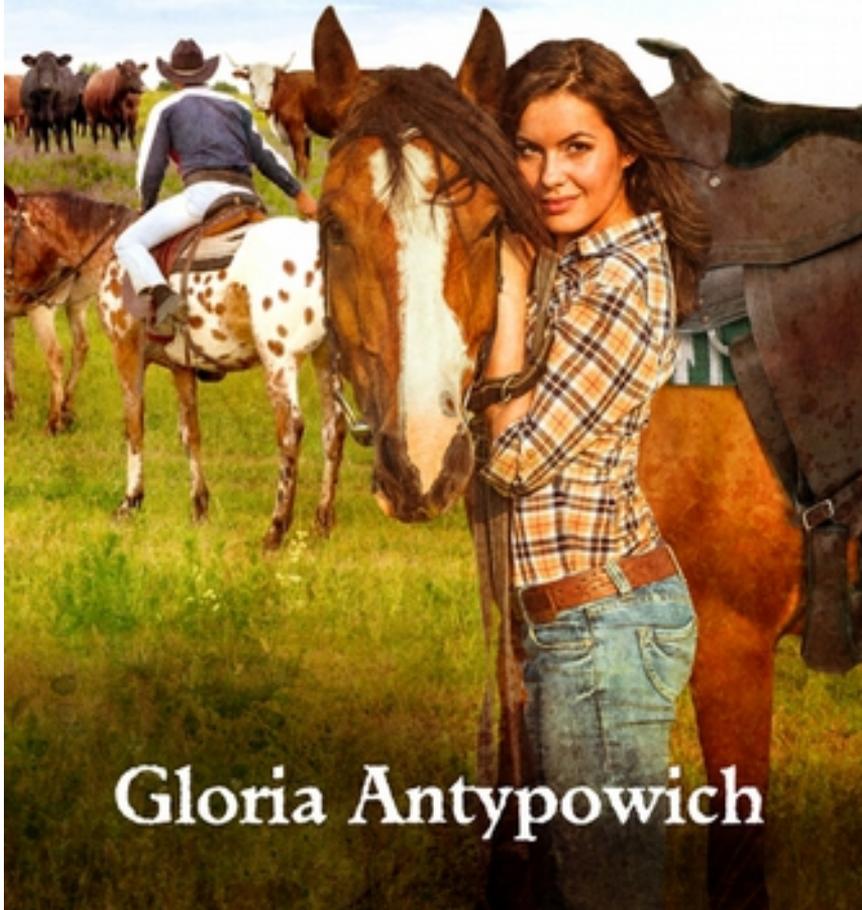


THE SECOND TIME AROUND

Book One of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series



Gloria Antypowich

The Second Time Around

*Book One
of the
Belanger Creek Ranch Series*

*by
Gloria Antypowich*

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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 any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

NOTE: This book has undergone an extensive rewrite since its first publication as *Hearts At Risk, Book one of the Thompson Family Trilogy*.

Contemporary Fiction/Western Romance/Adult Content

5 stars! Reviewed By Gisela Dixon for Readers' Favorite

The Second Time Around (Belanger Creek Ranch Book 1)... by Gloria Antypowich is an intense, realistic love story that is not the usual boy-meet-girl type. I loved reading about life on the ranch and the outdoors lifestyle that goes with it. I also found Frank's character to be superbly portrayed, and hopefully a book like this will open up the discussion about mental health and mental illnesses and how devastating they can be. I actually liked both of the central protagonists and found myself rooting for them. A great new novel in the romance genre and a fun read!

5 stars! Reviewed By Faridah Nassozi for Readers' Favorite

The Second Time Around by Gloria Antypowich is an enthralling contemporary romance story with a captivating plot and fresh characters, set against the serene and enchanting background of a beautiful ranch. Gloria Antypowich's incredible writing brought out the characters and their inner wars and wounds perfectly. Frank and Colt brought out a whole mixture of feelings in me; sometimes I wanted to give them each a hug and ease their pain, and at other times they were so infuriating I felt like smacking them on the head. Their story is a perfectly portrayed example of how fear of being hurt again can get in the way of true love

4 stars. Reviewed By Tina Gibbons for Readers' Favorite

Gloria Antypowich has created a world with vibrant characters in The Second Time Around. Frank - a very interesting name for a lead female character - can do anything a male ranch hand can do and better. She's been hurt and she's vulnerable, but she's strong and independent at the same time. Her attraction to Colt sizzles and their chemistry is undeniable. They both make their share of bad decisions trying to find the right path. Painful moments brought tears to my eyes, and the stubborn streak in that cowboy, well, it's

what kept me reading. Shauna Lee is also a multidimensional character. I wanted to dislike her for being in Frank's way, but I couldn't. Part of the second book in the series was included. I look forward to reading that installment to continue Shauna Lee's story and find out more about her.

