

Prodigal

by

Robin Bayne

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.

## **Prodigal**

COPYRIGHT © 2009 by **Robin Bayne**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given away to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. If you're reading an eBook edition, and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to the publisher and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Contact Information:

[titleadmin@whiterosepublishing.com](mailto:titleadmin@whiterosepublishing.com)

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing,

a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC

[www.whiterosepublishing.com](http://www.whiterosepublishing.com) \* PO Box 1738 \* Aztec, NM \* 87410

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2010

WRPBN 4664

**Published in the United States of America**

## **Dedication**

This is for my golf teacher Julieta Stack, who really did catch the little dog running amok on the driving range.



## **Praise for Robin Bayne**

I have always loved Robin Bayne stories, and she delighted me yet again with [Prodigal.] Filled with excitement and adventure, tears and laughter, the twists and turns will keep you reading until you reach The End!

~Loree Lough, author of 75 award-winning novels



# 1

This was it. Showtime.

Drawing in one long, deep breath, Daniel stepped over the threshold of the Martin's Mansion catering hall, his heart pounding to the beat of the keys he jingled in his pocket. His mouth felt full of cotton balls. The place hadn't changed since he'd last been here—when was it, his high school prom or something? In fact nothing in town seemed to have changed much in nearly ten years. Men and women in fancy clothes entered around him, ignoring him and checking their coats before heading into the reception hall. As they passed, strains of music flowed into the lobby. He tried to move his feet forward but felt glued to the spot on the marble tile floor. A waiter walked by and stared at him openly. Cold air rushed past his ears as the glass doors behind him swooshed open again and again. It amazed him that the blood pounding behind his eyes wasn't sufficient to warm him.

Someone lightly touched his shoulder, and he turned to see that his escort had arrived.

"Daniel, are you ready?" Liza smiled,

probably meaning it to look encouraging.

She wasn't good at encouraging.

He nodded but answered, "No."

"Yes, you are. You've been anticipating this moment for how many years?" Liza patted his arm. "Look at it this way: your reception here will be much warmer than mine will be."

Daniel glanced down at her. "That's probably true. Are you sure you want to go in here? I can make the grand appearance on my own."

Her hand still on his arm, she nodded slowly. "It's something I need to do. Let's pray first." She bowed her head, her long neck stretching from the white sweater she wore.

He wondered briefly if she'd worn white to look pure and innocent.

"We're like lambs going in for slaughter." An uneasy laugh belied her confidence, and she tugged at him. "Let's go."

With head held high, Daniel situated Liza at an open table, and then strode toward the head table. His heart pounded above the noise of the band's quick beat. The wedding guests chattered as they do, and Daniel strode right into the middle of the hubbub, glasses clinking around him.

And then all was quiet.

The band stopped.

The chatter fizzled, and a good fifty well-groomed heads turned in unison to stare holes

into Daniel's head.

Or so it felt.

He said nothing, but moved to stand directly in front of his parents. They had aged, he realized with pangs of regret. It was as if the ventilation system was pouring tension into the room. Long moments passed, and Daniel stepped back, preparing to leave.

And then Mom smiled.

She rushed for Daniel, wrapping him in warm arms and soggy tears of welcome. His father followed, letting loose a swarm of various relatives who joined them in a huddle to greet the long lost son. The breath he hadn't known he held eased out and his gut unclenched in relief. He knew the questions would come eventually, but for now, knowing his family still wanted him was all he needed.

"Dance with me?" His mother smiled and held out one hand. They moved to the dance floor and began to sway to the classic, "Someone to Watch Over Me," a song Daniel thought very appropriate.

Mom moved closer so he could hear her. "Are you staying?"

He nodded, and her eyes lit up, and they finished the dance in a comfortable silence. As they turned he spied Liza, grinning at him with that "I told you so" look, and she winked.

\*\*\*\*

"Hey." Tim spoke first, breaking the silence between the brothers as they washed their hands. Strains of music filtered in from the band in the hall, but the water flow from the gold faucets sounded deadening to Daniel. The pungent smell of a cherry disinfectant irritated his nose.

