

*Pure Amore*

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DELIA  
LATHAM

*At First Sight*

"HELLO...I LOVE YOU."

# At First Sight

Delia Latham

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### **At First Sight**

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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### Publishing History

First Pure Amore Edition, 2015

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-504-3

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-503-6

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

In memory of Dearl Wayne Dawson, my own "Parson," whose entire life was a picture of true discipleship, unwavering dedication, godly living...and a beautiful, sweet, humble spirit that portrayed God's love with every breath he drew. If I know any one thing in this life with absolute certainty, it is that Pastor Dearl Dawson fought the fight and kept the faith.

Can't wait to see you again, Parson...you always were and always will be a hero to me!



## *What People are Saying*

### **Lexi's Heart**

...your heart can't help but sigh. You can feel the God's love wrap around you as you read this story.

~Donna Basinow

### **Jewels for the Kingdom**

In writing *Jewels for the Kingdom*, Delia lives up to her reputation of writing wonderful, yet real, God-inspired stories.

~R. Solomon.







# 1

Reagan Massey stared into the mirror, utterly speechless. Behind her, her cousin Stevie's horrified but sympathetic amber eyes were also riveted on Reagan's reflection.

*It's orange! My hair is orange.*

Not all of it, just a gazillion vivid streaks that were supposed to have been soft, gold highlights, guaranteed to brighten Reagan's dark brown tresses and make her look utterly glamorous. Instead, her "soft" highlights rivaled the garish orange of a cartoon carrot.

Stevie's locks, naturally a couple of shades lighter, looked absolutely stunning. Reagan firmly quashed a pang of envy and consoled herself with the reminder that the other girl's makeover was the whole reason for the hair color venture anyway. Uncle Stephen's highly extolled young evangelist would arrive in Riverbend on Thursday—just three more days. By that time, Reagan would have turned Stevie into a glamour gal. If she could succeed in doing that, her own appearance didn't matter.

“Can you fix it?” Stevie hesitantly addressed the stylist, whose fresh, young face seemed better suited to cheerleading than running a busy salon chair.

A flash of hope snapped Reagan’s head around to hear the answer.

“Yes, of course. But...” The girl captured a full bottom lip between her teeth for a second to still its trembling. To her credit, she refused to look away. Her apologetic gaze met Reagan’s full on. “Not for at least a week. I’m so, so sorry. If we subject your hair to more chemicals today, we’ll fry it.”

*It couldn’t look any worse than it does now.* Reagan pushed the thought aside and managed a smile. “It’s OK, Shelly. These things happen.”

In all honesty, they didn’t happen to her, but she wasn’t about to berate the girl. Any customer who allowed a newly certified stylist to do something as touchy as hair color took a calculated risk and should be prepared for whatever happened. But Shelly’s family had been faithful to Uncle Stephen’s small parish for years, and neither Reagan nor Stevie would have considered taking their business anywhere else.

“Maybe God thinks I need a bit of humbling.” Reagan turned from the mirror, relieved to have her colorful hair out of

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sight—at least, out of *her* sight. “Can you fit me in next Monday?”

Shelly’s affirmative reply left Reagan four more week days plus the busy weekend to get through looking as if she’d walked under a spill of vivid orange paint. Not a pleasant prospect, but one she could endure, as long as everything else went according to plan.

Which meant making her cousin irresistible to Cord Phillips. Best case scenario, he’d fall in love with Stevie, marry her, and make her parents happy campers. They were concerned that their daughter seemed more interested in her work with the children in the church than in finding a husband and having a family of her own. Reagan knew this because Uncle Stephen had called her into his office two weeks earlier and said as much.

“I know you two aren’t really...well, chummy, I guess.” He’d shot her an apologetic look from across his desk. “I’m sorry. Stevie’s never tended to make close friendships. I’ve seen you try several times, and I appreciate your efforts. I wish things were different.”

Reagan had smiled. “You worry too much. We’re OK with each other. We have different interests. That’s all.”

Uncle Stephen rolled his eyes. “Well, you never seem to let such things bother you, and I’m glad of that, but...” He sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Well, sometimes it’s hard for me to understand how a young lady feels in this kind of situation—never having been one, you know...”