5.0 out of 5 stars A Great Read!

Amazon.com Review By Kathleen Ball

I love a book full of emotion and *The Second Time Around* is such a book. One minute I was hopeful and the next I was near tears. Gloria Antypowich has written a winner!! Her characters are flawed and true to life. The story is complex with the right mix of action and emotion. This book is a keeper- the type you'll want to read again!

5 stars By Juliette Douglas

Loved It! Author Antypowich pulled me in gently and before I knew it, finished the book in 3 hours. Just a delightful, wonderful afternoon read! The two main characters fought their feelings for each other like they were fighting the plague. Lots of tugs, tension and pulls. I like a book with good descriptions and this author did that for me. I love the author's writing style...and well...hummm...will have to read her others now.... Well done!

5 stars review By Picky

What an absolutely charming read. As my name states, I'm very picky about what I read. I start books and if they don't grab me within moments, I shut them. I started this book and was amazed to find myself drawn in almost without even realizing. And the key was dialogue. This author writes dialogue like nobody's business. The exchanges are crisp, each voice distinct, and—most importantly—it sounds authentic.

Speaking of which, this author also knows her way around a rodeo/ranch/farm. The rustic setting (rustic to this city gal, anyway) was perfectly drawn, the details rendered without bogging me down with vocab I didn't understand, and woven in seamlessly

5 stars By Cathy Poole

Gloria Antypowich delivers an amazing story!! A fast moving story, that is most definitely a page turner! Once you pick up this book, you cannot put it down until you are done. I promise the story will leave you with a smile on your face and a song in your heart. Well done Gloria!!!!

4 stars By Frank Daley

Gloria Antypowich...demonstrates a good knowledge of human nature in this take of a woman who has suffered three devastating losses in a short period, something most of us have also experienced. Her central character is a feisty, ex-tom-boy named Frank, who is a vet and, having grown up on a ranch, a pretty good horsewoman and stable hand. She meets a guy whose opinion of woman is pretty low and she straightens him out right smartly. My main interest was in how she handled Frank's depression and although, she does not belabor the issue, Frank's attitudes and behaviors reflect the condition well. Ms Antypowich also writes cleanly and clearly and the story develops smoothly.

5 stars from By mbsgreg

Really sweet story with characters you would love to have as friends. I read it quite quickly and stayed up into the wee hours to see what would happen next.

I really love stories with strong independent women and the character Frank Lamonte fit the bill to a tee. She, yes I said she, is bright and gutsy and while she is obviously attractive to the male

population, she never comes across as conceited, but more as a wholesome country girl. However, bear in mind that even though I used the word 'wholesome' never fear, this book is not lacking in the spice department, but the author still knows how to titillate the reader without going over the top, so don't expect full on erotica..

In the book, Frank suffers from depression... I appreciate that the author touched on the subject of mental illness, as it is so prevalent nowadays and we all need to be able to talk about it just like any other illness without feeling as if it is something we should be able to snap out of, or be ashamed of having.

I also loved the chemistry between Frank Lamonte and Colt Thompson. While it wasn't quite love at first sight (without giving too much away) it was really sweet how the relationship unfolded slowly but surely even though due to past hurts on both their parts, they were both guarding their hearts

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the many people who struggle with depression, whether in its mildest form or in its darkest, most debilitating way. Millions of people, in all walks of life, experience it in varying degrees.

I strongly believe that mental illness is a subject that needs to be talked about honestly and openly. Shining the light on it makes people aware and, hopefully, more willing to seek help.

People don't hesitate to go for treatment when they have a physical illness, like heart disease, cancer or diabetes. Depression is no different. Sadly, some people still feel there is a stigma attached to being diagnosed with a “mental illness.” That is often the biggest obstacle to seeking help. I believe that early professional diagnosis is important. Today, medication is only one of the tools available to aid long term recovery. If you suffer from symptoms of depression, please go to your doctor. If you recognize those symptoms in someone else, please encourage them to get help, even though they may be resistant to the idea. Most importantly, don't try to ignore the symptoms, thinking they'll go away.