"Hey. Thanks for not starting anything out there." Daniel dried his hands on a rough paper towel, tossed it, then ran a hand through his hair. "I wasn't sure what to expect after all this time." He glanced sideways at Tim and then shrugged. "Liza said you all would welcome me home with open arms, but I just didn't know."

Tim sighed and tossed his own towel into the trashcan. "There are things to talk about, but my wedding reception isn't the place." He reached the door, turning back as he grabbed the handle. "I am surprised Liza got you here. That you even thought to call her after all this time."

Daniel remained at the sink, hands gripping both sides of the cold marble. A long pause followed, the only sound, the water dripping from his grip. "And I'm surprised you let her go."

Tim closed the door, his mouth slightly open but no words coming out. Daniel watched his brother take deep breaths and apparently struggle for words.

"You don't know anything about me. About

my life now.”

“I’d like to change that.” Daniel was relieved his brother did not roll his eyes at the statement. “I’d like to meet your new wife and get to know you both, spend some time here. I’ve made some changes over the years. I’d like to go to church with you, with the family.”

Tim seemed to consider his request for a few seconds, but then shook his head. “Let’s just get through this party. You have a lot of relatives out there with a lot of questions.”

“What about you, Tim? Do you have any questions?”

“Too many to count. They can wait. Well, all but one.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“Have you talked to Lane yet? She’s wandering around here somewhere.”

“Lane’s here?” Daniel started to double over. Had Tim punched him in the gut, or what?

“Yeah, and I’m sure she has as many questions as I do. Maybe more.”

\*\*\*\*

Lane watched Daniel from across the room, her initial stunned paralysis wearing off. He looked the same. Oh, his hair was shorter, and he was a bit broader in the shoulders, but essentially he was exactly as she remembered him.

And her heart pounded exactly as she remembered.

She'd never expected to see him again, especially here, at a family event.

Her stomach muscles tightened. She was glad to observe him without his knowing she was there. It had taken her so long to put him behind her, she wasn't sure she wanted a confrontation now. Her heart was stronger now, but she didn't feel like putting it to the test today at the Gardners' wedding.

She knew the exact moment he spied her. She felt it deep in her gut, like the throbbing of a distant gong. Yep, that was appropriate. She'd always felt him deeply.

No doubt about it, Daniel Gardner still commanded the same presence he always had. She'd prayed for this moment, not that she deserved it. But this time as he moved toward her, a dark-haired woman spun him around. A gorgeous, thin woman dripping in gold jewelry dragged him to the dance floor. She looked vaguely familiar, but Lane couldn't identify her.

She turned to make a quick escape and faced an older man she didn't know.

"I heard you're job hunting," he said, taking her arm. "Dance with me." They twirled through two songs while he chattered about his company, not allowing Lane to speak at all.

And then he was gone.

Lane had been dismissed. Why were her

palms perspiring when she hadn't even wanted this particular job? Had he even really had a job opening? It must be part of His plan for her, though she really wished He'd given her a roadmap. Tapping her foot—in rhythm with the polka the band had begun to play, she realized—she forced her spine straighter and looked around. The man had moved on. Good, she wasn't interested in some imaginary marketing position with a balding boss who wore a pink plastic bracelet on one wrist, even if it did represent a good cause.

She had an early day tomorrow, with several interviews lined up to design for some major department stores. It was time to leave. She almost wished she hadn't come, though she did want to wish Tim and Rachel well. Why did they have these things on Sundays, anyway? Lane began to pace the perimeter of the party, nodding to a few women who looked slightly familiar. She'd go say her goodbyes to her hosts and thank them for inviting her. As she passed the cake table, she saw the famous Gardner's Gazebo gold-leaf icing cheesecakes on display, and she made a mental note to grab a piece before leaving.

Daniel Gardner was nowhere in sight. She sighed, relieved, and yet a bit disappointed. She owed him so much explanation and apology.

