

A woman with dark hair in a bun, wearing a gold sequined dress, is decorating a Christmas tree with gold and red ornaments. The tree is decorated with various ornaments, including gold balls, red and white ornaments, and pinecones. The background is a warm, yellowish light.

THE RANCHER'S CHRISTMAS PRINCESS

CHRISTINE
RIMMER

Cherish™

Christine Rimmer

The Rancher's Christmas Princess

Аннотация

Arabella Bravo-Calabretti came to Elk Creek, Montana, with a secret to deliver and a job to do. Being a Bravo Royale, she was going to do it right. Before she handed her best friend's darling son, Ben, over to his unwitting father, they would all spend Christmas together. Only then could she be absolutely sure that rancher Preston McCade was ready to be a dad. Or... was that really the reason Belle was hanging around? She and Preston were practically from different planets, yet the attraction was undeniable. Before long, someone was utterly in love with a rancher—and Christmas in Montana was presenting one surprise after another.

A CHRISTMAS PRESENT.
FROM THE PAST.

Arabella Bravo-Calabretti came to Elk Creek, Montana, with a secret to deliver and a job to do. Being a Bravo Royale, she was going to do it right. Before she handed her best friend's darling son, Ben, over to his unwitting father, they would all spend Christmas together. Only then could she be absolutely sure that rancher Preston McCade was ready to be a dad.

Or...was that really the reason Belle was hanging around? She and Preston were practically from different planets, yet the attraction was undeniable. Before long, someone was utterly in love with a rancher—and Christmas in Montana was presenting one surprise after another.

'Twas just before Christmas, and all over Elk Creek Tongues were a-flappin' with the news of the week. A princess was visiting, with staff and a child, And seeking a rancher. Wasn't that wild?

Now Belle (that's the princess) had a story to tell And she wasn't certain it all would end well She had to be sure that her friend's child, a boy Would be raised by his father with love and with joy.

So Belle and her bodyguard, companion and babe Moved in with the ranchers, the Mist'ers McCade And as Montana, and Christmas, and love worked their charms

Guess who fell passionately into whose arms?
Dear Reader,

It is the season of giving. And Arabella Bravo-Calabretti, Princess of Montedoro, has come to the small Montana town of Elk Creek bearing a gift beyond price. He's eighteen months old and his name is Benjamin.

Horse rancher Preston McCade has a good life, a solid, stable, productive life. It's a life he's just fine with, though deep in his heart he has that nagging feeling that the most important things have passed him by. Once, he planned on marriage and a family. It didn't work out. He hasn't tried again.

But then he meets Princess Arabella and soon enough, the child named Ben. And all of a sudden, Christmas is more than just a day in December. Preston's life is full of promise again and more than one miracle is within his grasp. He just needs to be brave enough to reach out and claim the love that's waiting for him.

Happy holidays, everyone! May this blessed season bring you the most important gifts—the ones of love and family.

Yours always,

Christine

The Rancher's Christmas Princess

Christine Rimmer



www.millsandboon.co.uk

CHRISTINE RIMMER came to her profession the long way around. Before settling down to write about the magic of romance, she'd been everything from an actress to a salesclerk to a waitress. Now that she's finally found work that suits her perfectly, she insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine is grateful not only for the joy she finds in writing, but for what waits when the day's work is through: a man she loves who loves her right back, and the privilege of watching their children grow and change day to day. She lives with her family in Oregon. Visit Christine at www.christinerimmer.com.

For MSR

Always

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Excerpt](#)

Chapter One

News traveled fast in Elk Creek, Montana.

And the presence of a real, live princess in town? That definitely qualified as news.

Her Highness's name was Arabella. Arabella Bravo-Calabretti. And her mother ruled some tiny, rich country in the Mediterranean Sea. Princess Arabella had taken three side-by-side rooms at the Drop On Inn on Main Street. Word was she had a baby in tow. She'd also brought along a big-eyed middle-aged lady and a bodyguard as well.

In Elk Creek, where things tended to get pretty quiet during the long, snowy winter, visiting royalty was big news indeed.

As a rule, horse rancher Preston McCade would have given no thought and less attention to any princess, in Elk Creek or otherwise. However, Her Highness Arabella had been asking questions—about him. She'd arrived in town on a Sunday in early December. Preston got a call that very evening informing him that the princess wanted to get in touch with him.

And on Monday morning bright and early, when he stopped in at Colson's Feed and Seed to check on an order, Betsy Colson beamed him the biggest smile he'd seen on her freckled face in all the years he'd known her.

"Pres." Betsy slid out from behind the counter. "You heard there's a princess in town?"

"Good morning to you, too, Betsy."

"I heard it from Dee Everhart who got it straight from RaeNell." RaeNell and Larry Seabuck owned and managed the Drop On Inn. "She's from Montedoro, this princess. You ever heard of Montedoro? It's on the coast of France. They say it's beautiful there. Palm trees. Casinos. Balmy beaches, the sun shining practically year-round."

Pres removed his hat and tapped it against his thigh to knock off the snow. "Speaking of weather, it's supposed to snow on and off all day. Tomorrow, too."

Betsy, who'd been trying to push him around since way back when she was two years ahead of him at Elk Creek Elementary, braced her fists on her narrow hips. "Did you hear what I just told you?"

"I heard yesterday. RaeNell called me out at the ranch to tell me some princess was looking for me."

Betsy widened her eyes—and lowered her voice. "Dee said that RaeNell says that the princess wants to speak with you, Pres."

"Well, then I'm sure she'll be calling me. I told RaeNell to give her my number."

Betsy's pale brows drew together over her pointy nose. "What do you think a princess wants with you?"

"Not a clue. Any news on those supplements I ordered?"

"They'll be in by Wednesday, guaranteed."

"All right, then." He turned for the door.

Betsy called after him. "She's staying at the Drop On Inn, you know. You could just stop in there, find out what she's after...."

"See you Wednesday, Betsy." He put his hat back on and pulled open the door. Ducking under the mistletoe tacked to the door frame, he got out of there before Betsy could tell him more things he could be doing.

The snow had let up. And the Drop On Inn was down at the end of Main Street. He went ahead and walked over there before stopping in at Safeway to pick up a few groceries. He was kind of curious. Might as well find out what business this princess thought she had with him.

Larry Seabuck, slim and stooped with thinning gray hair, stood behind the check-in desk when Pres entered the motel's pine-paneled lobby. "Preston, how's the world treating you?"

“Can’t complain. I heard you had a visitor who’s looking for me.”

“The princess.” Larry said it reverently and just a tad possessively, too.

“What room is she in?” Pres took off his hat again.

Larry frowned. “RaeNell said she called you—and when you said it was all right, she gave Her Highness your phone number.”

“Could you buzz the lady’s room? Tell her I’m here and willing to talk to her.”

“Ahem. Well. She isn’t in just now.”

Pres rested an elbow on the check-in counter, which had fake Christmas garland tacked in loops all around the rim and a small tree decked with blinking lights down at the far end. “You’re looking a little squirrely, Larry. Why don’t you just say what’s on your mind?”

Larry’s wire-rimmed glasses had slid down his nose. He eased them back up. “Well, a woman of quality. An aristocrat. And she’s our guest. We’ve had two calls from reporters, asking if she’s staying here. She’s asked us to say she has no comment and doesn’t wish to be disturbed. We want to respect her privacy.”

Pres, who in recent years hadn’t found a whole lot to laugh about in life, suddenly realized he was suppressing a chuckle. “She good lookin’, this princess?”

“Uh. Well. Very attractive. Of course. Ahem. Yes.”

“Larry, I believe you are smitten. You better watch out. Someone will tell RaeNell.”

“Oh, now, Preston. It’s nothing like that.” Larry blinked several times in succession. “No, not at all.”

“Just tell me where I can find her. I promise to be on my best behavior.”

Larry pressed his thin lips together. “You don’t even know how to talk to a princess.”

“Suppose you clue me in, Larry?”

“Ahem. Don’t sit in her presence unless she invites you to. Call her ‘Your Highness’ the first time you address her. After that, call her ‘ma’am.’”

“She told you all this?”

Larry sniffed. “Of course not. I looked it up. On Wikipedia.”

“Well, all right. So where do I find her?”

Larry gave in at last. “Oh, have it your way. Breakfast. She’s at breakfast.” He threw out a pale, skinny hand in the general direction of the Sweet Stop Diner across the street.

“Thanks, Larry. You have a fine day.”

* * *

Belle saw him coming. He was tall and ruggedly handsome. He marched right up to the booth where she sat alone, removed his cowboy hat and addressed her politely. “Your Highness, I’m Preston McCade. I heard you’ve been looking for me.”

