

Love at Christmas Inn

Bells on Her Toes



DELIA LATHAM

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Published in the United States of America

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“Make pomegranates of blue, purple and scarlet yarn around the hem of the robe, with gold bells between them. The gold bells and the pomegranates are to alternate around the hem of the robe. Aaron must wear it when he ministers. The sound of the bells will be heard when he enters the Holy Place before the Lord...” ~ Exodus 28:33-35, NIV ~

1

“We’re early.” Karynn Michaels glanced at her cell phone screen. “By a whole two hours. How could we have over-estimated driving time by that much?”

“We didn’t.” Her sister swung her luxury sedan into a small shopping center a few blocks from their destination and slid smoothly into a parking slot. She shot Karynn an impish grin and opened her door. “I got us here early so you could get a head start on unwrapping your gift.”

“Savannah!” She climbed out, and then stood for a second, listening for the beep that assured her the doors were locked. “What are you up to now?”

Her gaze swept the storefronts lined up side by side. The little strip mall boasted only a half dozen or so businesses. Which of them was her sister all set to dash into and lay down more money?

Savannah could afford to spend lavishly, now that she’d married Dr. Darren Quinn, brain surgeon extraordinaire. Karynn rejoiced in the couple’s happiness, and was thrilled for her sister—who grew up right along with her in the school of hard knocks, hard work and staying hard at it to keep the wolves from the door.

Still, despite her genuine joy in Savannah’s happiness and financial security, she cringed when the younger woman tossed money around like game board cash. This trip to Hope Creek, for instance. Why couldn’t her sister be like everyone else and just wrap up a bathrobe or a good book for her birthday? But no...nothing would do but to bring Karynn here—several hours from their hometown of Quillpoint—for a ten-day vacation at Christmas Inn. They’d be in Hope Creek all the way through Karynn’s birthday on December 25th. Darren would join them on Christmas Eve.

She didn't dare think about the fact that Hearth & Home, the bed and breakfast that was her livelihood, would be closed for two entire weeks. She'd manage the loss of income by cutting corners for a while. Growing up poor taught a person how to live on less than most people thought possible.

Savannah rounded the hood of the car and pulled her into a tight hug. "Sis, just let me do this for you. Please? Darren *wants* me to. He gave me specific instructions to pull out all the stops and show you the time of your life." She batted her long lashes like a preening prima donna. "He said he owes you for taking such awesome care of his 'Precious' until he could take over."

They both burst out laughing, despite the truth of the exaggerated presentation. Dr. Quinn adored his wife and always referred to her as 'my Precious,' never mind the negative connotations brought about in recent years by a popular book-turned-movie. Unlike Karynn, Darren didn't waste time and effort trying to please everyone.

Savannah grabbed her hand and tugged her along as she stepped out of the parking slot and up onto a wide sidewalk. "Seriously, Karynn, my husband thinks you're pretty special, and he's right. You are. So this year, we want to pamper you for your birthday. Will you just let us do that without fretting the entire time?"

"Oh, sweetie...I promise to try, but you know how I am." Karynn heaved a hopeless sigh. "If life were to roll along without a single kink in the works, I'd fret because there's nothing to fret about."

"Well, then I'll consider it my job to foil your frets. See this?" Savannah whirled in a circle and pivoted to a stop directly in front of Karynn, who came close to barreling into her.

"Vanna!" She brushed off her sweater, which didn't need brushing. Still, it made her feel better to administer a stinging slap to *something*.

"Sorry, Sis. But look at me." Savannah tilted her head forward, raised one perfect eyebrow and dipped the other one. "When you see me do this, you'll know you're being an old fuddy-duddy fretter."

"What are you, eight years old?" Karynn tried to give her sister a stern look, but when Savannah only repeated the 'fuddy-duddy' alert, she burst out laughing instead. "Fine. I will try to behave more like my crazy,

lighthearted, totally irresponsible little sister. Now, will you stop doing that?" She cast a furtive glance around. "People will think you're strange."

"Uh-uh...that's fretting!" Still, Savannah stopped rolling her eyes, linked arms with Karynn and they were on the move again. "Anyway, I am strange."