I am not a stranger to depression. I have experienced it twice. The first time it happened, I justified what was happening as being the result of stress. The happy, cheerful person I had been, disappeared. I became tearful and overly emotional. I worried constantly. I had insomnia and was always tired. I had trouble concentrating, and it became difficult for me to believe in myself, to trust my decisions. The asthma, which I had dealt with for years, went off the chart. After a time, my employer became concerned for my well-being and encouraged me to seek medical help. Once I did that, my life started to improve, but recovery didn't happen

overnight. The second time, I recognized the symptoms and went to my doctor immediately. Once I started taking medication, I got back on track quickly. Today, I am a happy person who loves life, but I maintain an awareness of how I'm feeling.

In The Second Time Around, Frank Lamonte has dealt with a series of traumatic personal setbacks, and experienced feelings that she has thought of as "the blues" for several months. Frank's boss is concerned for her well-being. He insists that she get help and places her on an indefinite leave of absence. This action is the impetus for the rest of the book. This is a work of fiction and I did not go into great depth about depression.

OTHER BOOKS
by Gloria Antypowich

Full Circle, Book Two, of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series
The Hand of Fate, Book Three, of the Belanger Creek Ranch
Series
Second Chances, Book Four, of the Belanger Creek Ranch
Series

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I want to express heartfelt appreciation to the following people who read and reread this manuscript, edited it and seeing it through fresh eyes, have made unbiased suggestions: Monicka Gregory, Sharron Hynes, Darlene Bell, Diane Maureen Pleasance, Cathy Hoy, and Donna Wassenaar Rezansoff. There were times when I struggled; this project would have been much more difficult without your support. You are all very special to me.

Monicka Gregory is a Social Media maven. She is the owner Bizz~Linkzz Social Media Services. She also has a successful web page of her own; Kids Goals at <http://kidsgoals.com/>

Sharron Hynes is a longtime friend, who is very creative in her own right. She designs and sells beautiful all-occasion cards and business cards. She is a musician and singer. She and her husband, Mel, sing and play with their band the Kootenay Legends. Their CD's are enjoyed by many people around the world.

I also want to say a big Thank You to Steve Caresser and *the team at ePrintedBooks*-(<http://eprintedbooks.com/>)

Steve Caresser and I have worked together before, and I appreciate the quality of work that he produces. It is a pleasure to work with him again. ePrintedBooks offers a wide range of author services, as well as a virtual bookstore. Steve is also the author of five books. I have read the *Sacred Crow*, *What Every Married Woman Needs*, and *Five Gallon Bucket*. He has produced several audible poems and he is in the process creating "The Whole World News" Reality is what you make it. Steve and Jason Sinner are the newscasters for this production.

Jason Sinner is a talented copy editor and proofreader at

ePrintedBooks and I had the privilege of working with him on one of my husband's book before he edited this series.

Laura Wright LaRoche, at LLPix Designs, (<http://llpix.com/>) designed the covers for the Belanger Creek Ranch Series. She was a pleasure to work with. I'm convinced she can do anything—that she has magic in her fingers! I also discovered that Laura is an author and her creative imagination shines in that field too. I have read *both Black Woods and Black Woods Revealed*. They have a touch of paranormal, along with mystery and horror. I thoroughly enjoyed them and the image of the “beast” lingered with me for days! *Broken Soul* is on my Kindle, waiting to be read. Her books are available on Amazon.com.

I also want to thank *Jen Blood* for evaluating the four book series in the first draft. She gave me terrific input, suggestions, and encouragement. Since then, she has established a successful editing service (<http://jenblood.net/adian-enterprises/>) and has become a bestselling author. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity for me and I would never be so fortunate now. (I cannot claim that she is a close friend) I am a big fan of her writing, and I have read all of the books in the *Erin Solomon Pentalogy*. Look for them on Amazon!

And last, but not least, my husband Lloyd Antypowich (a prolific author who has published six books at this time: *A Hunting We Did Go, From Moccasins to Cowboy Boots, Horns and Hair of the High Country, A Chip off the Old Block, Louisiana Man and Grasshopper McLain and Gotleep the Frog*); also my children and their spouses, my grandchildren and the great-grandchildren that I'm blessed to have—I love you all. I appreciate the times you have encouraged me, ragged on me for spending too many hours sitting at the computer and asked when the books were going to be published –after two years, you must have wondered if it would ever happen!

CHAPTER ONE

Thank God it is Friday!

Frank Lamonte sighed when she completed her last patient's file and clicked save. Ruger was an adventuresome Yellow Lab, who managed to get out of his kennel and disappear for a few days. When he limped home that morning, his concerned owner had brought him to the clinic. Frank had assessed him before she cleaned his deep lacerations and stitched them. When the dog and his owner left an hour later, she had been confident that Ruger would be as good as new in a few days.

