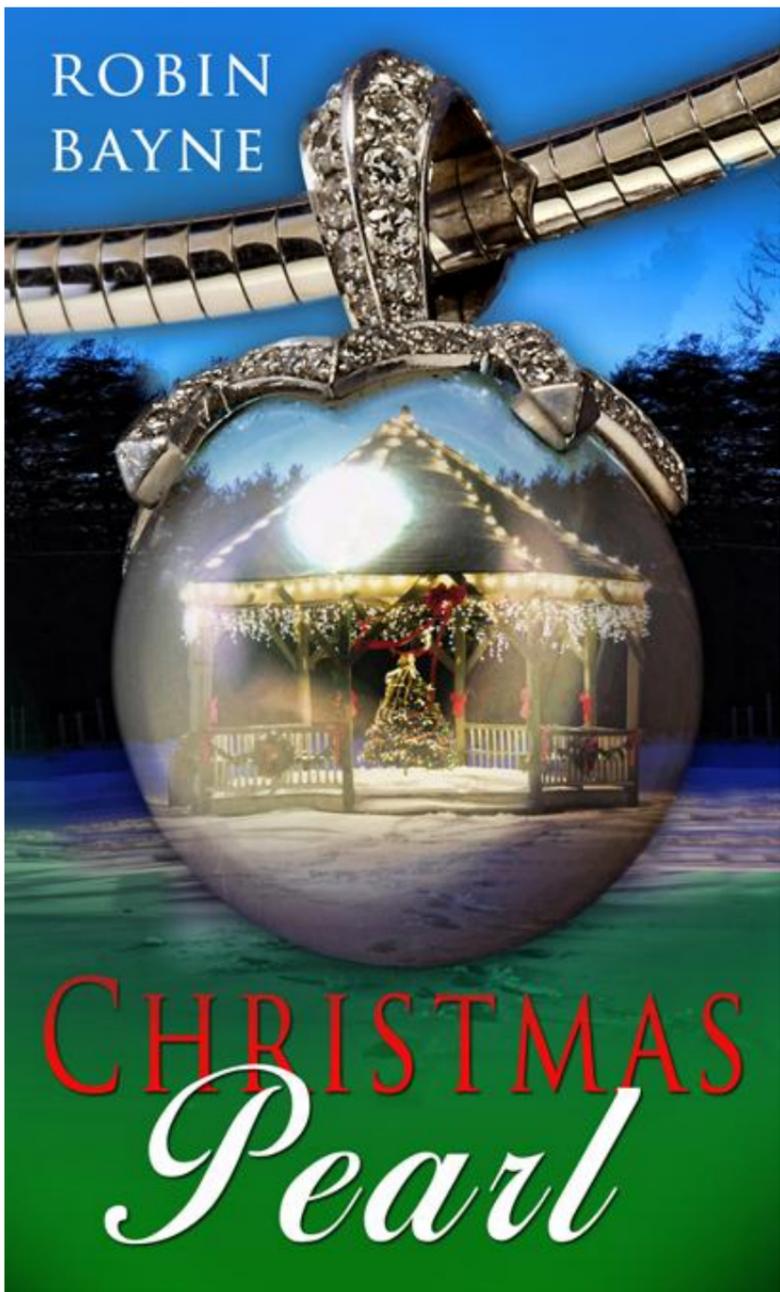


ROBIN
BAYNE



CHRISTMAS
Pearl

Christmas Pearl

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.

Christmas Pearl

COPYRIGHT 2011 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 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 to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R), NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2011

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-148-9

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

This story is dedicated to my wonderful editors, Nicola Martinez and Lisa McCaskill. Merry Christmas to you and your families.