"Well, you got that right." Karynn giggled, and then blinked. Twice. *Giggling? Really? Now who's the eight-year-old?*

"This is it!" Savannah trilled. "We're here."

Karynn read the sign on the window and suppressed a sigh.

Nail It.

"I take it we're getting manicures?"

"And pedicures—a double-digits treat. And we're right on time for our appointment." She opened the door, enacted an exaggerated bow, and waved Karynn inside with a flourish. "After you, birthday girl!"

Later that evening, Karynn started to slip one foot into a brand new, strappy red heel, but paused to consider. She loved the shoes, in spite of the scary price tag they'd worn when she spotted them. But the bright, cheery bells, one on each of her toes....

"Maybe I should wear something else. Don't get me wrong...I loved the mani-pedi, but my sweet, little Bohemian toe tickler might have gone a bit over the top. I'm not sure I want to hang these showy toes out there for everyone to see."

"*What?* No way, Sis. You're wearing those heels. And your toes look fabulous!" She crossed the room to stand in front of Karynn. The silver sequins around her dipping neckline caught the light and sent out a myriad of bright sparkles as she moved. "Honey, they're not gaudy at all. You asked for a soft, nearly transparent background. What's gaudy about that? And the bells are beautiful—not large or distasteful in any way. You look stunning, Karynn, and I love that your finger-and-toe designs match so perfectly."

Karynn sighed and slipped on the shoes. Savannah would throw a fit if she refused to wear them, and it wasn't worth an argument. At least her hands sported tiny bells only on the ring fingers.

Moving to the full-length mirror, she took in her completed look for the formal dinner downstairs. She hadn't dressed up for anything in such a long time...maybe this was too much.

"Oh, no, you don't." Her sister stepped up beside her and used the fuddy-duddy alert for the first time since they'd left the salon. "You look absolutely beautiful. Not in the least pretentious or overdressed." She laughed when Karynn's eyes widened. "What? I've known you all my life, remember? You always think you have to live in someone else's shadow. Well, not tonight. Tonight you shine!"

Savannah reached up to touch Karynn's hair, arranged in a loose coil behind one ear, with wispy strands hanging free. Tiny, pearl-tipped pins sparkled from within the twist.

"You look like an Italian princess. Do you seriously not know how lovely you are?" She kissed Karynn's cheek—lightly. "Don't want to mess up the little touch of makeup you allowed yourself. Thing is, on you it's enough. You look amazing completely *au naturale*, but this—a bare touch of cosmetics to highlight your beauty—it's perfect." She shook her head. "I can't believe some guy hasn't scooped you up and carried you away, long ago."

"Oh, stop it." Karynn gave her sister a quick hug, and then ran both hands over the deep red fabric that hugged her hips and flowed like a silky river to her ankles. "I don't need a man to sweep me off my feet, and I'd never leave Quillpoint. You're the only family I've got, kiddo. You're stuck with me."

"Hmmm...what if Daniel showed up again?"

A quick intake of air, and then Karynn regained the composure she'd lost for half a second. "If Daniel had wanted to return, he would have by now. Let's not talk about him."

"Then let's talk about the box of Daniel-memories you still keep in your closet."

She rolled her eyes and busied herself putting on a pair of her sister's triple-strand diamond earrings. Savannah had insisted they—and the

matching necklace—were perfect accessories for her outfit, but Karynn wouldn't be comfortable until the expensive trinkets were back in the safe.

“Savannah...”

“I know, I know. But tell me about them, and I'll leave it alone.”

Savannah settled on the side of her bed to watch Karynn finish getting ready. “Although...” She lowered her voice to a mutter. “I think I know why every single man who's tried to win you over in the past decade has ‘lacked that certain something.’”

Karynn chuckled. She'd almost heard herself in Savannah's silly impression. “Oh, do you now?”

“Yep. That ‘certain something’ they all lacked? They weren't Daniel Sheridan.”

Karynn turned to face her pesky sister, both earrings swinging. “What does it matter?”