Her bodyguard, Marcus, who stood near the diner’s front door, watched her for a sign that he should intervene. Belle met Marcus’s waiting eyes and gave a quick shake of her head. Then she granted the large rancher a cool, pleasant smile. “Yes, I have

been hoping to meet you, Mr. McCade.” She indicated the empty seat across from her. “Please, join me.”

Everyone in the diner was watching them. Belle could feel their breath-held regard. It was so quiet that a person could have heard a feather whisper its way to the floor as the rancher shrugged out of his sheepskin jacket and hung it up on the hook beside the booth along with his hat. Beneath the jacket, he wore a plain cotton shirt that was the same pale, cool blue as his eyes. His jeans were worn and his rawhide Western boots looked lived-in.

Blue eyes, she thought. A lovely light blue just like Ben’s....

“The usual, Pres?” the waitress called out from over behind the long counter.

“Sounds good, Selma.” He slid into the booth.

The waitress stuck an order on the metal wheel in the window to the kitchen. Then she picked up a coffeepot and sauntered over to the booth. Preston McCade turned his mug up and she filled it. She topped off Belle’s cup, too.

The rancher sipped and set down the mug. By then the waitress had left them. “Planning on being in town long, ma’am?”

“Please.” She spoke softly. “Call me Belle. My visit here is...open-ended.”

They regarded each other. His gaze was level and steady. He had strong, broad shoulders and a square jaw with a nice, manly cleft in it. She could see how Anne might have found him attractive. Any woman would.

And not only was he attractive, but there was also something

steadily about him. Something thoughtful and dignified and reserved. Her instinctive response was that he would be someone a person could depend on. She felt that it wouldn't be difficult at all to come to like him, to respect him. She was glad for that. She'd been worried about what she would do if she didn't like him.

She'd been worried about a lot of things. She was still worried, if the truth were known, just tied up in knots over this whole situation.

And her heart ached. For her lost friend. For sweet little Ben...

Oh, dear Lord. How could she do this? How could Anne have asked this of her? She shouldn't have to do this....

"You okay, ma'am—I mean, Belle?" McCade spoke low, with what really did sound like honest concern. He was leaning toward her a little.

Suddenly, she couldn't bear to meet his eyes. She looked down at his hands bracketing the heavy coffee mug. They were strong hands, big hands. Capable. Calloused. Hardworking hands.

Was his life...difficult? Harsh? How harsh?

So very many things she needed to know. Too many, really. Obligation dragged on her like chains.

She composed her expression and then made herself raise her head again. "Yes, I'm all right. Thank you." She glanced out the window. "It's snowing again."

He nodded. "You'd best not make your visit too open-ended. Stick around another week or so, you won't be getting out of

Montana until the spring thaw.”

“I think I shall have to take my chances as far as the weather goes, Mr. McCade.”

“Preston.”

She felt a smile blooming. Almost. “Preston.”

He nodded at her nearly full plate. “Eat. Your food will get cold.”

She wasn’t hungry. Not anymore. At the sight of him striding so purposefully toward her, her appetite had fled. Still, she picked up her fork again.

* * *

Pres sipped his coffee and tried not to stare at the princess across from him.

She was good-looking, all right. With all that shiny brown hair and those fine, almond-shaped whiskey-colored eyes. Her skin had a glow to it. He bet it was soft as velvet to a man’s touch. And she was classy, too. Polite. Soft-voiced. No wonder Larry had a crush on her.

His food came—a thick steak, four eggs, home fries, toast and a generous slice of hot apple pie on the side. He tucked into the meal, thinking that he liked the direct, no-nonsense way she’d met his gaze. She seemed kind of serious, though. Kind of sad. Like something was weighing on her mind.

Then again, he was pretty damn serious himself as a rule. After all, life was tough. Then you died.

“Have you lived here in Montana all your life, Preston?”

“Except for four years of college in Utah. I live at the family ranch. The McCade Ranch. It’s a ways out of town. We breed and train horses. Quarter horses, mostly, for ranch work.”

“The quarter horse. That most American of breeds. Great sprinters. So agile. Perfectly suited to work on a ranch.”

His opinion of her went up another notch. “You know horses.”

“My father was raised on a ranch,” she said. “In Texas. Near San Antonio. I have a cousin, Luke, who lives on that ranch now. Luke raises quarter horses, too, as a matter of fact.”

“Your father’s American, then?”

“He took Montedoran citizenship when he married my mother. But yes, he was born here in America. I’ve ridden since I was small. We all have, my brothers and sisters and me. My sister Alice is the true horsewoman of the family, though. Do you raise cattle also?”

“We do run cattle, yes. A small herd. But we’re mostly a horse operation. I’m in partnership with my dad and the ranch has been in the family for four generations. I’m pretty proud of our breeding program. Our horses are steady-natured, good for ranch work. They also perform well in rodeos across a range of events. We have two fine thoroughbreds standing at stud.” Whoa. He’d said a mouthful. As a rule, he wasn’t a man to fall all over himself bragging about his operation. He concentrated on his food again.

She asked, “Any brothers or sisters?”

“Just me and the old man.”

She leaned in a little. “You smiled. Because of your father?”

He shrugged. "You'd have to meet him. My father considers himself a charmer."

"But he's not?"

"I generally let people make up their own minds about that. But be warned. He'll talk your ear off if you give him half a chance."

"And your mother?"

"She passed on."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It was a long time ago. I was only a kid."

"That must have been hard. For you. And your father."

"Like I said, a long time ago." He had a few questions of his own. One in particular: What was it she needed to see him about? But she seemed to want to...get to know him a little, for some reason. And he realized that was just fine with him. He was curious about her, too. "How about your family?"

She sipped her coffee. "Both of my parents are still living and in good health."

"You said you had sisters and you mentioned brothers, too?"

"I have four sisters and four brothers."

"That's quite a royal family."

"Montedoro is a principality," she explained. "That means we, the ruling family, are not, strictly speaking, considered royal."

"So your father's not a king?"

"Actually, it's my mother who rules Montedoro."

Right. RaeNell had told him that, now that he thought about

it. "You said your dad was born an American..."

She nodded. "They met in Los Angeles. My father used to be an actor. He did well for himself, even won an Oscar for best actor in a supporting role."

"But he gave all that up when he met your mother?"

"Yes, he did. When my mother took the throne he became His Serene Highness Evan, Prince Consort of Montedoro—and no, my mother is not a queen. She's the sovereign princess."

"I see," he said. Though he didn't, not really. He only thought that her world and his were galaxies apart.

Which had him feeling suddenly awkward and foolish. He'd been talking way too much, acting like a rube, a hayseed way too full of himself, all puffed up to be having breakfast with this amber-eyed beauty from a long, long ways out of town.

Come on now. Exactly what business did she have with him? Whatever it was, she sure wasn't in any rush to get down to it. He pushed his plate away, wiped his mouth and set his napkin on the table.

The princess could take a hint. "I wonder if we might speak in private..." she cautiously suggested. He couldn't say he blamed her for wanting to take the conversation elsewhere. The low murmur of other voices filled the diner now. But he had no doubt that every ear in the place remained cocked toward their booth.

He thought again about how he had nothing in common with her, how she was out of his league and way out of his reach. How he was only here to find out why she was asking around about

him. He reminded himself how he had no interest in women anyway, not since his fiancée dumped him for that jackass Monty Polk over two years ago now.

Plus, RaeNell had mentioned a baby, hadn't she? That the princess had a baby with her. She wore no wedding ring. But why would she bring a baby to Elk Creek unless it belonged to her?

He went ahead and asked her. "Belle, are you married?"

She answered without hesitation. "No, Preston, I'm not."

Then what about the baby?

But he couldn't quite get those words out. He'd been raised to mind his manners around a lady. And he didn't know her well enough to ask her something as personal as that.

Instead, he shocked the hell out of himself by asking, "Would you have dinner with me?"

Chapter Two

The princess had agreed that he would pick her up at the Drop On Inn at seven. Pres was there right on time, freshly showered and shaved, wearing tan slacks and a sport jacket under his winter coat—and feeling like something way too close to a damn fool.

RaeNell was behind the desk, hanging miniature red balls on the little Christmas tree. "Lookin' pretty spiffy there, Pres. I'll tell her you're here."

He gave her a nod of acknowledgment and wondered how RaeNell knew that he was there to pick up Belle. Then he decided not to stew over it. RaeNell always knew way more than she had any business knowing.

She picked up the phone and pushed a button. "Hello, Lady Charlotte. Please tell Her Highness that Preston McCade is waiting in the lobby....Yes. Thank you." RaeNell put the phone down. "She'll be right down."

"Great."

RaeNell stood back to admire the little tree, then stepped close again to move an ornament to a spot nearer the top. "Where are you taking her? The Bull's Eye? Of course you are. Where else you gonna get a decent steak in this town?"

Pres said nothing. He didn't need to. RaeNell had always been perfectly capable of carrying on a conversation all by herself.