Praise for Robin Bayne

Make space on your "keepers" shelf because Carol Award-winner Robin Bayne has done it again in Christmas Pearl! Make space in your schedule, too, because once you start reading, you won't want to stop until you've turned the very last page. But be warned...when this story ends, your heart's going to ache every bit as much as when you say goodbye to treasured family members and friends...because the characters are just that real!—Loree Lough

Once again Robin Bayne has managed to touch this reader's heart. If you're looking for a feel good story, look no further. ---Award winning author Donna L. Bolk

Gardner's Gazebo Series

Prodigal

Samaritan

Christmas Pearl

Prologue

Joseph Gardner stared at the paper in his hand. He struggled not to crumple it or rip it to shreds. Talk about adding insult to injury—not only had the judge ripped apart his life by granting the divorce, he'd given her the house as well. And now, since he'd also been ordered to pay all of Anna's court costs, he held an invoice for thousands of dollars. He'd prayed so hard for Anna to change, knowing all along he shouldn't be yoked to a non-believer. God was on his side, or so he'd thought. Instead he'd lost everything. But it wasn't all Anna's fault, she had someone on her side too. The infamous divorce attorney. Home wrecker.

He tossed his mail to the counter and reached for his Bible, randomly opening it to Jeremiah. Midway down the page a verse jumped out at him: *"For I know the plans that I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope."*

A future and hope? Joe sighed. Maybe one day he'd understand.

1

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls: and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it." Matt 13:45, 46

One year later

Joseph Gardner stared out at the clear night sky, wondering how the lawn had grown so frosty it downright sparkled. It was still early after all, he thought, leaning against the wood railing of the Gazebo Café's front porch, hoping it held. His family gathered inside, laughing and planning the upcoming holiday season.

He, however, felt like grinding his boots against the brick walkway in a quick getaway. If the holidays never arrived this year, that would be fine with him.

The front door squeaked behind him, his cousin Daniel had come out to check on him, no doubt.

Joe sighed, and rolled his shoulder muscles to ease the tension. "I'm about ready to take off."

Silence. A truck passed on the road in front of the café, and Joe inhaled diesel exhaust. Even in a small town, trucks held a presence. Behind it, a white car turned into the drive and headed for them.

"Latecomer?" Joe asked, pushing his hat off his forehead.

"Guess so." Daniel moved out onto the porch. "Looks like Liza's Camry."

The car stopped and a blonde woman got out,

carrying a purse and what looked like a basket.

“Hey, it is Liza,” Daniel said, waving the woman over. He turned to Joe. “This is someone you should really meet. Single, an attorney. Good looking—and a Christian.”

The blonde reached the porch and stepped up, her heeled boots clicking on the wooden planks. Joe watched, appreciating her slim figure and long hair. There was something familiar about her. As she neared he inhaled a whiff of some sweet perfume, again, something he’d smelled before.

Daniel kissed her cheek and relieved her of the basket. “Glad you came!” He gestured toward Joe. “This is my cousin Joe.”

Their gazes locked. His heart thudded. Joe saw the silver flecks in her blue eyes glint when she recognized him. Probably ice crystals.

Her smile faded. Shoulders rigid, she took a step back. “You’re Daniel’s cousin?”

After a few beats Joe nodded. “Elizabeth,” he said, wondering why he’d never heard her called by a nickname before. From the corner of his eye he saw Daniel staring at him, his arms folded across his chest.

“Mr. Gardner.”

Joe could hear the frost forming in the yard as they stood there.

“Well,” Daniel said, “why don’t you both come in for dessert?”

A few more seconds clicked by in the evening air.

“I was just leaving.” Joe kept his gaze locked on her.

“Sure, I’d love to,” Elizabeth said, stepping forward and flashing an almost defiant glance at Joe.

She hadn’t forgotten what went down, and that

was OK because he hadn't either. He felt a tug in his gut and almost wished he'd talked to her back then, cleared the air. OK, he'd change his mind and stay a while. Just to make Daniel happy. Yeah, that was it.

"Then again what's the rush?" Joe forced a grin he didn't feel.

Daniel held the door, and they both moved into the light spilling from the Café. Watching Elizabeth's hair shine under the lobby chandelier, he wondered what she was thinking about him. When she disappeared into the crowd, he noticed Daniel studying him. Great, now he had to worry about Daniel too, which was interrupting his ability to think of something appropriate to say to Elizabeth. Of course, she might just avoid him for the rest of the evening, but that was OK. He deserved it.