“It matters because you have to move on, Sis. Or maybe we could find Daniel!” Savannah's blue eyes took on a gleam that knotted every nerve in Karynn's body. “We'll hire a private investigator and—”

“Savannah! Listen to yourself!” Karynn snatched up the soft, white wrap spread across her bed and pulled it over her shoulders. “Daniel was my high school sweetheart. He and his family left, and we eventually lost contact. It happens. We were kids, honey.”

She perched on the edge of the bed and took her sister's hand. “I keep the box in my closet because it holds memories that are still sweet, even though things didn't work out for Daniel and me—not because I'm still weeping over him, or dreaming of the day he returns.” She stood, tugging the younger woman up beside her. “Now let's go down to dinner.”

“OK.” Savannah crossed to the mirror for one last look at herself. “Oh, wait! You're supposed to ring your bell.”

Karynn's ‘Bells on Her Toes’ mani-pedi package had included a beautiful handheld crystal bell...and a series of ten ‘promidictions’—some promises, some cheesy predictions. She'd been instructed by the petite, flower-child pedicurist to ring the crystal bell once a day, after reading that day's ‘wise words.’ Karyn preferred to call it a daily slice of absurdity.

“You don't expect me to play along with that silly bell-ringing ritual?”

“It’ll be fun!” Savannah reached for the box in which the crystal bell resided. “May I?”

“Knock yourself out.”

Savannah lifted the bell from its satin bed. “It’s lovely.”

“Yes.” *And a good part of why that mani-pedi package was so expensive.* Karynn bit down on her bottom lip, and then made a deliberate decision to share something of herself with her sister. “You know, there’s a bell in that box of ‘Daniel-memories’ in my closet. Just a cheap, glass one, but Daniel gave it to me the day he left Quillpoint.” She stared off into the corner of the room, remembering how he’d used his thumb to brush away her tears, and pulled her in for a sweet kiss before he handed her the bell. “He said to ring it and think of him when I was lonely.”

“Did you?”

“Many times.” Karynn tucked a small, sequined clutch under her arm and headed for the door. “But he mustn’t have heard, because ringing that bell never brought him back. After a while, he didn’t even call anymore. Let’s go eat.”

“First you have to ring this. I insist—and read the first promidiction.”

Karynn laughed and joined Savannah in the vanity area.

Ten small envelopes lay beneath the satin cushion on which the bell had rested. Karynn removed a single half-sheet of paper from the one marked “Today,” and read the beautiful, flowing script aloud, for Savannah’s benefit. “*You will come into contact with someone from your past. Whether the relationship was romantic, familial, or a simple friendship, its revival will impact your future in unforgettable ways.*”

Karynn rolled her eyes, but she picked up the bell and swung it back and forth, enjoying the sweet, high tinkle in spite of the ridiculous situation. “There. Now let’s go.” She reclaimed her evening bag and widened her eyes. “Perhaps this mystery person waits in the dining room even now.”

Savannah gave her another fuddy-duddy face, but said no more.

The sisters admired the lovely Christmas decorations as they made their way downstairs. A dainty garland of holly berries and silver bells wound around the baluster, from the newel post at the top to the identical one at the bottom of the staircase. Over the fireplace, a large clock boasted

elves that popped out every quarter hour to chase each other behind the timepiece and back inside.

Darren's family had wonderful memories of Christmas Inn, where they'd often spent brief vacations. "It never mattered what time of year we were there," he had told them. "The place is like having Christmas all year round. It's beautiful, and the décor is breathtaking. I was a kid—and a boy, so I didn't really notice particulars, but it did make an impression. You girls will love it."

Karynn did love it. While retaining the all-important elements of welcome and home, the inn also possessed an unmistakable touch of class. She was eager to explore the gift shop. Perhaps she'd find something to enhance those same elements at Hearth & Home.

A faint smell of paint, varnish and new carpet hung in the air, lending a clean, fresh ambiance. Had the place fallen into disrepair at some point? Many clues pointed to a recent facelift...but then, Karynn's efforts to maintain her bed and breakfast made her aware that keeping a place like Christmas Inn in this kind of condition would be a constant, ongoing effort.

"This is it." Savannah spoke in an awed tone, so unlike her usual fun-at-all-costs persona that Karynn bit back a grin. Her sister was impressed with their surroundings, as well.

