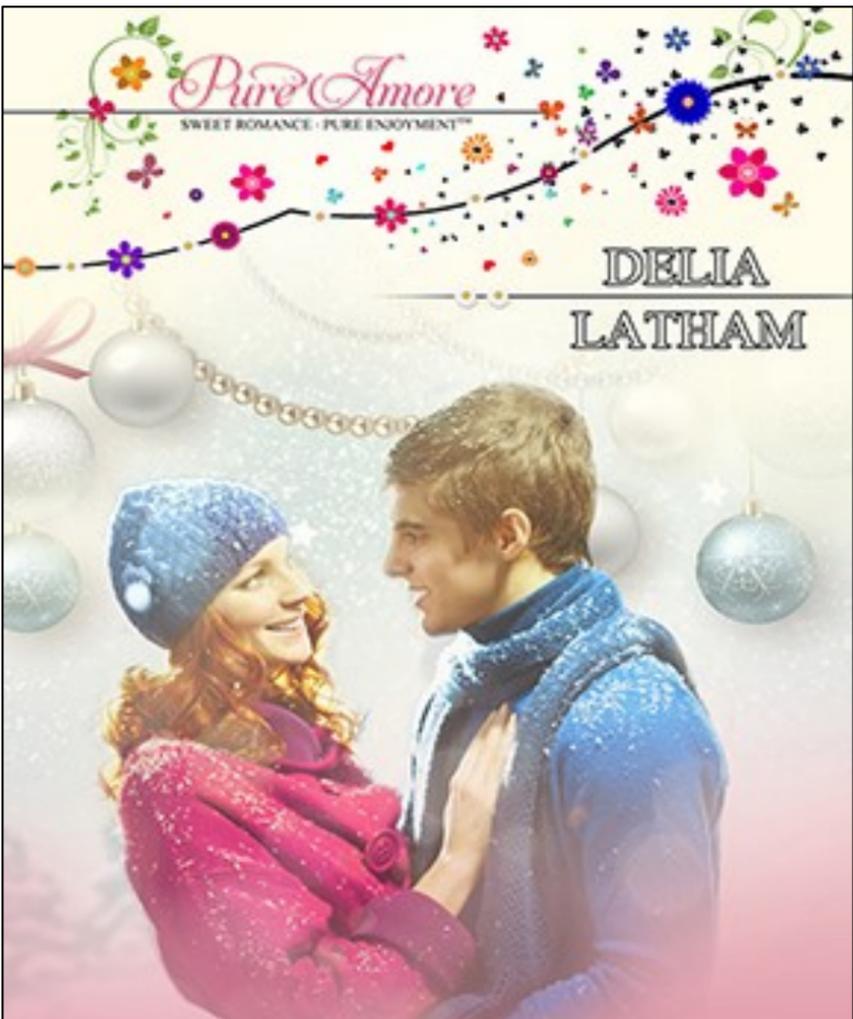


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DELIA

LATHAM



*A Christmas Beau*

DARE SHE HOPE FOR A REAL  
CHRISTMAS MIRACLE?

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**A Christmas  
Beau**

Delia Latham

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## **A Christmas Beau**

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# 1

Sliding her key into the lock, Katie Knowles listened for the click of success, and then pushed into her office at Pohon 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 meet the school’s psychology counselor. 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 thick, 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 that stood 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 get into a child's mind. And 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.

Katie smiled, as she always did upon taking in her work surroundings. *Amazing what a difference a year and a half can make.* She crossed the room and slid her purse into the bottom desk drawer. Her satisfied smile grew into a jaw-splitting grin when she picked up a small, framed photo of herself with the love of her life.

Cameron Hilliard. 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 Hilliard. He was new to her lineup of young cases, but already she looked forward to meeting the little guy. How could she not? Even though the child wasn't related to Cam, who had no family at all in Oklahoma, the two still shared a surname. No matter how coincidental, it gave the boy a special spot in Katie's heart.

Her friend Heidi Greer waited at the door, next to a little 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 the child 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. “Here, Aidan, come over and sit down. 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, legs crossed Indian fashion.

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 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 (ASD) 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. Academically, the boy’s condition interfered with his learning capability in only a couple of areas. Overall, his grades were high. His foster parents had indicated to Heidi that the child’s current decline into more defined autistic traits had come about only within the past few months, since they’d moved to Pohono from Edmond, where they’d taken him into their home just over a year ago.

He displayed artistic skills far beyond that of a normal eight-year-old. Heidi had included a few of his drawings to corroborate that opinion, and they did indeed 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 laid 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 picked up the pencil and held it up as if he was actually watching her, even though he hadn’t glanced her direction even once. After a moment, she laid

it on top of the pad. "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 Aidan. Later, she'd lose herself in the painstaking notes and charts, but right now, she wanted to observe the boy 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*. Her day was off to a decent start.

\*\*\*\*

“How was your day, Cam?”

Katie’s sweet smile wrapped itself around Cam’s heart and squeezed hard. He pulled air into his lungs, wondering for the hundredth time what he thought 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 not much more than half his age?

