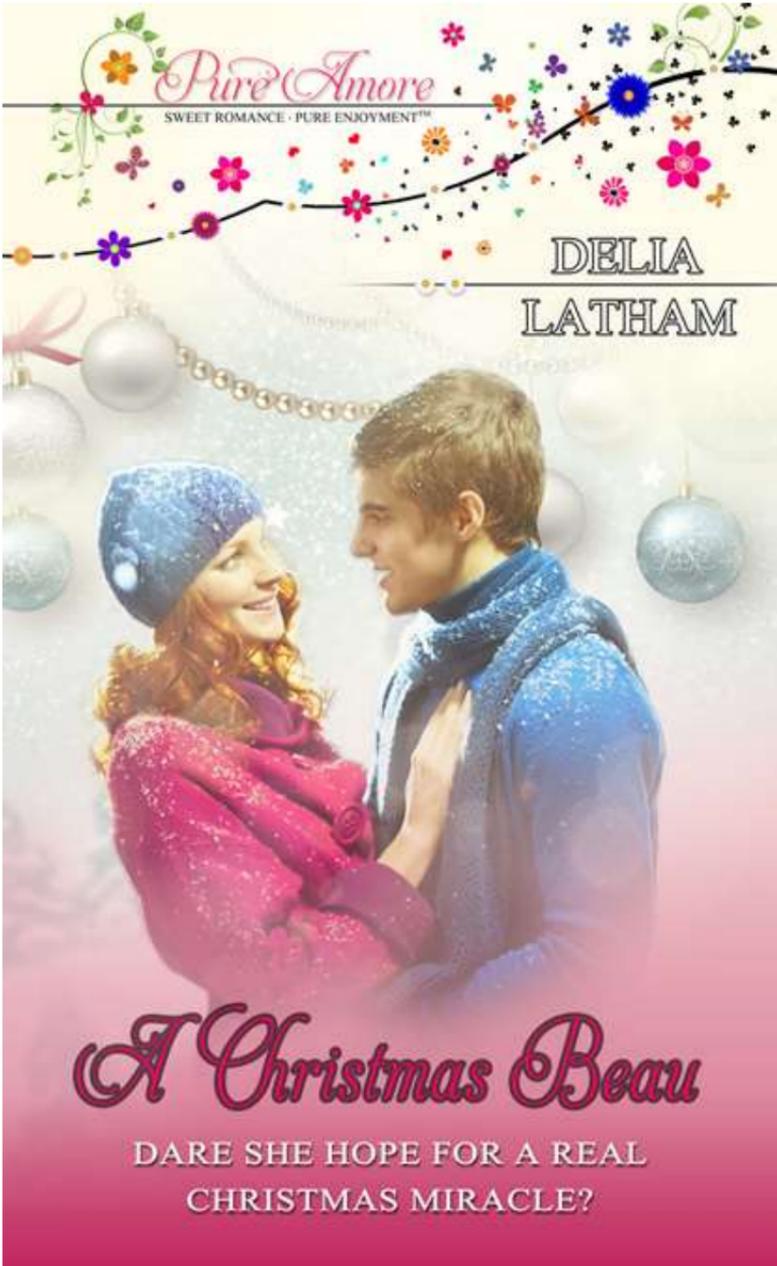


Pure Amore

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DELIA
LATHAM



A Christmas Beau

DARE SHE HOPE FOR A REAL
CHRISTMAS MIRACLE?

A Christmas
Beau

Delia Latham

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A Christmas Beau

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Dedication

To Sally Laity and Tanya Stowe, the two best critique partners in existence. You make me shine, and I would never dare send in a manuscript for publication without first running it past your sharp eyes and sharper minds. Thank you, for teaching me so much and for always making me look better than I am!

Prologue

Christmas, twenty-two months ago

Watching her sister show off her ring, Katie Knowles grinned. Belle glowed brighter than any of the Christmas lights scattered in a glorious display across their mother's living room—and she deserved that glow. She also deserved a great guy like Nick Santini. Handsome. Rich. Italian gorgeous.

This holiday gathering provided the perfect venue to announce an engagement. Always a big deal in their family, Christmas this year would be even more memorable, thanks to Belle's and Nick's joyous news.

But despite the excitement of the news from her older sister and best friend, and the pleasure of meeting her future brother-in-law, Katie's gaze drifted across the room again and again. Kicked back in her mother's recliner, Cameron Hilliard's face was lit by a broad smile. Owner of the Hilliard Agency, and her sister's boss and dear friend, Cameron set Katie's heartbeat to a racing rhythm.