She turned off the computer and grabbed her coat from the rack behind her. It was closing time, and she sighed with relief, knowing that she had managed to get through one more week at the clinic without falling apart.

Before she left, she decided to check on the new foal they'd delivered that morning. There had been complications before the mare arrived and the foal was unsteady and sluggish. They'd decided to keep them both at the clinic over the weekend.

All day, Martin Cole, her co-worker and fellow veterinarian, and the receptionist at the clinic, Coleen Nutlatch, had been giddy with anticipation. They were leaving right after work to spend the weekend skiing in Banff. Usually they kept their relationship low-key at work, but today their excitement, their happy, carefree laughter, the little looks and suggestive comments had no restraint, and Frank had to fight to keep her fragile composure intact. She hoped they would be gone when she got back from checking the foal. Then she wouldn't have to put on a happy face and wish them a good weekend.

She lingered with the horses, but she didn't stay quite long enough. When she came back into the office, she heard Dr.

Winters say “Have a great time on the slopes, you two.” As the back door closed, Martin and Coleen’s laughter hit her like a tsunami. Her stomach clenched and her chest tightened. She struggled to keep her composure, but it crumbled in spite of her efforts. Desperate, she slipped into the utility room, confident that she wouldn’t be found there. Her knuckles whitened as she clenched the edge of the stainless steel counter. She leaned forward and rested her head against the cupboard, eyes squeezed closed, trying to force back the tears that wanted to spill down her cheeks. Her breath came in harsh hiccups as she fought to stifle the ragged sobs that threatened to explode from her throat. *No, she thought. I can’t do this now. Dr. Winters has to leave first. Then I can cry my eyes out.*

She listened to her boss’s movements as he drew the slatted blinds in the waiting room. He checked to make sure the front entrance was locked and turned out the lights. He whistled cheerfully as he walked through the operating theater to the stall where the mare and foal were resting. On the way back, he stopped in his office and called his wife to ask if she wanted him to pick up anything on his way home. Then Frank heard his footsteps when he walked passed the utility room to the back entrance. When she heard the door slam shut, she sagged against the counter and gave in to the dark cloud of sadness that had overshadowed her life for the past four months.

Her shoulder length auburn hair fell forward, covering her face as anguished sobs shook her body and she let the tears flow. Minutes later she didn’t hear the utility room door open. She wasn’t aware that anyone else was there until Dr. Winters’ fatherly arms enveloped her. He turned her into his chest and held her close. She leaned into his comforting strength and let the storm of emotion run its course. When the sobs subsided, she pushed away; embarrassed that he’d witnessed the collapse of the façade that she presented every day, as she valiantly tried to act like her world was still intact.

“I’m sorry about that,” she murmured. “I thought you were gone.”

“I saw your car in the parking lot. I came back to see what you were doing.”

“I’m alright.”

He shook his head and guided her out the door.

“Let’s go into my office. We need to have a talk.”

She shook her head. “You should go home. Sadie is expecting you.”

He gently led her into his office. “Sit down.” He pointed to a soft chair. As she sank into it, he walked behind the desk and sat in his office chair. He looked directly at her, but she refused to meet his gaze. He extended an arm across the dark surface of the desktop and reached out to her.

Dr. Winters’ voice was filled with concern. “Look at me, Frank.”

When she glanced up at him, her dark brown eyes were blurry from the storm of emotional tears. Her look met his, and then quickly darted away.

He sighed. “Frank, you are not okay. I’ve known you since you were knee-high to a grasshopper. I’ve watched you grow from a chubby-cheeked princess in your daddy’s arms, into a gangly, adolescent tomboy who was always at his side. I watched you learn to ride and team rope, and I was as proud of you as he was.

“Then you started coming here to help me on weekends and school holidays. I watched you grow into a feisty, confident young woman and when you decided to go into veterinary medicine I was damned proud of you. When you graduated and came back here to practice, I couldn’t have been happier if you were my own daughter.

“I hired Martin because he came with you. He’s a good vet, but I never felt he was the right man for you. Sadie said I was prejudiced; I wanted to protect you like I would my own kid. But when he dumped you and hooked up with Coleen while you were staggering from your dad’s accident and the sale of the ranch, I knew I was right.”

Frank twisted her hands in her lap. “That’s all in the past now.”