"So."

A voice came from behind her, and Liza nearly dropped the cream puff she'd just plucked from a platter. The back of her neck tingled as she turned.

"So you're no longer engaged? Daniel said you're single." Joe stood nearly a foot above her, causing him to look down his nose at her. Or maybe he meant to do that.

"No, I'm not." She shifted her weight and set her dessert plate on the oval dining table which displayed the party's treats. "With Calvin anymore, I mean."

"That figures."

She felt her face warming but didn't argue. Joe Gardner knew nothing of what really happened, why Cal had dumped her. Or what she was like now.

“Stoic ice queen.” He shook his head. “Nothing’s changed.”

Liza remained motionless, letting him interpret her non-reaction any way he chose. Her mind replayed the last time she’d seen him, when he’d misinterpreted her questions about his faith and provided a not-so-Christian response. She watched as he reached past her for a mini-cannoli, her pulse racing. Around them the party swirled with scents of vanilla candles and spicy pumpkin pie. Happy chatter tinkled through the air, but Liza was only aware of the man standing in front of her, a reminder of all she’d left behind. In another life. Thank Heaven, literally, for second chances.

After attending Sunday morning services with his family, Joe kissed his mother’s cheek and started the drive to Portlandville’s only golf club, the Portlander, where he worked as manager.

He still couldn’t get Elizabeth off his mind. Joe shifted the car into drive, mentally kicking himself for the way he’d talked to Elizabeth. Or Liza, as she now called herself. He knew he actually owed her an apology—a big one—but he also should have known his resentment would surface in a matter of moments. The prima donna divorce attorney still held his attention when she was near. He still remembered the softness of her hand when he’d held it that once. She still smelled great. The only thing different was her fingernails—years ago they’d been dagger length and always polished. That and the cross she now wore around her slender neck.

He had to oversee the setup of the ballroom for an

afternoon wedding reception. Joe arrived just ahead of the Gardner's Gazebo Café van. He was pleased to see Lane and Rachel bringing in the stack of white cardboard boxes tied with string.

"Hi, ladies. Thanks for making the delivery." He pointed to the rear entrance, and took several of the boxes off their hands. "Let me help."

"So," Lane, Daniel's wife, began as they placed the cakes on the stainless steel counter of the club's kitchen. She waved at the two cooks already at work. "Daniel mentioned you recognized one of our guests last night." She exchanged some sort of glance with her sister-in-law, which Joe couldn't interpret.

He sighed. "Well of course I did. A lot of people I know were there. I've been back in this county a year now." Should he just keep playing innocent?

"Joseph Gardner, you know we're talking about Liza Montgomery." Rachel spoke in a teasing voice, but it was laced with tension. He nodded toward his employees, who set their pans aside and headed outside for a break. Cool November air flowed in again at the door's movements.

Joe began moving the boxes to the walk-in refrigerator. "Wasn't Liza engaged to Tim?" How well he remembered Elizabeth.

"That was a long time ago," Rachel said, "and we have no hard feelings between us at all. She dumped Tim but it was the best thing that could have happened to both of us. And you might not know, Liza helped Daniel reunite with all of us, and we are grateful for that."

"Very grateful," Lane added.

He closed the metal door and turned toward the women. Somewhere in the adjacent dining room, glass

crashed to the floor causing them all to look that direction.

"She's a friend of the family, she changed her career and is a Christian now."

"Yeah. So she says." Joe crossed his arms, and tried not to squint in irritation.

"Joe! You know you shouldn't be judging someone's faith like that."

"Hey, boss, we need to get back to work or the chicken won't be 'Cordoned Bleued' by go-time," a young man's voice called from the doorway.

"I need to see to this." Joe was glad for the interruption. "Come back in guys, we're finished here. Thanks again for the delivery, ladies. I have to go see what crashed out there and make sure the waiters are setting up the tables and chairs."

Rachel patted his shoulder. "You're welcome. You're a good manager, Joe. And please think about what we said. Liza's a different person than she was before. You might even like her if you gave her a chance." Lane followed Rachel out the door, throwing a casual wave over her shoulder.