She'd met him five years ago. Barely nineteen, she'd made the ninety-minute drive to Pohnono on her own to visit Belle. They'd made a special trip to the agency so Katie could meet her sister's co-workers on Belle's day off.

That's all it took. One look into those gentle eyes—blue as the purest sapphire—that sweet face and shy

smile, and Katie's heart was lost to Cam Hilliard forever.

A man eight years her senior. A man who thought of her—if he thought of her at all—as nothing more than his prize employee's little sister.

The only man in the world for Katie...and that meant she had to make him see her as the woman she'd become in the years since they'd met.

Starting right now.

She turned from the little crowd of family and friends gathered around Nick and Belle and plopped into the matching recliner next to Cam.

"So why aren't you over there admiring my sister's new ring?"

Cam's grin widened. "Already saw it. Some rock, huh?"

"Uhm...*yeah*. And perfect for Belle. She's so classy, but not in a 'hey-look-at-me' kind of way. It doesn't surprise me her ring would be stunning, but not too large or...uhm, ostentatious."

Cam laughed. "Wow. Careful there, Katiekins." He used her sister's pet name for her. "That's a pretty hefty word for a little sprite like you."

Groan. So Cam did still think of her as a child...and she couldn't deny she was a bit on the small side. Even Belle, at five-foot-two and noticeably petite, stood taller and boasted more womanly curves than Katie. Her miniscule five-foot frame had not been counterbalanced with any real shapeliness, much to her own regret. Still, she'd never lacked admirers, so someone recognized her as a grown-up woman.

Would Cam ever see her that way?

She studied him for a moment, her teeth gently tugging at her lip. "So when are you going to put a

ring on someone's finger?"

Now Cam laughed outright. "Take a good look at this baby face. Come on. Do it." He stretched his neck in a deliberately comical fashion and turned his face side to side.

Katie laughed. "I've seen your face before. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Well...now look over there and let your eyes feast on the man your sister's hanging onto like there's no tomorrow. That, my dear Katie, is what modern women are looking for."

For a moment, her breath refused to be found. Surely this wonderful man didn't really believe that nonsense?

In one slow, deliberate movement, she vacated the chair she'd claimed only moments earlier, took two steps, and knelt at his side. Drawing on every ounce of courage she possessed, Katie laid her hand on top of his.

Cam's eyebrows shot toward his hairline, but he didn't remove his hand from under hers. Maybe that was a good sign.

"Let me tell you something, Cameron Hilliard—and you listen up. Not all women want a man like Nick." A sudden, uncharacteristic shyness threatened to overwhelm her, but Katie determinedly captured his gaze with her own and refused to let go. "I don't."

1

Early October, twenty-two months later

Sliding her key into the lock, Katie Knowles listened for the click of success, and then pushed into her office at Pohono Elementary School. Once the door swung shut, she took a moment to cast a contented glance around the space. Not exactly fancy—what public school office ever was? But the room exuded warmth and welcome.

Any child who visited “Miss Katie” suffered some type of emotional or mental problem. Otherwise they’d never have a reason to see her. The last thing she wanted was for her young charges to be put off by dull, unattractive surroundings—or a cold, unwelcoming one. Hence the plush rugs on the floor and the brightly colored, child-oriented art on the walls. Her desk, while as utilitarian as any other in the public school system, sported a couple coats of pleasant, robin’s egg blue paint, as did the tall, four-drawer file cabinet shoved against the wall behind it.

Comfortable, child-sized chairs and a low, round table filled the center space. Stacked atop the table, sketch pads and a variety of colored markers, pens, and pencils provided an alternate medium of communication for those young guests to whom talking didn’t come easily. In one corner, a couple of standing shelves held an assortment of toy trucks and cars, action figures, dolls, and bright jewelry.

All the tools she needed to help her relate to a child's mind. She was good at it, even if success meant "becoming a child" herself. She'd been known to push a truck around the room, making all the appropriate noises, to win the trust of a troubled little boy. Nor was it beyond her to don cheap, gaudy earrings and wrap a feather boa around her neck, or cradle a doll in her arms and play Mommy with a sad-eyed girl.

Whatever it took to reach a child.

After graduating high school, Katie had kept her nose to the educational grindstone. She'd put her social life on hold, sacrificed lazy weekends and carefree vacations and plowed through the rigors of an accelerated graduate program. That single-minded dedication resulted in a Master's degree just in time to apply for this position in Pohonon.