RaeNell folded her arms and braced them on the counter and pitched her voice to a whisper that somehow managed to ring out clear as a shout. "So what did she want from you? What's it all about? Come on, you can tell me. You know I will never tell a living soul."

"I don't know what she wants from me, RaeNell. She hasn't said yet."

"But everyone saw you having breakfast with her, the two of you yakking away like you're the best of friends."

He only looked at her. He kept his expression untroubled, although he was at least as curious as RaeNell as to what it might be that Belle wanted from him. "Sorry, she didn't say."

The concrete stairs to the upper floor were visible through the window that gave a view of the parking lot. He watched Belle and her bodyguard descend.

RaeNell pasted on a big smile and stopped leaning on the counter. The bodyguard opened the door and Belle sailed through wearing a long wool coat. Beneath the hem of the coat he saw she wore black boots with low heels. At breakfast, she'd worn a cashmere sweater and tan pants, with tan boots to match. He liked the way she dressed. Simply and practically. Expensive, but not flashy.

She met his eyes. "Preston, hello." The dark, cold Montana night suddenly seemed cozy, bright as a new day.

He offered his arm. She stepped up and took it. He felt like a million bucks—or maybe two million. The bodyguard opened the door for them.

As soon as they were outside where RaeNell couldn't eavesdrop, he said, "The restaurant's just down the street. We can walk, if you don't mind a few snow flurries and a little gale-force wind."

She gripped his arm a fraction tighter, moved in just an inch closer. He got a whiff of her perfume. It was like her. Subtle, but so tempting. "I would love to walk."

He asked, "Your bodyguard have a name?"

"Marcus."

"You can leave Marcus behind. I promise not to give you any reason to need backup."

She let out a small, resigned sigh. "Marcus goes where I go. If I dismissed him, he would still follow us. He doesn't take orders from me. His job is to protect me and he's very...committed to

his job.”

“Even if you don’t need protecting?”

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.”

“Sadly, in this day and age, you just never know. A little over five years ago, my brother Alexander was kidnapped in Afghanistan. He eventually escaped and he’s home safe and happily married now, but the kidnapping forced my family to face a few realities. Whenever we travel now, we have security round-the-clock.”

He’d read about her brother’s kidnapping. That afternoon, he’d spent an hour on the internet learning what he could about Belle and her family. “I’m sorry to hear about your brother.”

“He’s doing well now. Truly. But Marcus will be accompanying us.”

“Fair enough.”

She had her face tipped up to him. Her eyes seemed almost golden in the light that spilled out the lobby windows. She clutched his arm a little tighter. “Then shall we go?”

“This way.” He touched her gloved hand where it wrapped around his forearm. They started off down the street.

The bodyguard fell back several paces. It wasn’t that hard to pretend he wasn’t there.

* * *

The Bull’s Eye Steakhouse and Casino was in a brick storefront between the Upper Crust Bakery and Elk Creek

Cleaners. The sign out front was a target with a giant red arrow sticking out of the center. Miniature multicolored Christmas lights framed the front windows and the door.

Inside, nothing had changed since the last time Pres ate there. The walls were paneled in bead board up to the chair rails and decorated with a lot of bad paintings of cowboys on trail drives. The tablecloths? Vinyl, printed with Western scenes. The chairs had red vinyl cushions and backs. There was a full bar. In the back was the “casino,” which consisted of two poker tables and a row of gambling machines. From the dining room, faintly, you could hear the never-ending sound effects from the machines.

The Bull’s Eye wasn’t exactly jumping that early December night. Pres had called ahead and told the owner which table he wanted. It was the one tucked into that quiet corner, across from the bar.

Daisy Littlejohn, the owner’s daughter, greeted them, waited for Pres to hang their coats and his hat on the coat tree by the door next to the Christmas tree and then led them to the table he’d asked for. Once they were settled in the red vinyl chairs, she handed them menus. “Wayne will be right with you.”

Wayne, the waiter, knew his job. They went through the business of ordering drinks and food. He got all that out of the way quickly. In no time, they were left alone with a bread basket and a nice bottle of red wine.

“It’s not fancy,” Pres said, “but I think you’ll like that rib eye you ordered.”

"I'm sure I will." She sipped from her water glass.

Pres had ended up facing the door. The bodyguard stood by the row of chairs in front of the register, out of the way. He seemed to be good at blending in. Daisy was behind the register counter, fiddling with some receipts or something. She seemed totally oblivious to the big, silent fellow standing right there beside her.

"I looked you up on the internet," Pres confessed.

Belle nodded, apparently not in any way surprised. "Did you find out anything interesting?"

He buttered a hunk of bread. "I learned about what happened to your brother."

She nodded. "It was terrible for all of us. We were sure he had died. But he returned to us. And it's over now. His wife, who is like a sister to me, is expecting twins next month. They are very much in love, Lili and Alex."

"I read that your Lili is a princess from the island country of Alagonia."

"Yes. Lili's the crown princess, the heir presumptive."

He chuckled. She amused him to no end with her talk of princes and crowns, of thrones and titles. "And that means?"

"Lili's an only child. If her father, the king, never has a son, she will rule Alagonia one day. She's called the heir presumptive because it's presumed that she will one day be queen, barring the birth of a male heir. If she were a man, she would be called the heir apparent and her position as first in line of succession

would be secure, regardless of any future children her father might have.”

He studied her expression. “Somehow, you don’t approve of that?”

“Well, I think it’s somewhat...backward. As though men were born naturally superior to women, naturally more suited to rule and therefore should take precedence. Everyone in the modern world knows that’s completely untrue.”

Pres set down his butter knife. “You expecting me to argue that point with you?”

“Were you planning to?”

“Not a chance.”

She sent him a sideways look. “Good thinking, Preston.”

He moved on to a safer subject. “I also read that you’re a nurse, that you work with Nurses Without Boundaries.”

“Yes. In my family, we believe in being useful. I don’t do a lot of hands-on nursing, but I am able to help raise awareness—and necessary funds—to get supplies and medical personnel where they’re most needed around the world.” She was so damn easy on the eyes. He could have sat there across from her forever, listening to her beautiful voice, watching her face, on the lookout for a hint of a smile. And he really was impressed that she was a nurse. She’d gone and gotten herself an education in a useful profession, even though she probably had money running out her ears and would never actually need to work. “What else did you learn about me?” she asked.

He swallowed a bite of bread. “Your oldest brother, the heir to the throne, is a widower with two children.”

She picked up her wine, took a small sip. “What else?”

“Your second-born brother married a lawyer from Texas who happened to be the mother of his son.”

She chuckled. A beautiful sound. “That’s a long story. For another time.”

“None of your sisters are married. Neither is your one other brother, Alexander’s twin, Damien. I also read all about your mother and father and how they met.”

She gave an elegant shrug. “How did your parents meet?”

“My dad was six, my mom was five. It was her first day of kindergarten.”

“Ah,” she said. “Love fated from childhood.”

“I don’t know about that. The story goes that he chased her around the playground. She ran away screaming, tripped and needed seven stitches in her chin. She didn’t let him near her for years after that.”

“At least it was a memorable meeting.”

“It certainly was.”

Wayne brought their salads. They ate, talking easily. Of her life. Of his. The steaks came—and were terrific as always. He told her he was an agriculture major in college. She said she’d gotten her nursing degree in America, at Duke University.

He knew that this dinner was supposed to be an opportunity for her to get down to whatever it was that she needed to discuss

with him. Didn't matter. It felt like a date to Preston. A real date. A successful date, the kind of date that has a man thinking he will ask this woman out again. The kind of date that makes the world seem new and fresh and full of promise.

He kept reminding himself that it really wasn't a date. That any minute now, she was going to get down to it, to tell him what was going on.

But she didn't tell him. They had coffee and the Bull's Eye's famous bread pudding.

And she remained not the least forthcoming as to why she'd been asking around town about him. He probably should have been more bothered about that, should have pushed at her to get on with it.

But he wasn't all that bothered and he didn't feel like pushing. He was enjoying himself too much. By the time he'd swallowed the last of his bread pudding, he was starting to think he didn't really care if she ever told him why she'd been looking for him.

The bodyguard was still waiting patiently by the door when they went to get their coats. Pres helped Belle into hers.

She looked back over her shoulder at him. "Thank you, Preston."

He had his hands on her slim shoulders. He never wanted to take them away. And he wasn't ready for the evening to end. "How about a drive out to my ranch?"

"Yes, I would like that."

He let go of her reluctantly and reached for his hat. "It's a half-

an-hour ride,” he warned because it only seemed fair to let her know the trip would take a while. “A half hour each way.”

“That’s fine. Marcus will follow us and drive me back. That way you won’t have to make two trips.”

“I don’t mind making two trips.” The words came out husky and full of meanings he hadn’t intended to put in them.