Another loud *thunk* grabbed his attention. Joe didn't have time for Liza/Elizabeth, or whoever she was right now. He had work to do.

2

"So glad you picked me up for breakfast. We haven't had much time to talk lately. There's a free spot," Liza said, pointing to a table in the glass-enclosed patio of a small bistro in the heart of Portlandville. It was just like the one she'd waitressed in while going to school. She inhaled the aroma of bacon, and her stomach growled.

"I'm glad we could meet." Lane pulled a chair across the tile floor as Liza did the same. "I've been meaning to make an appointment, but we've been so busy at the Gazebo, and time just flies as we serve meal after meal. Besides, your assistant told me you had a lot of vacation saved up, and you need to use it." The clank of silverware and the chatter of hungry diners drifted from the main dining room.

Liza unfolded her cloth napkin. "So. You and Daniel?"

The other woman beamed. "It's wonderful."

Liza reached over and squeezed her friend's hand. A young man sporting a French beret approached to take their order, and Liza took a moment to study her friend. She looked thinner than she had back in the summer, and seemed tense. What did she want to talk to her about?

"Eggs and bacon with wheat toast, please." Liza handed the menu to the young man, and turned back to Lane, who ordered the same. "So you've resolved your differences?" She kept her voice casual, not

wanting to sound accusatory or too nosy. A light breeze blew through the patio area, ruffling Liza's bangs along her forehead.

Lane twisted her napkin in her hands. "Well, it's all kind of related to why I'm here." She leaned closer. "Daniel and I want to start exploring the possibility of adoption."

Liza sat straighter. "Really?" That was a relief. This wasn't about a marital problem.

"Yes. I can't have children, and we would like to start a family. You're the best family lawyer we know. Well, the only one we know. Would you help us?"

"Well, of course!" She lifted her glass in a token cheer. "I am so happy for you two. Have you looked into this at all yet?"

Lane shook her head, dropping the napkin. "Not really. We wanted to have a little alone time as a couple first, but I think we're ready to see what our options are." She bent to retrieve it, and kept her gaze lowered. "And Daniel mentioned what happened when you got to the party the other night."

She had anticipated that. "What did he say?"

"Just that you and Joe knew each other, and didn't seem too friendly." She shrugged. "That's about it. He also told Joe he should check you out. That you two might like each other. Find something in common."

Liza sputtered, spewing a little of her orange juice onto the table. "I am so sorry!" She definitely hadn't figured on Daniel saying that.

"Surprised?" Lane smiled. "You might be a good match for him." She held up one hand. "I know, I know, you're not ready to start dating again. But really, it's not like your fiancé died or anything."

"Right. He dumped me." She laughed a bit. "Big

difference.”

“You know what I mean. You don’t want to be alone forever.”

“I don’t. But—”

“But nothing. Just say the word and I will invite you and Joe both over for dinner.”

Sighing, Liza had to smile at her friend. “Thank you, really. But not Joe. And I seriously doubt he would be interested in me, either.”

Liza sipped her juice while she mentally ran through adoption scenarios for her friends. When a woman approached from her right, Liza turned to look at her.

“I thought that was you, but I wasn’t sure.” The words spit out like nails from the tall, redheaded woman. “How can you live with yourself?”

Liza stiffened.

“Excuse me” — Lane came to Liza’s rescue — “can I help you?”

The woman snorted. “I doubt that. Just be careful of the woman you’re eating with. She’s a barracuda. A home wrecker.” She turned on her heel and stomped off, leaving the table quiet in her wake.

“Wow,” Lane began, twirling a straw between her fingers. “What was that about? I don’t believe you wrecked somebody’s home.”

“Just a casualty of my old career. I represented her husband in a nasty divorce.”

“And you won?”

“I did. We did.” Liza dipped her head, waiting for condemnation. “That was years ago. I’m surprised she remembered me.”

Lane put her straw into her glass and folded her hands. “Well, I’m sure you were great at your job and

had to take care of your own client.”