Given her minimal hands-on experience, Katie's job title was 'Counselor's Assistant.' The official Psychology Counselor, responsible for a dozen county schools, made her home base in Eufala, sixty miles away. She held a cyber meeting with Katie once a week, offered advice when needed, but put in an actual appearance at the school only once or twice a quarter. Since the beginning of the current school term, Katie had thought of the Pohonon counselor's office as her own.

She slipped her sweater off her shoulders, but quickly decided against removing the extra layer. The past week had brought on a bit of a chill that announced winter's approach, way too soon. Old Man Winter must be planning a humdinger of a season, to be awake and blowing whispers of ice into the atmosphere in early October.

After sliding her purse into the bottom desk

drawer, she picked up a small, framed photo that lay face-up in the same space. Although not strictly forbidden, displaying personal photos was subtly discouraged, so she kept the picture of herself with the love of her life in that drawer, where she'd see it every morning when she put her purse away. The photographic reminder that she and Cameron Hilliard were a couple never failed to start her work day off with a smile.

They'd started dating not long after Belle's engagement to Cam's friend, Nick Santini. Thank God her sister worked for the Hilliard Agency. Otherwise, Katie might never have met Belle's boss. Scary thought, since life without Cam would be...well, she didn't even want to entertain such a devastating scenario.

She giggled. Successful business owner or not, the man would blush to the roots of his dark blond hair if he could see into her thoughts. Sweet, quiet Cam, with his moments of unexpected shyness that always swelled her heart with something so profound, so intense, it often frightened her. Those elements of his personality were a large part of what made Cam *Cam*...and Katie loved the whole package.

A sharp knock on the door pulled her out of her daydreams. She glanced at her appointment book then hurried across the room to welcome her first little challenge of the day. Aidan Seth Treadwell. He was new to her lineup of young cases, and she looked forward to meeting him.

Her friend, Heidi Greer, waited at the door, her fingers wrapped around those of a little blond boy. Small for a third-grader, the child cast his gaze somewhere around the vicinity of his toes as his teacher made the introductions.

“Good morning.” Katie knelt and tried to catch his eye, but he seemed determined not to let that happen.

Heidi sighed. “This is Miss Katie, Aidan. Say hello.”

“Lo, Miss Katie.” The boy mumbled a barely audible greeting.

“You and I are going to have a lot of fun together, Aidan.”

Heidi stepped into the office and pulled out one of the small chairs. “Come over and sit down, sweetie. You’re going to visit with Miss Katie for a little while, and then I’ll be back for you.”

The boy moved toward his teacher, never once raising his gaze off the floor. He ignored the chair and lowered his small form to the rug, cross-legged.

Heidi cast a frustrated glance in Katie’s direction. “Your turn to try, my friend. Good luck and all that.”

“Later, Heidi.” *But I don’t need luck. Just a little inspiration from On High.*

Alone with her young visitor, she joined the boy on the floor—face to face, but far enough apart to avoid making him uncomfortable. “I’m so happy to meet you, Aidan.”

She’d already determined to use his name often. His diagnosis of mild autism spectrum disorder was a recent one. For some autistic children, constant use of a name helped ground them in time and space, counteracting the tendency to take mental journeys inside themselves.

Katie plucked a sketch pad and pencil from the table. Heidi had told her during their pre-appointment discussion that her prime concern for Aidan was his inability—or perhaps refusal—to interact with others. The boy’s condition interfered with his learning in only

a couple of areas. Overall, his grades were high. His foster parents had indicated that the child's condition had declined steadily in the nine months he'd been in their care. At first, Aidan showed little evidence of autism, although the diagnosis was indicated in his records. But as time passed, he'd lapsed into more of the behaviors and symptoms common to the condition.

He displayed artistic skills far beyond that of a normal eight-year-old. Heidi had included a few of his drawings in his file to corroborate that opinion, and they did indicate surprising ability. Katie hoped to utilize that natural talent as a possible means of communication.

But only if Aidan made the first move. She wouldn't try to force the issue.

She placed the pad and pencil on the rug between them. "Do you like to draw, Aidan?"

The boy crossed thin arms over his chest and rocked forward without looking up. Katie waited for the backward swing, but it didn't come right away.

"Well, I heard you like it a lot. That's why this sketch pad is here." She plucked the pencil off the thick tablet of drawing paper and held it up as if he was actually watching her, even though he hadn't glanced in her direction even once. After a moment, she laid it down again. "Think you could draw something for me?"

Nothing. Finally, he rocked backward, and forward again. And back.

"Aidan. Look at me, please."

His head tilted upward and away from Katie, but only by a bare fraction of an inch. Just when she decided he wasn't going to do as she asked, Aidan slanted his gaze in her direction but focused it about

the level of her neck.