She only said softly, “That’s lovely. But Marcus will be following us. He might as well bring me back.”

* * *

Belle was becoming annoyed with herself.

She should have told him by now. The longer she dragged it out, the more upset he was likely to be when she finally got down to it.

But every time she started to edge up on the difficult things that needed saying, she would glance across the table into those sky-blue eyes of his and...her tongue was suddenly a slab of lead in her mouth, inert and unresponsive. Incapable of forming the necessary words.

Because, honestly, how does one tell a man such a thing? How does one deliver such news?

She should have planned better. She should have rehearsed what she might say, practiced how to...lead up to it. Because she wasn’t leading up to it and the longer she stalled, the worse it was going to be when she finally delivered the truth.

The drive out to his ranch was a quiet one. He wasn’t a man who felt it necessary to fill every silence with words. Even with

her nerves on edge from all she had yet to say, she appreciated that about him. He was good with silence. At peace with it.

There were so many things she liked about him. Too many. Her response to him was distressingly positive on more than one level. She found him much too attractive. It made her feel...all turned around somehow.

Maybe she really shouldn't have rushed into this. Her mother and father had urged her to hire a private investigator to check Preston out before she approached him. They'd seen no reason why she had to head straight for Montana after the funeral.

But she'd had other ideas. She'd agreed to hire the investigator, but she'd also decided to come straightaway to meet him. In the end, it was going to have to be her decision anyway. She didn't want to dawdle over it, growing more and more attached to Ben as he grew more attached to her.

Better to get moving on what needed doing, to...get it over with.

She was a good judge of character and so far Preston had done nothing to raise any red flags with her. On the contrary, he seemed to her a solid, trustworthy man. A responsible man. When she'd asked the chatty motel owner about him, the woman had said he was gruff and not an easy man to know, that he'd only gotten more withdrawn after a "disappointment in love" two years before. Belle had wanted to ask the woman for details about that "disappointment."

But she hadn't. It would have felt too much like gossiping.

Still, after what Mrs. Seabuck had said about him, she'd worried he would be hard to know.

And then she'd met him and found him much too easy to talk to. He hadn't been gruff or withdrawn in the least, not with her anyway.

She could find no excuse to keep the truth from him. She needed to follow through on her dear friend's final request.

Anne had wanted it this way....

Anne.

Just thinking her name brought a fresh surge of pain. Her friend had been gone for only ten days. Maybe she should have listened to her parents, waited for the investigator's report at least.

All she really wanted was to keep Ben with her, to raise him as her own.

But that wasn't to be. In the end, she was honor bound to carry through and do what Anne requested.

How to get started, though? How to get the all-important words out of her mouth?

Dear Lord, she still didn't know.

It was snowing lightly, the white flakes flying at the windshield out of the darkness. So beautiful. So cold.

The land was bare and rolling with a silvery glow about it. Staggered, leaning fences lined the slopes to either side of the two-lane highway. Farther out, she could see the dark shapes of evergreens. The sky was endless—cloudy overhead, but clear far in the distance. On the crests of the mountain ridges way ahead,

beneath the lowering dark clouds, she could see a band of cobalt studded with stars.

“Here we are,” Preston said. Neither of them had spoken for several minutes. He turned the four-door pickup truck onto a smaller road. The lights of Marcus’s SUV beamed in through the rear window as the bodyguard swung in behind them.

Thick evergreens, several rows of them on either side, lined the curving road. “Ponderosa pines,” he said. “They make a good windbreak.”

The snow had stopped. They rode between the thick stands of dark trees. And then the road opened up. There was a rustic arched gate with a sign: McCade Ranch. Beyond the gate, she saw barns and sheds, pastures and corrals, the land rolling in the distance. Farther out, those craggy peaks poked into the sky.

There were two houses facing off across a wide yard and circular driveway from each other. They were both two-story, of wood and natural stone, the smaller house seeming almost a miniature of the larger one. There were lights on in both houses. Nearer the barn, she saw another house, more rustic, like a cabin. There were lights on inside that one, too.

Preston parked in front of the largest house. Marcus pulled in behind him and was at her door, opening it for her, before Preston could get there.

She got out and went to meet Preston as he came around the front of the pickup. “Marcus will need to go in first, if that’s all right? To...have a look around.”

Preston shrugged. “Whatever it takes.” He turned to the bodyguard. “Go ahead. It’s not locked.” Marcus went up the steps and disappeared inside. Preston offered his arm and she took it. They proceeded up the steps at a slower pace. “So...do we wait out here until he gives the okay?”

She felt her cheeks redden. Really, all these security protocols did become tiresome. “It should be only a minute or two. And the good news is, once he gives the all clear, if you ever invite me back, he won’t insist on doing this again.”

“You sure?” Blue eyes teased.

“I promise.” Her gaze drifted to his mouth. It was a fine mouth, firm and yet well-shaped. She wondered what it might feel like pressed to hers—which was a completely unacceptable and inappropriate thing to be wondering.

She was not going to kiss this man. She hardly knew this man. This evening was not about kisses and she desperately needed to remember that.

“Don’t look now, but here comes my father.” Preston’s gaze had shifted. He was looking out across the front yard. Which meant maybe he hadn’t seen her staring at his lips—she hoped. “Whatever he says, don’t believe a word of it.”

She turned to look. A tall, rangy white-haired man with a thick, walrus-worthy moustache came striding toward them dressed in a pair of jeans that had seen better days and one of those waffle-weave shirts that looked like it doubled as his pajamas. He had bushy gray brows and a definite gleam in his

eyes.

“Preston,” he said, his voice deep and rumbling and full of good humor. “Where’s your manners? You bring a lady home, you know I need to meet her. It’s only right I give her warning about you.” The old guy’s mustache twitched. He gave Belle a wink. “I’m Silas. The charming half of the family.” He offered a leathery hand.

Belle took it. “Arabella. Please call me Belle.”

He enclosed her hand between both of his. His gray eyes twinkled down at her. “I heard about you. They say you’re a princess....”

“Back it down a notch, Dad,” Preston muttered dryly.

The door opened and Marcus emerged. “All clear, ma’am.”

Silas patted her hand before letting it go. “A bodyguard. I can tell by that thing in his ear. And the lack of any facial expression whatsoever.”

Preston appeared to be suppressing a groan. “Why don’t we go in?” He gestured at the open door.

“Don’t mind if I do, son.” Silas gave a little bow. “But after you, Your Loveliness.”

Belle grinned. She couldn’t help it. So often, people were intimidated by her background. Not Silas McCade. “Why thank you, Silas.” She led the way into a roomy two-story foyer. Wide stairs led to the upper floor. It seemed to her a sturdy, solid house. A house that could do with a woman’s touch—some brighter colors, different curtains. But still, it was a fine house. Clean and

well-maintained.

“Let’s go in the living room.” Preston helped her out of her coat and hung it on the hall tree, along with his own and that handsome cowboy hat he always wore. Then he gestured toward the open double door to her left. She went in. The McCade men followed. Marcus remained behind, near the front door. Preston told her, “Have a seat.”

She did, on the sofa.

Silas took an easy chair across from her. “A little whiskey would be welcome, son. You, Belle?”

“Nothing right now, thank you.”

Preston poured a drink, gave it to his father and sat down in the other easy chair.

Silas started talking. About how he had the foreman’s cottage across the yard, about how it got lonely at the ranch on a cold winter night. “Nice,” he said, “to have a little feminine company around this old place.” He started in about the horses they raised. “Preston’s good with horses and our breeding program is one of the best in the state. But I’m what they call a natural. You heard about those horse whisperers? I can do them one better. I don’t even have to whisper. A horse just naturally wants to please me. They know what I’m thinking and they do what I want them to do without me having to breathe a word.”

Preston advised softly, “Don’t let false modesty stand in your way, Dad.”

“Never have. Never will.” Silas drained the last of his drink

and stood again. “Well, I guess I’ve monopolized the conversation enough for this evening.” He gave a nod of his shining silver head. “Belle, it’s been a delight to meet you.”

“And to meet you, Silas.”

Now Silas seemed almost shy. “You come back again. Anytime. Often.”

“Thank you.”

He left them.

Preston waited until the front door closed behind him. “No one quite like my dad.”

“He’s a charmer, definitely.”

“For God’s sake, don’t ever tell him that. He’s impossible to live with as it is.”

“I doubt that. I’m guessing he’s good company. And that the two of you get along quite well together.”

Preston looked at her levelly then. “Yeah, you guessed right.”

She thought of her cousin Charlotte, her companion, who was back at their lodgings, with Ben. She counted on Charlotte in so many ways. They’d been together for four years. And they did well together, she and Charlotte. She imagined that Preston’s relationship with his father might be somewhat the same.

He was watching her.