They stood in the door of the dining room, getting their bearings.

White linen cloths topped six round tables, each of which boasted a three-arm candelabrum. Candlelight played over bright Christmas baubles and gleaming silverware.

"Each table has its own holiday theme," Savannah noted.

Karynn lifted an eyebrow. "And each room is assigned to a specific table, based on theme?"

"Right. Ours is the bell theme." She laughed. "So is our room—and your toes. We'll be hearing bells in our sleep tonight, won't we?"

Karynn glanced down at the painted-on bells peeking from beneath the hem of her gown. They were growing on her. "That's OK. I like them. Let's find our table." She gave Savannah a quick, mischievous grin. "Or perhaps we should close our eyes and follow the sound of tinkling bells."

“Ha! I’m game, but you’d never make such a spectacle of yourself. Oh, I see it.” Savannah pointed out a table that sported a bell-adorned wreath around the base of its candelabrum. “Only one other guest at our table, at least for now.”

An older gentleman stood as they approached, a broad smile lighting his face. “Ladies.” He pulled a chair out for each of them before returning to his own. “I am Gabriel D’Angelo.”

They introduced themselves and Gabriel shone that sunny smile again. “It is an honor to meet such lovely sisters.”

Karynn couldn’t put a finger on why, but the man’s presence calmed her. Gabriel D’Angelo wasn’t just any sweet, elderly man from...where? Certainly not America, judging by his beautiful accent. She’d enjoy getting to know this guest.

“Gabriel, I’m guessing you are perhaps from...Italy?”

“Ahh...you are as perceptive as you are lovely. Venice.”

“I thought so. What brings you to Tennessee?”

“I’ve come to deliver a message for an old friend.” He smiled, but seemed disinclined to reveal more about his mission.

Karynn didn’t pry. The man’s purpose in Hope Creek was his own business.

“Savannah, may I be so presumptuous as to guess that you are a newlywed?” Gabriel ventured.

Savannah laughed outright. “How did you know?”

“It is easy to see beneath the surface, if one tries. You are quite young, yet you wear a beautiful wedding ring. You are glowing, so your heart is happy. Mine was a reasonably safe assumption.”

“You had me going for a second!” Savannah said. “I was starting to think—”

A petulant female voice cut into their conversation. “I take it this is the bell table.”

Something unpleasant coiled its way up Karynn’s spine, and her breath caught in her throat. She’d experienced it before...the same instinctive, soul-deep, gut-wrenching aversion on first contact with an individual. Over time, she’d come to recognize the powerful inner reaction as more than the instant dislike some humans experience now and then toward one

another. This wasn't a personality clash or adverse chemistry. Karynn called them Spirit-warnings, and she no longer downplayed their existence or their importance. They'd proven true and accurate one hundred percent of the time.

She fisted both hands, as if by tensing her fingers she could school her facial muscles to hide the war raging inside. Then she lifted her eyes to see what kind of person could call forth her Spirit-warrior by voice alone.

Copper-colored hair. Green eyes—up-tilted, almond shaped and narrowed to slits, like a cat on the hunt. A face that might have been lovely but for its bored, dissatisfied, self-indulgent expression. The newcomer held the hand of a small, blonde-haired girl whose sunny smile made up for her mother's lack of one.

"Please...join us." Gabriel stood once again and waved an arm toward the empty chairs.

"Thank you, but we're waiting for my daddy." The child's voice was as sweet as her smile.

"I'm here, Chrissy." A tall man with a trim, medium brown beard and slightly longish hair strode toward the table. "It's crazy cold out there, and the snow is—" He broke off and stopped as if frozen in place, sapphire-blue eyes wide, shocked...and fixed on Karynn.

"I, uh...I don't...Karynn? Karynn Michaels?"

The cat-eyed woman cast a waspish look at Karynn, and then back at her husband.

Savannah's soft laughter held a touch of pure wonder. "This is unreal."

Karynn refused to look at her sister. She forced a smile that felt wooden and dredged up every ounce of courage she possessed to hold the man's startled gaze. She prayed her eyes did not reflect the mixed emotions creating utter turmoil in her heart.

"Hello, Daniel. It's been a long time."