ending she possessed vibrated with the movement. “Where’s your car?”

At his startled expression, she glared at him. “I need coffee, Gallagher! I need it now—and you owe me that much, don’t you think, after crashing my mother’s funeral like that? Now which of these wheels belongs to you?”

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