She met and held his gaze. It was so easy to do, to look at him. And it felt...good. Warm and exciting to be here with him. She hadn’t expected this. To be so attracted to him. As a rule, she was a down-to-earth, practical person, not prone to flirtations or

easy infatuations.

It probably wasn't a good thing to be so taken with him, when you came right down it. It was hard enough to be calm and objective about the task before her without these sparks flashing back and forth between them.

He said, "You're so quiet, all of a sudden...."

"Sorry. Just...thinking."

"About?"

"I was..." Tell him. Tell him now. But her courage deserted her. "...wondering if you have this big house all to yourself?"

"I do. My dad moved across the yard when I got back from college. He said it was a fine thing that I wanted to work with him. But the house would be mine one day and I might as well lay claim to it. He said the smaller house suited him. Doris, our longtime housekeeper, used to live in. But she remarried last year and moved to her new husband's place. He's got five acres not far from here. She comes in Monday through Friday to clean—here and across the yard at the old man's place. She also cooks for us."

"How many hired men do you have here?"

"We keep two hands on year-round, and then hire at least two more in the spring. There's another house, the men's cabin, with a living area downstairs and an open sleeping loft that holds six beds."

She remembered. "The cabin near the barn?"

"That's right. Doris cooks for the hands, too, Monday through Friday. Weekends, we play the meals by ear. It works out fine."

He would need a full-time nanny. Ben would change his life completely. He had no idea....

In her mind's eye, she saw him, suddenly, sitting in Anne's lap, his blond head tipped back to smile at her adoringly, in those last days before she grew too ill to sit up.

Anne.

A sudden, hard wave of loss rolled through her. Her stomach knotted, her throat clutched and tears welled. She swallowed them down, blinked the moisture away.

"Belle?" He was rising from his chair. "What happened? What did I say? What's wrong?"

She put out a hand. "No. Sit down. Please. It's...all right. I'm all right. Honestly."

He sank back to the chair. "Why don't I believe you?"

Tell him. Tell him now. She opened her mouth to break the news.

Chapter Three

But Belle's leaden tongue refused to form the words. She pressed her lips together over the silence.

Preston was watching her, looking concerned as he waited for her to explain what the matter was.

She got up and went over to the big window that looked out on the wide front porch. Outside, the sky was clear now. A light dusting of snow sparkled under the quarter moon. "The clouds are all gone. The sky is so beautiful, so thick with stars...."

"That's how it is in Montana. We're closer to heaven here."

He said it so softly. And he was on his feet again. She heard him come toward her, his tread quiet but nonetheless charged with great energy, with purpose. He stopped close at her back. She felt his presence there acutely. A sense of that steadiness he possessed, of the density and power in his strong male body.

She turned to him, her breath snagging in her throat at the look in his eyes. So tender. So...intent.

How to tell him? How to say it? How to lead up gracefully to the moment when she handed over that final letter to him? It had been tucked within the letter Anne had written to Belle, in an envelope with his name on it. She hadn't opened the envelope. That wouldn't have been right. But she hoped whatever Anne had written to him, it might help him understand. She had it with her now, in the pocket of her skirt. All she had to do was bring it out, hand it over....

But then, really, maybe it was too soon. Maybe she should wait a little, give herself more time to...

To what? Any excuses she might have had not to tell him had dried up and blown away like dead leaves in the wind. She liked him. He seemed a fine man. His ranch looked to her like a good-size operation. The house was perfectly livable. And anyway, there would be plenty of money from Anne's estate. Even if Preston's personal finances were shaky—which they did not appear to be—Ben would never want for anything. His mother had left him everything she owned.

She opened her mouth to tell all.

And he said, “Tell you what. Let’s go outside. I’ll show you the stables and we can look at the stars without a window in the way.”

Belle realized she’d been holding her breath and let it out slowly. “I would love to see the stables.”

They put their coats and gloves back on and he took her outside. The icy snow crunched under the heels of their boots as they crossed the yard, past the barn to the stables, which were large and clean and well-maintained. He explained his breeding program and the supplemental lights that made the stable bright enough to read the small print of a newspaper even at that time of night. The point was to trick the mares’ reproductive cycles into thinking it was spring come January. That way, the foals were born early the following year. And because all foals’ official birthday of any given year was January 1, a foal born early had significant advantage over foals born later in the year when it came to competitive activities like racing.

His horses were healthy and beautiful. She admired his way with them, could see that he treated them well, noted the way they chuffed and nuzzled him, responding eagerly to the sound of his voice. She saw how they sought the touch of his hand.

“You’re like my sister Alice,” she said as they were leaving. They stood under the bright lights suspended from the ceiling beams, the smell of hay and horses all around them. “Her horses love her.”

“I read about your sister.”

“On the internet, you mean?”

He nodded. His eyebrows were burnished gold in the light from above. "I read that she raises Akhal-Tekes."

"Yes, she does."

"The most ancient breed on earth, a breed prized by Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan."

She was impressed. "You know the legend of the Tekes?"

"I know horses. The Nez Perce Indians are currently breeding them with Appaloosas, did you know that?" She did know, but she kept quiet, hoping he might continue. And he did. "It's an effort to replicate the legendary Nez Perce horse, which is believed to have originated from Akhal-Teke stock brought to the New World by Russian traders." He touched her hair, the lightest breath of a touch. "A Teke is a loyal horse," he said. "A sensitive, one-owner horse."

Belle watched his shadowed face so closely as he spoke. Why, oh why did she find it so difficult to tell him? Beneath the tough exterior he needed to make a life in such a rugged land, he truly was a fine man, a sensitive man. He would be a good father.

Her throat was tight again, her eyes brimming. Because she knew what held her back.

As soon as she told him, she would be out of time. Out of hope. Any faint dream she might have nourished in her secret heart that Ben could somehow stay with her...that dream was dying.

She didn't need to wait for any private investigator's detailed report. Just being around him had told her all that she needed to

know. He was a good man and he had a father's rights. And once he knew, once he got over the shock and the disbelief that Anne had never said a word to him, never made any attempt to contact him after that one night they spent together, once he knew the truth at last, he would set about claiming what was his.

She was going to lose Ben as she had lost Anne. There was absolutely no doubt about it now. She had known from the moment Preston walked into the diner that morning. It was just taking her poor, battered heart a little while to catch up with her mind.

"Belle?" He looked stricken. "What did I say? I swear, I don't get it. Whatever it is, whatever you want from me, you only need to say it." He reached for her. She knew he would touch her tear-wet cheek.

"Don't." She shoved his hand away, swiped the traitorous tears from her face. "Please. I...let's go. Back to the house. We'll talk. I'll...explain."

He was silent. His expression changed, grew harder. Closed to her. He didn't understand.

But how could he? She'd told him nothing. Yet.

Unspeaking, they turned for the stable door. He pushed it open for her. She went through, her head lowered, steps dragging. He followed, pausing, turning to secure the latch.

She was aware, for a moment, of the ever-present Marcus, silent and watchful in the shadows not far away. But only for a moment.

Because magic happened.

Magic happened and the crushing weight of her unhappiness, of her terrible obligation, of her loss—all of that was lifted. She raised her head and saw the miracle that waited overhead.

The sky was alive with melting, pulsing, vivid color. A concert of color.

“Preston...” She didn’t even stop to think about the confusing mishmash of signals she was giving him. Automatically, she reached for his hand.

“The northern lights.” He said it softly, with reverence, his gaze turned upward to the sky. And his warm, strong fingers closed around hers. The distance she’d put between them moments ago vanished. It was gone as though it had never been.

There was only pure beauty lighting the heavens. And the two of them, together, hand in hand, watching the wonder unfold.

Red, yellow, green, blue, a purple as deep as the heart of the night, a pink like the blush on the cheek of an angel, the colors moved and slid and dipped and danced across the giant canvas of the sky. Alive, rhythmic, majestic, otherworldly—perfect notes in a silent symphony.

Preston pulled her closer as they watched, until she stood tucked up against him, his arm around her shoulders. She didn’t think to resist. Why should she resist? How often in a lifetime did magic like this occur? She’d been born in a palace, seen the wonders of the world. But a concert of pure color pulsing above her, filling the endless star-scattered darkness of the sky?

Never, until that night. Never in her life before.

How long did it last? Minutes only. Minutes that seemed to her sweetly, enchantingly, perfectly endless.

But then the brightness began to fade. She sighed when she saw the end coming after all. The bands of color were losing brightness and form. Much too soon, it would be over.

And he was gazing down at her. She saw the magic reflected in his eyes. He touched her chin, brushed that rough, warm hand across her cheek.

She didn't stop him. She couldn't, not right then. And even if she could have, she wouldn't have. She wanted what happened next.

He lowered his golden head. His fine lips touched hers. She sighed again and turned her body into him. It was wrong of her, and she knew it. But for that moment and that moment only, wisdom was silenced for the sake of a kiss.