Not what she'd hoped for, but a decent start.

Katie nudged the sketch pad closer, hoping the movement was perceptible to the boy, but not obvious. Then she stood.

"I'll be at my desk, Aidan. If you need anything, let me know."

No response...for now. But there would be. She knew it.

She opened his file, but only to make herself appear occupied with something other than her young visitor. Later, she'd lose herself in the painstaking notes and charts, but right now, she wanted to observe the child without making him uncomfortable.

As she watched, two small fingers slid closer to the sketch pad. She waited, holding her breath, until he drew the drawing tablet onto his lap and picked up the pencil, without once looking directly at the book, or at Katie.

Still, it was something. Not a half-bad start to the day.

From his booth in Santini's Italiano, Cameron Hilliard kept an eye on the entrance. His lips curved into a wide, unstoppable grin when his date appeared in the doorway. He could no more have held back that smile than he could've stopped the sun from shining. Katie Knowles possessed some kind of 'magic' that made smiles happen—and Cam wasn't alone in feeling its effect. A quick glance around the vicinity revealed at least a half dozen pair of eyes fixed on the tiny, auburn-haired woman in the arched doorway—every

one of them accompanied by a big, happy, helpless grin.

He stood, and her green gaze found him in an instant.

Katie accepted the discreet brush of his lips against her cheek. "How was your day, Cam?"

Her sweet smile wrapped itself around his heart and squeezed hard. He pulled air into his lungs, wondering for the hundredth time what he was doing.

Every minute he spent with this beautiful woman was one moment deeper under her spell, one smile closer to losing his heart forever...and still he kept coming around. What was he thinking? What in the world had possessed him to risk a relationship with a woman so young, and so far out of his league?

He bit back a chuckle at his slight mental exaggeration. At twenty-five, Katie was eight years younger—enough to make their formative experiences somewhat different, but not so much that the gap made a relationship impossible.

He looked at her across a candlelit booth overhung with grape vines and twinkling lights. "Maybe you should tell me about your day, Katiekins. It's bound to be more interesting."

"You first." Katie blasted him with a thousand-watt smile, effectively dousing any sensible thought he might have had. "I want to know about every second you spent away from me."

He smiled back—something he'd done a far sight more since Katie came into his life—and laid an open hand on the table. She slid hers into it without hesitation, big green eyes lit up like emerald stars.

Cam, my man, there's no hope for you. You're a goner.

"Every second?"

“Uh-huh. From the moment you opened your eyes this morning until this very moment.”

“That’s a pretty tall order. I’d really hate to bore you with the details of my humdrum Friday. I didn’t do anything worth talking about.”

“Everything you do is interesting to me, Cam, because...well, because you’re *you*.”

How many women would be so open about their feelings?

In the name of honesty, he had to admit that he’d almost certainly be uncomfortable with that degree of candidness in most women he’d dated. But not this woman. Katie’s forthright demeanor refreshed him, made him feel vibrant.

And that’s what scared him all the way to his core. Was it possible he was just caught up in her youthful exuberance for life? Maybe what he felt for her wasn’t real. And maybe that light in her eyes when she looked at him was no more than a crush on her sister’s boss.

“Cam?” Her voice held an uncertain edge. “Is—is something wrong?”

He laughed and squeezed the hand he still held. “What could possibly be wrong? I’m in the company of a sweet, smart, beautiful woman who seems to actually enjoy being with this old geezer.”

“I love being with you, you know that—and you’re not old.” Her auburn eyebrows took a dive toward each other, while green eyes flashed her displeasure. “Why do you insist on thinking of yourself like that?”

“Maybe because you’re so young.” He grinned, knowing she wouldn’t let him by with that comment.

“I’m not that much younger than you.” She narrowed her eyes, causing an adorable crease to show

up between her eyebrows. "An eight-year age difference doesn't make you a cradle robber, and besides—" An impish smile lit her face. "You didn't exactly kidnap me."

"Well, that's true." That little spark of fire. He loved it—especially when paired with her fun-loving personality. "You kind of leaped out of the cradle and into my waiting arms, didn't you?"

"Yep, and I'd do it again, so no more self-deprecating comments about your age...old man. Got that?"

"Got it."

"Good. Then let's start over. Tell me about your day."

"Well, it wasn't bad. Belle and I made a few customers happy, closed a couple of accounts, and contracted another one or two. That's a good day. But..."

"But what?"

He loved the sincere interest etched into her expression. For the thousandth time, he wondered how he'd managed to snag an honest-to-goodness what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of girl. Today's society didn't offer up a whole lot of women like that.