They laughed together, and Reagan sent up a quick prayer of gratitude for this gentle man and his family. She’d been fourteen, and devastated when her parents were killed in an automobile accident. Her father’s only sibling, Uncle Stephen had taken her into his home without hesitation and made her part of his family. Stevie, two years older than Reagan, and Aunt Trisa had joined him in welcoming the mourning, frightened teen she had been. Somehow, they’d managed to allow her the space she needed in order to deal with her new life situation, even as they made it clear she was not alone.

Reagan owed the small family more than she could ever repay...not that they wanted repayment. But she longed to return their kindness in any way she could. And at the moment, her uncle seemed to be having difficulty communicating what he wanted to say, which was unusual for the normally eloquent speaker.

“What is it? Is something going on with

Stevie that I'm not aware of?"

"No, no...at least, I don't think so." He heaved a sigh and raked his fingers through thick hair that had taken on a few streaks of gray. The fact that he wouldn't always be around pinched Reagan's heart with enough zing to momentarily steal her breath. By the time she regained a bit of equilibrium, her uncle had launched into an explanation.

"I need your help. Nothing is wrong with Stevie—at least, not that Trisa and I are aware of. But she's twenty-six years old, as you know, and...well, she's never been serious about a young man." He hesitated, and Reagan waited quietly. Because she'd worked in the church office a couple of days a week for several years, she'd become familiar with Uncle Stephen's pastoral *p's* and *q's*, as well as his personal quirks and foibles. Right now, she instinctively knew he was concerned about betraying Stevie by discussing her with Reagan. Whether or not he continued had to be his decision.

As it turned out, he reached it quickly. "Well, you can see as well as I can that she doesn't seem too worried about trying to find a husband."

Reagan chuckled. "Is it so important that every young woman get married and have two point five kids and a cookie-cutter

house?" She reached out to squeeze her uncle's hand. "Stevie's a lovely woman with a sweet, fun personality. A bit off the wall..." She grinned to take any possible sting from the statement. "But that works for her. So *what* if she doesn't have a lot of female friends?" She broke off with a chuckle when her uncle's eyebrows shot halfway up his forehead. "OK, she doesn't have male friends either. Maybe you've just raised a well-adjusted daughter who doesn't need a lot of outside influence to make her feel complete. Why is that not a good thing?"

"I'm not saying it isn't." His thoughtful expression told her she'd given him something to consider. "If you're right, that's fine, and of course her mother and I will be happy with whatever she wants to do with her life. But suppose there's more to her solitude than that? What if she feels inadequate or shy around men? I mean, it's fairly obvious that you're more fashion conscious than Stevie—but not a lot more outgoing, to be honest. It wouldn't hurt you to get out more. Do things with other young people."

Reagan laughed, but she squirmed in her seat, uncomfortable with the direction the conversation threatened to take. "How about we just make today's conversation all about

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Stevie? We'll take care of my lack of a social life at another time."

He narrowed his eyes, but gave her a slow nod. "Agreed. For now."

Her insides curled up like a frightened caterpillar, but she managed a smile. "So...what is it you'd like me to do, Parson?" As far as Reagan knew, no one else called her uncle by that title, and for her it had become almost a term of endearment.

He leaned back and crossed his hands behind his head. "I've invited a young minister I met at camp meeting a couple months ago to come preach for us."

"Oh, good. The church could use a revival." Simple truth, but what in the world could it have to do with her?

"Don't get me wrong...I invited Cord Phillips here because he's a dynamic preacher. We need someone like him to help us breathe a little life into the congregation now and then. But"—Uncle Stephen hesitated, but finally ploughed ahead—"Well, I guess I may as well admit it. Trisa and I are hoping Cord and Stevie might find something in common."

"Well, ah do declay-uh!" Reagan made no attempt to hide her amused grin as she turned on a slow drawl that would've made Aunt Trisa proud—true southern belle that

she was. "You sly old *matchmakah!*"

Uncle Stephen managed half a grin in response to her overdone accent, but a dull wash of red climbed upward from his neck. "Stop it, would ya? I'm not enjoying this, you know."

She forced herself not to tease further, although the temptation was great. And her lips simply refused *not* to twitch upward. "OK. I'm sorry. But I don't see what I can do to help. I'm definitely *not* a matchmaker."

"And I'm not asking you to be. What you are is a young woman with good taste and style. And you're confident. Maybe you could take Stevie under your wing before Cord gets here and give her some tips? Make her feel better about herself?"