For that moment, it was the most natural, the most right thing—to press her lips to his under the last pale and fading echoes of the aurora borealis.

And it was a beautiful kiss, as magical as the sight they had just witnessed together. She forgot everything—the bodyguard waiting close by, her duty to her lost friend, even the precious child she would soon have to surrender to him.

Finally, he lifted his head. He stared down at her, bemused. “Belle...” The way he said her name required no answer. He raised her hand to his mouth. She shivered at the touch of his

lips. It wasn't with cold. "Come on. Inside..." He still had his arm wrapped around her. She let him hold her, let him guide her. Together they turned for the warmth of the house.

In the foyer, he took her coat. She gave it reluctantly. She knew what came next and it was not going to be graceful or pleasant.

She turned to Marcus, who had followed them in. "Will you wait in the car, please?"

Marcus frowned, but he did as she bade him. He went out the front door, closing it quietly behind him.

Preston said nothing. He'd grown watchful again.

"Could we perhaps...sit down?" she asked, the words carefully measured.

He gestured her ahead of him. They went into the living room. As before, she sat on the sofa, in the same spot she'd taken earlier.

He offered, "Coffee, maybe?"

Perhaps a little false courage. "I don't suppose you have any brandy?"

He went to the cabinet in the corner, got out a crystal decanter and a proper brandy snifter. He poured her the drink and brought it to her.

She thanked him and took a larger sip than she should have. Brandy, after all, was meant to be savored. It burned going down. And when it spread its warmth in her belly, she felt no braver than she had before. She set the glass on the low table in front of her.

He settled into the easy chair. "All right, hit me with it. Why are you here in Elk Creek, Montana, at Christmastime, Belle?"

Where to start? “Do you...happen to remember a certain archaeology student named Anne Benton? She came to Elk Creek three summers ago.”

He frowned. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m getting there. I promise I am. But could you just...” She sighed, shook her head. “Do you remember Anne?”

He stiffened. And he looked at her steadily for several awful seconds. But then he shrugged. “Sure I remember her. I liked her. Why?”

* * *

Pres had no idea why they were suddenly talking about Anne Benton.

He’d hardly known the woman, though he had liked her. She’d told him she was getting a doctorate in anthropology. A couple of times he’d gone riding out near the caves where she and the others in her group were working, cataloging the artifacts and pictographs in the caves, they said. Pres would stop. Visit a little with them—and with Anne especially. He remembered she was friendly, with an easy, open way about her.

It hadn’t been anything romantic. He’d just liked her, that was all.

He’d rested his elbows on the chair arms, his hands folded between. He looked down at them. “I...spent an evening with her once, just before she left town.” He hadn’t realized he would say that out loud until he heard the words coming out of his mouth.

“Spent an evening?” Belle prompted softly.

Pres didn't like this. Not one bit. He ought to be the one asking the questions—and she should be coming up with the answers.

But somehow, she brought out the truth in him. She made him want to open up to her, to tell her all the things he'd never told a living soul. "It was a bad time for me that summer. I was going to get married. My fiancée dumped me for another guy."

Belle made a low sound, of sympathy. "Oh, Preston..."

He went on, "She married that other guy on the second Saturday in September, which was right at the end of Anne's stay in Elk Creek. I ran into Anne that night, at a certain roadhouse not far from town."

Belle drew in a slow, careful breath. "You were with Anne on the night your fiancée married another man?"

"That's right. I was trying to drown my sorrows. Anne was with her scientist friends, celebrating the end of their dig. She was drinking, too. Almost as heavily as I was. I'm ashamed to say, I drank enough that my memory of that night is pretty much a blur. I didn't go home. I wasn't safe to drive. I got a room in the motel adjacent to the roadhouse. I think I remember Anne being there, in the motel room, with me. But maybe I just imagined that."

"Imagined it?" Belle was frowning.

He raised both big hands, palms up. "I don't know. I know that when I woke up in the morning, there was no sign of her and I was alone. I pulled myself together and came home."

Belle studied his face. She seemed to be looking for answers

there.

He had no answers. And what in the hell was this all about anyway? It was time—well past time—she came out with it. “I think I’ve said enough, a damn sight more than enough. And you’ve told me nothing. What’s Anne Benton got to do with anything? Are you telling me you know her? Did she mention me or something?”

“Oh, Preston. Yes. Yes....”

“What? Yes, you know her? Yes, she mentioned me?”

“I...both. Anne has been my dearest friend in all the world. We met at Duke University. She was getting her undergraduate degree and I was studying nursing. She had no extended family, but her parents had been wealthy. They adored her. She was their only child and she never wanted for anything. Her father died when she was eight. And her mother raised her alone—and then died the year Anne graduated from high school. She was on her own in life by the time I met her. And I was far from home. She and I...we became like sisters.”

He still didn’t get it. What did any of this have to do with him? “What are you saying? Anne wants to talk to me, is that it?”

“I...oh, I really am trying to explain. I’m not doing a very good job and I realize that...”

He felt that need again, the one he seemed to have around her—to go to her, to hold her, soothe her, tell her that everything was going to be all right.

How could he tell her that? He didn’t know that. He was the

one in the dark here. “Just go ahead, okay? Just...continue.”

“Oh, sweet Lord...” She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, steadied herself, lowered it. “I’m sorry to tell you, so sorry. Not long ago, Anne was diagnosed with ALL—acute lymphocytic leukemia. I went to her, took care of her, but she didn’t make it.”

He tried to wrap his mind around that one. “You’re telling me that Anne is dead?”

She swallowed, convulsively. Her eyes brimmed. She shook her head, blinked the tears away. “Yes. She died ten days ago.”

“My God.” It seemed impossible. “She was such a great woman. So young, so full of life...”

“Yes. And she...had a little boy. His name is Benjamin. He’s eighteen months old.”

Pres remembered. “The boy folks in town say you brought with you to Elk Creek?” He watched her head bob with her swift nod. She swallowed hard again. And right then, as he stared into her wide, wounded eyes, he made the connection. He raised both hands, palms out, shook his head. “Wait a minute. I still don’t even know for certain if she...if we...”

“I know.” Belle’s voice had gained strength again. She spoke firmly now. “Anne would never claim you were Ben’s father if she didn’t know beyond a doubt that you were. She named me his legal guardian. She knew I would always take care of him and that I would give him all the love in my heart and an excellent start in life. She also knew she should have contacted you. She

realized that both you and Ben deserve to know each other, that Ben needs his father and you have a right and a duty to be with your son. So she set me the task of making that happen.”

Pres was not keeping up with this flood of information. He was still stuck back there with the fact that, apparently, he actually did have sex with Anne Benton on the night that Lucy married Monty Polk. “Damn it to hell. If it happened, it was only one night.”

Beautiful Belle gave him a sad little smile. “Sometimes one night is all it takes.”

“Dear God.” He realized he was on his feet. And his knees didn’t want to hold him up. He sank to the chair again. “A boy. A little boy...Ben, you said? His name is Ben?”

“Yes. Ben.” Belle produced an envelope from the pocket of her skirt. Her hands were shaking. “She gave this to me two days before she died. It was tucked inside a note she wrote to me. She told me to...” The tears welled again. She pressed her lips together, forced herself to go on. “...to read the note addressed to me after she was gone. That note told me who you were and where to find you. Also in that note, she asked that I give you this.” She extended the envelope across the coffee table toward him.

He took it from her trembling fingers. Struck with a sense of complete unreality, he tapped the end on the table, tore off the other end and removed the single sheet of folded paper within. He unfolded the thing, stared down at the words on it, words

written in a hand that didn't appear to have been all that steady. Those words ran together at first, kind of wiggling, like a caravan of ants trudging without direction across the paper, refusing to take any recognizable form. With effort, he read it through once.

And then again.

And finally, on the third time through, the ragged writing made sense to him.

He dropped the letter onto the coffee table and tossed the envelope on top of it. And then he made himself speak, although his voice sounded rough, ill-used, raggedy as Anne Benton's handwriting. "She says the boy is mine. She says she woke up in that motel by the roadhouse with me and...she didn't know what she would say to me. So she just...left. She says when she found out she was having my baby, she didn't know how to tell me. She kept meaning to do it, but she never managed to work up the courage."

Belle was nodding again. "She told me she always intended to get in touch with you, to tell you..."

"But she didn't." How could she not? How could she keep the reality of his own child from him? It wasn't right. For the first time since he'd met the princess across from him, he felt the heat of anger in his veins, the blood pumping in furious spurts. Wrong. All wrong, what Anne Benton had done. "By God, she didn't come to me, didn't tell me...."

Belle stood up. He stiffened in the chair and watched her warily as she came around the coffee table to his side. Gingerly,

she touched his shoulder. "Preston, please... Try to understand..."