"Cam!" She turned the word into two slow, Oklahoma-style syllables and pouted prettily. "A good day, but...what?"

He rubbed gentle circles atop her hand with his thumb. "But even with all that going on, I still missed you."

"Really?" Katie's lips curved upward in a delighted grin, and Cam's heart gave a powerful hitch. He'd do or say just about anything to keep that happy smile on her face.

“Really, truly.”

“I missed you, too. Really, truly.” The warmth and affection in her soft voice flowed over his senses like warm butter on a slice of bread right out of the oven.

He cleared his throat and forced a light tone. “Your turn, Katiekins. How was your day?”

“Perfect! I got a new case this morning.”

“Oh? So...how much can you share about it?”

“Heidi’s his teacher—you remember Heidi?” She barely waited for his quick nod before she hurried on. “She says he’s been with a foster family for nine months. Other than that, his backstory is really sketchy—and, of course, I wouldn’t be at liberty to share it even if I had more information. The only thing we know for sure about his life prior to being placed with his foster family is that he was living with his great grandfather. No other family at all as far as we know. But he’s a sweet kid and so smart. Super-talented little artist.”

“So...why is he seeing ‘Miss Katie’? Can you say?”

She wrinkled her nose and gave her head a shake, setting shiny curtains of auburn hair swaying around her chin. “I can’t say a lot. He’s mildly autistic, but quite highly functioning. My guess at this point is that he’s having a problem adjusting to the death of his great-grandfather.”

“Poor kid.” Cam cleared his throat and winked, ready to move on to a cheerier subject. “One thing for sure, that little boy has the sweetest, most beautiful counselor in the state.”

“Awww...thank you!” Katie tilted her head, cast her gaze to the ceiling, and blinked rapidly. Her fake attempt at being coy set them both laughing. Katie didn’t do coy, and Cameron appreciated it more than

she could possibly know.

They were still chuckling, with Katie brushing dampness from her eyes, when a tall, dark-haired man stopped at their table. "I love when my guests have a good time. You two would be a perfect commercial for Santini's."

"Nick!" Katie jumped up to hug her brother-in-law. "We're having a great time, and you've just made it even better. Where's Belle?" She scanned the room for her sister.

"She's making an early night of it." A slight frown drew his eyebrows together. "My wife has been a little tired lately. I'm worried about her." As if realizing his words might put a damper on the evening for Cam and Katie, he grinned. "But I'm probably being overprotective and annoying. We Italian men have a tendency to do that. Anyway, I'm putting in a few hours here tonight so my brother can spend some quality time with his family."

Nick and his brother, Alex, co-owned a chain of Santini's Italiano restaurants. Although younger than Nick, Alex had been first to marry and become a proud papa to an adorable daughter named for her uncle Nick.

"How are they doing?" Cam asked. "I haven't seen Alex and Elena in far too long. Little Nikki's probably all grown up by now."

"She's not quite two, but she thinks she's as big as anyone else." Nick chuckled. "Let me talk with Belle. If she's up to it, maybe we can all get together at our place. I'll throw some steaks on the grill and bring out the karaoke machine."

Cam rolled his eyes. "I always love a good steak, but maybe you can lose that machine between now

and then.”

Katie laughed as she settled back into her seat. “Don’t be such a fuddy-duddy. Belle says you have a great voice.”

“Belle has a great voice.” Cam hiked his eyebrows and gave his head a firm shake. “All I do is beller.”

“B—Beller?” Katie raised an amused gaze to Nick. “Did this advertising executive really just say ‘beller’?”

“I’m pretty sure he did.” Nick grinned. “Cameron, my friend, you need a vacation from Oklahoma.”

Cam grinned, even as heat climbed up his neck. “OK, you two, enough already—unless you want a public demonstration of what I mean by *beller*.”

Katie raised both hands, her green eyes wide and mock-horrified.

Nick backed away from the table, trying to duplicate the expression. He didn’t quite succeed—far too much mischief lit his eyes. “No belling allowed in Santini’s Italiano, old friend or not. Can’t have you running off my real customers.”

“Well, then.” Cam snapped his fingers in what was clearly meant to be a peremptory gesture but wouldn’t have fooled anyone. “We’ll have a sparkling cider, my good man. And make haste, if you will.”

“At your service, *monsieur*.” Nick bowed grandly then spun neatly on his heels and strutted off toward the kitchen with his nose in the air, leaving Cam and Katie to share a second long, hearty laugh.

Yep. One auburn-haired, Oklahoma child counselor had turned Cameron Hilliard’s world upside down and inside out. And he loved every minute of it.