Reagan shrugged. She didn't think Stevie lacked confidence. Her fashion taste might lean a bit toward the eclectic, but it worked well for her off-the-wall, quirky personality. Reagan wouldn't want to change her cousin in the least.

"I'll be happy to hang with Stevie a little, and—if she's interested—we could shop together or something. I can make suggestions. But seriously, there's nothing wrong with her fashion sense. It's unique. Quirky and fun, but not in a loud, pretentious way. I think she looks lovely."



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“Well, I do, too. Of course I do. But maybe, for Cord, something a little...well, *less* unique might be in order.”

Reagan hesitated, gnawing gently at her lip before deciding to speak her mind. “Would you really want Stevie to change who she is to get a man?”

He blinked and then did it again before he answered. “No. No, I would not. You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Well, I’d say you were thinking you want to see your daughter happy and secure, and there’s nothing wrong with that.” She smiled, trying now to make him feel better. “I’ll work on spending more time with her. Maybe I can get a feel for what she wants out of life...or if she’s even given it any thought.” She grinned. “It wouldn’t hurt either of us to brighten our wardrobes a bit.”

Uncle Stephen’s eyes widened and he slapped a hand against his head. “What have I done? I’ll be sure to put a cap on my credit cards.”

They were both laughing when Reagan left his office.

She’d immediately launched herself into an all-out effort to modernize and stylize her cousin in the short time before the young minister was due in Riverbend—just as she’d said she would. She’d privately dubbed her

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efforts “Project G-SAM”...Get Stevie a man.

Her embarrassing orange hair proved in vivid, living color that she'd made good on her promise to Uncle Stephen.

## 2

Three days after the salon fiasco, Reagan sat alone behind her desk at the church office where she always spent Tuesdays and Thursdays. No one occupied the whole building except her and her orange hair. She had piled the frightful mess atop her head and fastened it with a purple claw, thanking God she did not work in a public position—or in a mirrored office, where she'd be forced to see herself. She could tuck away in the church and relax, since they received few visitors during the week.

Another reason to thank God. Because, as if her garish locks weren't bad enough, she now had another reason to hide out. Her shared trips with Stevie to Riverbend's various cosmetic institutions had produced fantastic results for her cousin, but that success had come at a far greater cost to Reagan than Uncle Stephen's credit card statement would reflect.

They'd gone for facials and mini-makeovers the day before. Both girls had

anticipated the mid-morning facial pampering session with excitement, and planned to have lunch together afterward at a quaint little tea room they both loved. Reagan wore a saucy hat to hide her colorful locks the best she could, and set out to enjoy the day with Stevie.

But by the time they left the cosmetics facility, disaster struck yet again.

An allergic reaction to some ingredient in the cosmetic line swelled Reagan's lips to three times their normal size and painted livid welts across her cheeks and forehead, all of which were now swollen and misshapen. She looked as though she'd tangled with poison oak and come out on the losing end, and to make it worse, her entire face itched and burned. She now had orange hair, a seriously malformed face *and* puffy, discolored lips that protruded like a duck's bill.

But neither duck nor human had to see her today, so she still had something to be thankful for, and a couple of pain relievers had dulled the throb to a bearable level. She ignored the remaining discomfort, frowning as she concentrated on the columns of numbers in the worn ledger.

How could otherwise intelligent people like the majority of Uncle Stephen's

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parishioners fail to *get it*? They slapped their children's wrists in the privacy of their homes for leaving a bathroom light on or not closing the front door against the outside heat or cold. And yet, here at Riverbend House of Worship, with its cavernous sanctuary, sizeable kitchen, and cafeteria-sized fellowship hall, as well as numerous smaller rooms used for classes and other meetings or functions, those admirable qualities went right out the window. Reagan wished she had a dime for every time she'd turned off the light in the women's restroom, or closed a mysteriously open outside door. Only months ago, someone had left water running in the kitchen sink, and the church coffers had narrowly escaped being poured into new flooring.

Tithes and offerings from the small congregation simply did not stretch to cover all the expenses. Utilities alone swallowed up a good portion of those funds, and anything extra, like the small monthly stipend they offered Mabel Collins to vacuum and dust the sanctuary once a week, required tricky financial gymnastics on Reagan's part. Uncle Stephen had, on more than one occasion, insisted on shorting his own small salary in order to keep their metaphorical heads above water.