He jerked free of her hand and glared up at her dead on. "I want you to go."

* * *

Belle longed to stay, to soothe him, to ease his confusion and frustration—and perhaps even to come to an agreement about how they would proceed from there. She had plans, detailed plans. She knew what to do and was prepared to move forward.

But she understood that she couldn't force him. He would need time to process such momentous news.

Plus, there was the way she'd handled telling him the situation: badly. She should have told him sooner—and she should have done a better job of it. So far, she'd mucked everything up, taking forever to get to the point, finding endless excuses to put off the inevitable.

And kissing him. What had possessed her to think that it would be all right to kiss him? It wasn't. It was wrong.

So very wrong. She'd...completely misled him. Indulged herself in an impossible romantic fantasy when she should have kept her focus on the important information Anne had trusted her to deliver with a certain delicacy and tact.

Of course he was angry. With Anne. And with her.

"Please go." He wasn't even looking at her. He had his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. "Go now."

She thought again of all the things she still had to say to him. And then she reminded herself that none of those things had to

be said that night. The least she could do after botching her first task here so completely was to leave the poor man alone to deal privately with the life-altering information she'd finally managed to deliver to him.

She turned for the foyer, where she took her coat off the hall tree and put it on. She pulled her gloves from the pocket and put them on, too. Then, quietly, she left through the front door, closing it gently behind her.

Out in the snow-dusted driveway, Marcus was waiting. He had the SUV's engine idling, ready to go. He got out when he saw her emerge from the house and opened the door to the backseat for her.

She ran down the front steps, pausing only for one brief second to glance up at the star-thick indigo bowl of the sky, hoping to see a last echo of the northern lights.

But there was nothing and that made her sad, made her feel as though the magic had never been.

* * *

Pounding sounds invaded her dreams.

Belle struggled up through dragging layers of sleep, groaning. The room was dark. The time glowed at her from the bedside clock: 6:14 a.m.

More pounding—on the door that led out to the landing. What in the...

In the crib across the room, Ben woke with a startled cry. He began calling for Anne. "Mama! Mama!"

Belle flicked on the lamp, threw back the covers, pulled on her robe and went to him. The pounding continued.

“Mama!” Ben cried.

She scooped his warm, plump body up into her arms and hugged him close.

Ben pushed at her with his little fists and kept crying. “Mama! Mama...”

Outside, she heard Preston’s voice, followed by another that sounded like Silas. She held on to Ben, stroking his back, rocking him from side to side, kissing his forehead, whispering, “Shh, shh, now. It’s all right, sweetheart. It’s all right...” as he continued to wail and push her away. Outside, there were scuffling noises. Someone fell heavily against the door.

The startling sound brought another frightened cry from Ben. Then he grabbed on to her, buried his face against her neck and sobbed, “Mama, Mama...” The words broke her heart. And his plaintive, lonely little cries made her feel powerless and useless and somehow cruel—to deny this perfect, beautiful child what he needed most of all. He shook his head against her neck, his hot tears smearing on her skin at the same time as he pressed himself so close against her, needing comfort so desperately, he grabbed for her even as he cried for the one he really wanted.

“Darling, shh. It’s all right. You’re all right...” She pressed her lips to his fine blond hair, breathed in the baby smell of him, milky and warm, a scent like fresh bread and baby lotion enchantingly combined.

“Mama, Mama...” He let out a garbled string of sad little nonsense words.

“Shh, Mama loves you. She loves you so much. But she can’t come,” she whispered against skin. “I’m here, though. I have you. You’re safe, you’re all right...”

Outside, the scuffling sounds continued. Again, something heavy bounced against the door.

And then she heard her cousin Charlotte’s sharp voice. “Stop this. Stop it this instant.”

A few more thuds and grunts followed.

And then she clearly heard Silas McCade say, “You damn fool, get hold of yourself.”

After that, there was silence from outside at last.

Charlotte spoke again, more quietly. Belle couldn’t make out the words. Then a door shut.

A moment later, Charlotte tapped on the door that joined their rooms. Ben had stopped wailing. He had his head buried in the crook of her neck and he was sniffing dejectedly, his little body shuddering in the aftermath of his tears.

She carried him to the inner door, rubbing his back, her lips to his temple as she went. When she reached the door, she settled the baby a little higher on her shoulder and turned the lock to admit her cousin, companion and dear friend.

“The...father has arrived,” Charlotte said, her prominent gray-green eyes wider than ever. She clutched the high neck of her ruffled robe with one hand and held the other hand around her

middle.

“I heard,” said Belle.

“He wants to see Ben. He and Marcus had a bit of an altercation. They’re waiting outside with a loud-mouthed older fellow whom I’m assuming is the grandfather.”

“Has he been drinking?” Belle asked.

Charlotte frowned. “Which one?”

“Preston—but when you come right down to it, have either Preston or his father been drinking?”

Charlotte thought it over. Finally, she decided, “I don’t believe so. I think it was a case of the blood running high, as it were. They both appear sober and I didn’t smell liquor on either of them.”

“Very well.” Belle kissed Ben’s velvety cheek. He had his fist in his mouth by then. With a final hiccup and a weary little sigh, he laid his head on her shoulder. “Tell Preston we will meet him...where? It’s so early. I have no idea.”

“The restaurant across the street should be open,” Charlotte said. “I checked the hours yesterday. Six in the morning until eight in the evening.”

“Wonderful,” Belle said wearily. Maybe fortune would smile on them and the restaurant would be empty at this hour, giving them all a little privacy to deal with this difficult situation. “Tell them the diner, then. We’ll meet them there in twenty minutes.”

Chapter Four

Belle, Charlotte and Ben entered the Sweet Stop together. Ben was bundled up and tucked in his stroller. The ever-present

Marcus, sporting a black eye, followed close behind them. The diner was far from empty. Apparently, many of the good citizens of Elk Creek took breakfast before dawn. As had happened the day before, a hush fell over the establishment when Belle and the others came in. People paused with their coffee mugs halfway to their lips and stared.

Preston and Silas had taken a back booth and were waiting for them. One of them must have thought to ask for a high chair. It stood at the end of the booth. Preston, who faced the door, had a swollen lower lip and a small cut above his right eye. His gaze locked with Belle's for a too-brief moment. An echo of last night's magic arced between them.

And then was gone.

He and Silas both stood up as Belle, pushing Ben's stroller, came toward them, Charlotte at her side. Marcus hung back near the door.

Belle reached the men looming by the booth. She moved around to the side of the stroller to take care of Ben and suggested over her shoulder, "If you two gentlemen wouldn't mind sitting in the inner seats? Charlotte and I need to be next to the high chair for Ben."

Neither of the McCade men answered. She glanced over at them. Neither had moved either. Both of them stood stock-still, wearing identical expressions of dumbstruck wonder, staring down at the child in the stroller.

Ben, bundled up in blankets and a miniature down jacket, a

blue wool hat over his white-blond hair, gazed solemnly back at them.

Charlotte broke the silence. “Ahem. Sit down, please.” She made a shooping motion with both slim hands. “Sit down and slide over. Both of you.”

That seemed to break the spell. The men sat and slid to the window side of the booth. Charlotte hung up her heavy coat and took the remaining seat on Silas’s side of the table. Belle got Ben out of his warm hat and fat coat.

When she eased him into the high chair, he smiled up at her, sweet as any angel, his earlier misery completely forgotten. “Belle. Eat!” He pounded his hands flat on the chair tray—but not too hard. Just enough to punctuate his excitement at the thrilling prospect of breakfast. He loosed a happy string of nonsense noises.

She laughed low as she took off her coat. It was so good to see him back to his cheerful little self again. “Yes, Benjamin. We shall eat.” She gave him a biscuit to keep him occupied until his meal arrived and then took the seat next to Preston, who wore a winter-green corduroy shirt and a look both stern and completely stunned.

The waitress from yesterday, Selma, arrived with a coffeepot and an order pad. She poured coffee for all of them. Belle and Charlotte ordered.

Selma glanced at Silas and then at Preston. Both of them said, “The usual.”

The meal was a strange one, which really wasn't all that surprising under the circumstances. Charlotte bravely tried to contribute something resembling conversation. She spoke of the weather and of the beauty and majesty of the local forests and mountains. Belle agreed with her companion that Montana was wild and rugged and beautiful. Charlotte had purchased a copy of the most recent edition of the Elk Creek Gazette. She'd read about the various holiday events that were coming up in the next few weeks.

"If we're still here, we must attend the craft fair," she said.

Belle agreed that, indeed, they must.

Preston methodically shoveled in food. He had nothing to say. Neither did the previously talkative Silas. Both men continued to seem astounded by Ben. They would glance in the child's direction and then blink and gape. After a moment or two, they would catch themselves at it and resolutely return to devouring the enormous breakfasts they'd ordered.