He bit back a chuckle at his mental exaggeration. At twenty-three, Katie was thirteen years younger, but he had to admit she seemed to enjoy his company as much as he enjoyed hers. And yeah, she’d even made the first move—of course, because Cam would never have dared to hope this lovely, vivacious, intelligent young woman would want to spend time with him, not in a million years. He wouldn’t have asked her out, putting her in the position of having to reject her sister’s boss.

And yet here they were, comfortably ensconced in a candlelit booth overhung with grape vines and twinkling lights, enjoying a Friday evening out.

Maybe he'd died and gone to Heaven...

"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—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 you knocked on my door tonight."

"That's a pretty tall order, and I'd really hate to bore you with the details of my humdrum day. I didn't do anything worth talking about."

"Whatever 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 young.

And that's what scared him all the way to his core. Was it possible he was just caught up in her youth? Maybe what he felt for Katie wasn't real. And maybe that light in her eyes when she looked at him was no more than a young girl's 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 stunningly beautiful woman who seems to actually enjoy being with this old geezer."

"I love being with you, you know that...but you're not old." Her auburn eyebrows took a dive toward each other. "Why do you insist on thinking of yourself like that?"

He shrugged. "Maybe because you're so young. I never thought of myself as a cradle robber before." He grinned, trying to lighten her mood.

She wasn't buying it.

"You aren't one." Her smile had disappeared, replaced by an adorable crease between her eyebrows. "I've been out of the cradle for a long time, and you didn't exactly kidnap me, you know."

"Well, that's true." That little spark of fire. He loved it. "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, Mr. Hilliard. 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 concern 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.

Yet one of the few sat across the table from him—a simple guy who had never stood out in a crowd. He lacked any kind of overwhelming charisma like his friend Nick Santini, the Italian owner of this upscale Italian ristorante. And he would never be accused of obsessing over physical fitness. He packed an extra ten to fifteen pounds most of the time, and had never joined a fitness facility in his life. Yeah, he jogged around the block now and then, and spent a half hour on his treadmill once a week or so, but he certainly wasn’t overly body-conscious.

And yet, despite all the negatives he could think of, Katie looked for all the world as if she lived to be right here...with him.

“Cam!” Katie 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 wide, open 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.”

*God, what did I do to deserve this woman?* The warmth and sincerity 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.” Did his use of Belle’s nickname for her little sister bother Katie? He hoped not, because he’d heard Belle use it so often that calling Katie by the same nickname just kind of evolved. “How was your day?”

“Perfect! I met a new ‘case’ today, and guess what?” She didn’t even pause, so clearly didn’t expect a guess. “His last name is Hilliard, just like my favorite guy’s.”

“No kidding? I don’t often run into anyone with my last name—and I sure didn’t know there were any Hilliards here in Pohono.” He chuckled. “It’s been almost ten years since I came across anyone with that name. I

thought I'd succeeded in leaving them all behind in New York."

Katie narrowed her gaze briefly, as if to chide him for not being nice. He supposed that was the price for dating someone who worked with children. But, as usual, she didn't dwell on the negative.

"I was surprised too. But Heidi—you remember Heidi?" Again, she barely waited for his quick nod before she hurried on. "She says his foster family just moved here from Edmond a couple of months ago. I don't know how long they've had him, or what his story is—and, of course, I wouldn't be at liberty to share it even if I did. But he's a sweet kid, and so smart. Super-talented little artist."

"So...why is he seeing you? Can you say?"

She wrinkled her nose and gave her head a little 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 the move disturbed his routine, and he's having a little problem adjusting. Nothing major."

"Good." Cam winked. "One thing for sure, that little boy has the sweetest, most beautiful psychology 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 Elena tells me I’m being overprotective and annoying. We Italian men have a tendency to do that. Anyway, I’m putting in a few hours tonight so Alex can spend some quality time with Elena and Nikki.”

“Hey, how are they doing?” Cam asked. “I haven’t seen your brother and his family in far too long.”

“Well, we’ll have to do something about that. Let me talk with Belle—maybe we can all get together at our place...if she’s up to it. I’ll throw some steaks on the grill and bring out the karaoke machine.”

Cam rolled his eyes. “Well, the steaks sound good. Maybe you can misplace 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 say ‘*beller*.’” 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 ‘*bellering*’ allowed in Santini’s Italiano, old friend or not. Can’t have you running off my *real* customers.”

“Well, then.” Cam faked a peremptory, dismissive gesture. “Just be a good proprietor and go find us some sparkling cider, why don’t you?”

“At your service, *monsieur*.” Nick bowed grandly, then

turned neatly on his heels and strutted off toward the kitchen, leaving Cam and Katie sharing a second long, hearty laugh.

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

*Watch for the release of A CHRISTMAS BEAU during the 2017 holiday season. In the meantime, enjoy Delia Latham's [two previous Pure Amore titles](#), AT FIRST SIGHT and JINGLE BELLE.*