## 2

The door to Daniel's parents' house swung open, and Tim entered with a wide stride and a determined look on his face. Daniel and his parents were seated in a sunny breakfast nook, sipping from ceramic coffee mugs, and the smell of cooking scented the kitchen. Daniel braced himself for angry words now that the celebratory atmosphere of yesterday had dissolved.

"Good morning, son," Dad said. "There's still some bacon on the stove."

Tim grunted a "Good morning." He grabbed a mug from the counter then looked at Daniel. "I was wondering if you'd be here."

"Well, of course he is, dear, this is his home." Mom smiled and wiped her mouth daintily on a paper napkin. "You know how much we love both of our children and hope to love your children someday."

Daniel watched his brother—could practically feel the steam rising under his collar. He knew Tim wanted to argue the point, that Daniel had abandoned his home seven years

ago, and he couldn't deny it. Tim was correct.

"Why are you here so early? Did you forget your plane tickets?" Dad stretched his flannel-sleeved arms over his head. "Seems to me a man on his honeymoon ought to be with his new wife, not stopping by his parents' for coffee."

Tim yanked a chair out from the table and straddled it, folding his hands around his cup. "Rachel and I talked about it, and with the three parties we have booked at the café this week, we thought it would be best to postpone our trip for a bit."

Mom squealed. "Oh, no, son, that's not necessary. Please go on your trip. We can handle the restaurant. In fact, your brother has offered to help out." She beamed at Daniel, who squirmed a bit in his chair. "The three of us should be enough to keep Judy from going nuts while you're gone. So go."

"I'll talk to Rachel." Tim turned to Daniel. "You really want to help?"

Daniel nodded. "If you'll have me. I did quite a bit of cooking while I was gone; I ran a small bistro in Florida for a while."

"So you were in Florida? You're not tanned."

"Haven't been there for a year. Also worked in Nassau for a while, after I ran a ship's galley on a very small cruise line."

Tim snorted. "You've really been around, haven't you? What tropical island were you on

when Dad had his heart attack?"

Mom gasped. "Timothy, don't jump on your brother like that. He's home now, and that's what matters."

"That's right, son, Daniel's welcome here. He had no idea I was sick, I don't hold that against him, and neither should you."

"You sound like Rachel."

"Your wife is a good woman." Dad clapped Tim on the shoulder. "Now go on back to the hotel and get started on your wedding trip. We will all still be here when you get back. You saved the business for the family, and now it's our turn to reciprocate. Judy and the three of us will handle the bridal shower, the bachelorette party, and the anniversary party at the café. Rachel's gold leaf cakes are already made and on ice."

"I will be responsible," Daniel offered. "I give you my word." His pulse pounded in his temple while he waited his brother's response. He'd always craved Tim's approval, even as kids. The wall clock ticked off long seconds of silence.

"I guess it will work. Thank you, guys, I'm depending on you." Tim stood and slid his chair under the table. "Oh, I almost forgot; you will have a little more help than you thought. Rachel hired her friend, Lane, to waitress temporarily — she just got back in town and needs work while she's job hunting. You remember Lane. She is

willing to help at the catered events, and," he said, gazing at Daniel, "she will report directly to you."

\*\*\*\*

The clash of pots against pans rose from the kitchen, followed by good-natured bickering between the Gazebo's two cooks. Daniel paused to make sure it was in fun, and then resumed totaling the receipts from the night before. He'd told Judy, the café manager, to come in late today, since she'd worked so many hours recently while Tim got married.

As the lunch hour opening time approached, scents of roasting chicken and baking bread filtered out from the kitchen. He'd always enjoyed being in the restaurant, despite what his family thought. They had no idea why he'd left so suddenly. Did they really think he would have abandoned them without a good reason? He ran a hand through his hair, absently wondering if it now smelled like the food cooking. It's a wonder it was still dark brown and not gray. How quickly they all had judged him.

But he was back now, welcome, at least on the surface. And trusted, apparently, as he was running the place again. At least, Judy let him think he was in charge. He sipped the last of his coffee, smiling at that thought.

“Reporting for work, commander.”