Ben watched the two rugged ranchers warily at first. But then, after fifteen minutes or so, he seemed to realize that they presented no threat to him. He grew accustomed to their staring and he ignored them. He ate his cereal and fruit with gusto and drank watered-down apple juice from the sippy cup Belle carried along wherever they went.

There was so very much to discuss. But every time she glanced at Preston's battered face and saw his blank-eyed expression, she realized she didn't know where to start. And even if she had

known what to say, the busy diner didn't seem the right place to talk. So she said nothing—except to agree with Charlotte that the scenery in Montana was spectacular and she would love to visit the Christmas Craft Fair.

When the meal was finally over, Preston claimed the check, piled some bills on top of it and cleared his throat. “Belle, I'd like a few words. Alone.” Grudgingly, he added, “Please.”

She took a wet wipe from a pocket of Ben's diaper bag and cleaned the little sweetheart's face and hands. “Charlotte, could you take Ben back across the street with you?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.” She faced Preston again. “How about a stroll?”

“Fine.”

Charlotte rose, put on her coat and scooped Ben out of the high chair. She put him in the stroller and bundled him up again.

He laughed, a delighted chortling sound that warmed Belle's heart. “Shar-Shar. Kiss.”

“Oh, yes.” Charlotte leaned close to him and he made a loud smacking sound with his little mouth against her cheek. She beamed at him. “Thank you, young man—now let's put on this nice, warm hat.” She put it on him and tied the yarn ribbons under his chin. “There. Are we ready?”

“Yes!” declared Ben.

“Bundle up,” she instructed Belle in that motherly way she sometimes did as she got behind the stroller and aimed it at the door. “It's bitterly cold out there.”

“I will,” Belle promised.

Marcus opened the door when Charlotte reached it. She pushed the stroller through. Wordless, Preston and Silas watched them go.

And then, out of nowhere, Silas found his voice. “That boy’s a McCade if I ever saw one.” He said it loud enough that every listening ear in the diner was treated to the big news. And then he spoke to Preston. “And damned if he didn’t get those baby blue eyes of yours.”

“Keep it down, Dad,” Preston growled, already on his feet. He shrugged into his sheepskin coat and shoved his hat on his head. Then he grabbed Belle’s coat and held it open for her. “Belle.”

She got up and let him help her into it. “Thank you.”

Silas was sliding from the booth.

Preston stopped him. “You stay here, Dad. Have yourself to another cup of coffee. This won’t take long.”

“I’m up to my eyeballs in caffeine as it is,” Silas grumbled. But he did sit back down.

“After you,” said Preston.

She led the way to the door.

Outside, the gray sky was growing lighter. She pulled on her winter gloves and put on her wool hat against the blustery cold. With Marcus in their wake, they hunched down into their coat collars and forged off up the street, snowflakes whirling around them. Christmas decorations, battered by the harsh wind, clinked rhythmically against the Victorian-style streetlights that lined the

street.

“I would like to...apologize,” he said stiffly as they passed a jewelry store and then a gift shop, neither of which were open at that hour. “I got completely out of hand this morning at the motel.”

She sent him a sideways glance. He had his head hunched very low and his hat tipped down against the wind, shadowing his eyes. His swollen mouth had a grim twist to it. In spite of the fact that he was going to take Ben from her, she felt a tug of sympathy. “I imagine it must be a lot to take in.”

“Yeah, it is—and I shouldn’t have been so hard on you last night. You’re only the messenger, right?” He laid on the irony.

That got her back up a little. “I am, as a matter of fact, Ben’s legal guardian. So my responsibilities in this matter far exceed those of one who merely bears news.”

“Fancy talk,” he muttered.

“It happens to be the truth.”

He made a low, scoffing sound. “Here’s a truth for you. He’s my son.”

“I know that, Preston.” She kept her voice carefully even.

“And he’s what—a year and a half old?”

“Yes, he is.”

“But this morning is the first time I’ve ever laid eyes on him. That’s the truth. And it’s not right.” He waited—apparently for her to say something, to argue the point. When she didn’t, he added, “She should have told me.”

“I know. And she knew it, too. I don’t know why she didn’t get in touch with you before she—” it was still hard to say the words “—before she died. After college, we didn’t see each other as often as we might have wished. She had her work. I had mine. I lived in Montedoro and traveled a great deal, raising funds and awareness for Nurses Without Boundaries. She was living here, in America—in Raleigh, North Carolina, and often off on a dig somewhere for her studies. I hadn’t seen her in person for two years when she called to tell me she was sick.”

“You’d never seen Ben until then?”

“No. I kept meaning to go to her, to meet her new baby, to spend some time catching up. But somehow, I never managed to make the time. Not until she called and told me about her illness, about how bad it was. I went to her then, at the end of October. We were with her until the end, Charlotte and I. I asked her more than once about...the baby’s father.”

He did look at her then. His eyes were haunted beneath the brim of his hat. “This way.” He offered his hand. She took it and couldn’t help thinking of the night before when he had kissed her, when he had raised her hand to his warm lips.

He led her off the sidewalk, into a courtyard between the buildings, out of the wind. He let go of her fingers to brush snow off one of the benches there. They sat down, side-by-side but not touching.

He asked, “What did she say, when you asked her about Ben’s dad?”

“That it was a one-night thing. That she hardly knew the man. And that she kept meaning to get in touch with him. That she would get in touch with him—with you, as it turned out. But she did nothing to make that happen through her final month of life. When she gave me that letter I showed you last night, I was reasonably certain of what would be in it. By then, I had a good idea of what she intended. I understood that she wasn’t planning to be the one to get in touch with the father of her child. I accepted that. I couldn’t do otherwise. She was so sick. She was in no condition to reach out to you, to tell you what you needed to know.”

“But there was plenty of time before she got sick for her to have done the right thing. Why didn’t she?”

“You would have to ask her that question.”

“That would be a little difficult at this point.”

She folded her hands and lowered her head. “Yes, it would.”

He was silent for a moment. He stared at the brick wall opposite the bench where they sat. Then he asked, “Before that letter, she never told you my name or anything about me?”

Belle shivered, folded her arms around herself and shook her head. “No. Didn’t I already say that?”

“I just want to get real clear on all this.”

“She asked me not to read the letter until after she was gone. I did what she asked. I did it her way. It wasn’t an easy time. My main concern was for my friend, to help her get through the final days of her life. The only other thing that mattered then was Ben

—to make that horrible time as bearable for him as I possibly could, to make certain he knew that he was loved and safe and would always be cared for.”

There was a moment. He stared straight ahead. She feared he would say something angry and hurtful. But he surprised her. In the end, he leaned toward her, bumping his shoulder against hers in way that struck her as reluctantly companionable. “Okay,” he said. “I’m sorry. I am. I know this isn’t your fault, that you’re doing the best you can here. I’m sorry you lost your friend. I’m furious at Anne, but I still can’t believe that she’s...no longer on this earth. It’s awful that she died. But the hard truth is that I’ve been a father for a year and a half and I just found out yesterday that I have a son. I want someone to blame for that and you’re way too damn convenient.”

“Yes,” she said softly. “I can see that.”

He stared at that brick wall some more. “She died less than two weeks ago, you said?”

“Yes.”

“I gotta hand it to you.” His voice was rough with carefully contained emotion. “You got here fast.”

“There seemed...no excuse to put it off. Though I must confess, Preston, I wanted only to put it off, to take Ben home with me to Montedoro and bring him up as my own.”

“But you couldn’t. You did the right thing.”

She turned toward him on the bench. “Please. She’s gone. Don’t hate her. She did the best she could. And she was Ben’s

mother. Don't...poison her memory for him."

He was looking in her eyes now. His mouth was grim, but his gaze was warmer than before. "I would never do that."

She did reach out then. She laid her hand on his arm. Beneath the sleeve of his coat, she felt the strength of him, that steadiness she'd admired from the first. "Good. I didn't think you would."

He looked down at her hand. She withdrew it. He said, "It was wrong what she did. I don't think I'll ever get over that. But that's not something the child has to know about. From what you're describing, she was a good mother. A loving mother."

"Oh, yes. She was."

"I'll, uh, focus on that."

"I'm grateful that you will." She wished she could make him truly understand the good, generous heart of her lost friend. But she didn't really understand herself why Anne hadn't done the right thing concerning her child's father. She put her hands between her knees, rubbed them together—and gave it one more shot. "Anne was...so independent. She never wanted to be tied down. She had her work that she loved. I don't think she ever planned to marry. And when she got pregnant with Ben... I don't know. She was happy to be having a baby. She told me so more than once, when we would speak on the phone. And then after Ben was born, I could hear the joy in her voice every time she mentioned her baby. But she still had no desire to have a husband, to make the traditional sort of family."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.