“Thank you,” Liza said. “That’s so kind of you to say.” She relaxed. “I don’t practice divorce law at all anymore.”

“I know. We both just need to look forward, and not backward. Oh good, here’s our toast.” Lane tipped her head to the approaching waiter. “Now stop feeling guilty and dig into this.”

The server set plates of heaping piles of fluffy eggs in front of them, and asked if they needed anything else. As he left Lane reached for her hand to say a quick prayer of thanks for the meal.

Liza used a knife to cut into her bacon, mentally adding thanks for Lane. It was so nice to have a friend. A friend, like herself, who didn’t have a perfect past. Her heart swelled with something joyful. She didn’t want the morning to end.

“Lane, let’s go shopping!”

“I really appreciate your help with this.” Daniel adjusted the hardware on the Gazebo’s lighting track while Joe handed him tools and bulbs. “Lane and Rachel have been bugging me to put these up for months so that this room would match the main dining room.”

“No problem,” Joe told him, grabbing a wrung to steady the wobbling ladder. “It’s easier now that I don’t live an hour away. And there is nothing special going on at the club today anyway.”

“Business still good?”

“Not bad, but once wedding season is over and golf tournaments are finished for the year, it’s quiet.

We do have some Christmas parties booked for next month. That reminds me, I'll need to talk to Rachel about getting more cheesecakes."

Daniel tapped a nail in place. "Let's make sure this fixture will slide back and forth. The ladies won't be happy if the lights don't move around; they want to spotlight people.

"So what are you doing on Thanksgiving? That's day after tomorrow, you know. Ma told me to invite you to dinner since your parents will be out of town." He moved the lights back and forth on the track, then rotated them. "Hand me some bulbs, would you?"

Joe ignored the invitation as he handed the bulbs up one at a time. "Hey, you been out to play any golf lately?"

Daniel shook his head as he accepted a bulb. "No, but I'd like to before it gets too cold. I'd like to drag Lane out to the course again." He chuckled. "She pretends to like it but I know she'd rather be reading a book or something."

"Last one. I'll go plug everything in." After a few moments of silence the private-party room was washed in light—less harsh than the fluorescents.

"We can dim them too. The girls will love it." Daniel climbed down and started to pick up cardboard boxes. "You want coffee?"

Joe grabbed the rest of the bubble wrap and took it to the closet. They moved to the Gazebo's kitchen, which was quiet during the pre-lunch hours. Only one of the cooks was already there, an older man named Casey. Joe nodded at him, and Casey turned back to the vegetables he'd been chopping.

Daniel poured them both a large mug of black coffee and sat at the island counter. "So,

Thanksgiving?"

Joe sat across from him on a metal stool. "Who else is coming?" He knew the holiday was really important to the family, and they always closed the Gazebo that day.

"Me and Lane, Mom and Dad, Rachel and Tim, Aunt Doris and Uncle Jay. And possibly Wanda Sue."

Joe grinned at the thought of Wanda Sue, a distant cousin who sometimes appeared at family functions in high heels and leopard-print outfits. Her conversations were as loud as her clothes. "No one else?"

Daniel shrugged. "Not that I know of." He sipped his coffee. "Why? Are you afraid Liza Montgomery might be there?"

"Not afraid. Not sure how to describe it."

Casey turned toward them, pointing his knife at Joe. "He's afraid she won't be there."

Joe sputtered a little, and Daniel laughed.

"You two should just admit you like each other," the cook said, and took his knife to the sink. "Time to get the bread in the oven."

Joe didn't bother to ask the man where he got his information or if he even knew who Liza was. He rose and took his mug to the sink. "So is Wanda Sue getting along better with her husband?"

Daniel followed him. "I have no clue. Haven't seen her since Easter, I think. Were you there? She had her hair all frizzed and big. Was kinda' funny." After placing both mugs in the dishwasher, Daniel glanced at Joe. "You're not interested in Wanda Sue, are you?"

Joe laughed. "No way. I prefer blondes in tame clothing. Besides, she's a married woman and a relative."

"Married for now. And a distant, distant relative."