Daniel jumped, barely saving his mug as he spun to face Lane Taylor. She was neatly dressed in a crisp black blouse and pant uniform. Her dark blonde hair sat atop her head in a cute bun. “Hey,” he said, unimpressed with his own quick wit. “Um, did Judy tell you how to dress?”

Lane smiled. “Well, no, I asked Rachel when she hired me.”

Daniel nodded, unsure of what to say next. The other waitress would be in shortly. He glanced at the door, and then back at Lane. Seven years had only made her better looking. Her dark brown eyes still seemed to look right into a person’s soul. The black outfit did nothing for her, he realized, though she still seemed to glow.

“Um, Daniel?” She matched his gaze. “Shouldn’t we unlock the front doors? The lunch crowd will be coming soon.”

He nodded again, still studying her. One of the cooks yelled a foul word in the kitchen, but Daniel and Lane didn’t move.

His pulse raced as he wondered what she was thinking.

Finally, he moved. Had to. “I’ll go open up. Maybe we could talk later?”

“Maybe.”

Now there was a real promise, he thought, sighing. He headed for the lobby but turned back. “Lane?”

“Yes?”

“I searched for you, you know. For years.”

\*\*\*\*

The lunch rush didn't give Lane much time to think, but she did keep hearing Daniel's confession over and over in her head. She'd had an idea he'd been looking, but, really, she hadn't been that well hidden. She knew if God wanted Daniel to find her, forgive her, He would have paved the path. Since Daniel had never found her, she'd decided He didn't think she was right for Daniel.

“Table five and seven, order's up,” Judy announced from the serving window.

Lane delivered two burger plates to a young couple. The woman was positively glowing from her advanced pregnancy, and Lane watched as she distractedly touched her stomach as the couple said grace.

Lane's heart twisted a bit as she turned to a newly seated couple. “Liza!” She recognized Tim's former fiancée, whom she'd met at the wedding.

“Hello, Lane. Daniel has you working here now?”

Lane flipped to a new order check on her pad. “Just while I'm job searching, and it helps the family out while Tim and Rachel are away. I'm actually a display designer. So, what can I

get you today? We have a great chicken parmesan special, and the soup is cream of crab."

Liza and her friend ordered, and then Liza handed the menus to Lane. "So, did you know Daniel before?"

Lane shrugged, shuffling her feet. "I did." She turned to leave and heard Liza say, "Well that explains a lot, then."

\*\*\*\*

Lane's answering machine was winking at her when she got home, and she kicked off her shoes before hitting the play button. Three messages, and not one from a prospective employer. She knew the economy wasn't great here in Portlandville right now, but not even an interview? Her stomach clenched a bit. Would she have to move to a larger city again to be able to do store displays? She missed putting together stylish outfits for the mannequins and arranging furnishings for the backgrounds. She loved putting seasonal touches on the settings, too, but she really didn't want to move back to a big city. It was so impersonal there, so cold.

Her own apartment was sadly lacking in décor, but then she'd only been in it a few weeks. She flipped through her mail, which might have been interesting if her name happened to be "Resident" or "Occupant."

Tossing it onto the counter, she headed for her room and a much needed shower after a day spent around food smells. Before she turned off her light, she glanced at the small circular table that held her boudoir lamp and the silver frame by its side. It held Daniel's photo.

\*\*\*\*

The third night of Tim and Rachel's honeymoon was also the night of the Gooliani-Smith rehearsal dinner. After a run-through at their church, family and friends would gather at the Gazebo Café for dinner.

Lane was ready. She and the other server had the tables lined up and draped in mauve cloths, decorated with burgundy candles and white cloth napkins to match the bridal party colors. Casey and Ryback were in their kitchen, preparing the Chicken Cordon Bleu the family had selected. The aroma of fresh baked rolls competed with the scented candles for atmosphere. Relieved they were ready a bit early, Lane looked forward to a few minutes before she would come into close contact with Daniel again. She intended to slip out and hit the mall for a few minutes once dinner was underway. She could leave a note at the major department stores that were all "considering" her resume.

Who was she kidding? Lane sighed and