“It isn’t, Frank. You see them together every day. It has to be like constantly rubbing salt into a raw wound. I’ve struggled with it. I know what you’ve been through these past nine months.” He shook his head. “And, Martin had no compassion. He dumped you and took up with Coleen, right in the middle of everything that happened.” He picked up a pen and slammed it on the desk in frustration. “I couldn’t believe how insensitive he was. I wanted to tell him what a jackass he was; I wanted to tell him to leave. But he’s a good vet and what he did to you had nothing to do with his work here at the clinic. Sadie warned me. She told me it was a personal matter between the three of you, and from a business point of view I didn’t have a leg to stand on.

“But I’ve watched you struggle. I’ve seen the light fade out of you. You’ve tried to get on top of things, but you haven’t been able to. You’ve just kept sliding deeper into a hole of despondency.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve meant to talk to you for a while, but I’ve put it off because this is hard for me.

“I’ve thought about this a lot. Martin is a good vet and I have no reason to ask him to leave, except to protect you. If I ask him to leave, I’ll lose Coleen too. I’d accept both of those things if I thought it would help you, but I don’t think it would. You’d still be here with all the memories, all the pain. You need to take a break; you need to get away from Stettler for a while.”

Frank’s head shot up. “Are you telling *me* to leave?” Disbelief and anguish filled her voice.

He got up and walked around the desk to crouch beside her. “Frank, your mom, and dad are in Arizona for the winter. Your dad still has a lot of healing to do, but so do you. I’m asking you... no, I’m telling you, to take a leave of absence. I’m not a medical doctor, but I know enough to recognize that you are slipping into depression.”

“Jeez! I admit I’ve been feeling down and I haven’t exactly been a ray of sunshine lately but don’t you think I might have a few reasons to feel blue? My dad almost died, we had to sell the ranch I grew up on, the man I’ve spent five years with, the man I was engaged to marry, dumped me for the secretary in our office.”

Her eyes flashed with anger. “I’m not sick. I’m not depressed. I’m trying to get my feet under me.”

“Honey, that’s a classic response. But feeling blue shouldn’t last for months like this has for you.”

“Damn it. I am not some weak person who got depressed because things didn’t go my way.”

“Frank, please listen to me. You are one of the strongest people I know, and people don’t get depressed simply because things don’t go their way. Often, they are strong people who have struggled against the odds for too long: they try to shoulder their burden, no matter how crushing it is. That’s what you’ve been doing, and I’m not surprised that you’re emotionally exhausted and overwhelmed. To be honest, if I was in your place, I couldn’t have dealt with the situation here at the clinic. Given time, I know that you’ll get past all this and the black cloud that is hanging over you will lift. But staying here, in the mire of your hurt, is not conducive to getting better. So, as of now, you are on an indefinite leave of absence.”

Frank’s eyes blazed with anger when she stood up. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to me. You’ve been like a second father to me, and now you are turning on me too.”

He placed his hands on her shoulders. “This is the first real emotion I’ve seen you express in months. I hate that it’s taken this, but get mad at me. I’ll bear the brunt of your anger if it helps to shake you out of the lackluster state you’ve been in.

“This is tough love, sweetheart. Go to see your doctor and get some medication: then get out of town. Take a few months off. Go to Arizona and spend some time with your folks—or get a job doing something totally different. Go work on a cattle ranch in B.C., or wait tables in a restaurant in Nova Scotia. But get away from all the painful reminders here in Stettler.”

Frank pushed away from him. “You just want to wash your hands of me because you’re uncomfortable with the three of us working here together. If you force me out of the picture, you’ll only lose one member of your staff.”

“That’s not true, Frank. I’m....

“I can’t believe you’d do this to me. You know I’d go nuts in Arizona, and can you see me waiting tables? I’m a vet. I work with animals and I that’s what I love doing.”

“Frank! I’m not washing my hands of you. And, I’m not forcing you out.” He pulled her against his chest again. “I’m doing this for your own good. A raw sore won’t heal if it is constantly picked at, and that’s what is happening to you here, in this clinic, in this town.”

“Don’t.” She tried to push away again.

He held onto her arm. “Frank, do you have any friends in Stettler? Who do you hang around with? Who is your support system? Who do you talk to and share your feelings with?”

She glared at him.

“I know you. I’ve watched you grow up. You never were a giddy schoolgirl. You spent all of your time with your dad. You were named after his father and you became the son he knew he’d never have. You worked around the ranch, rode horses, and learned to rope with Clint Roberts. You never hung out with the girls. I doubt if you dated when you were a teenager. You and Clint were best buds and you hung out with him and his friends, just like you were one of the guys. On weekends and holidays, if you weren’t at a rodeo with your dad and Clint, you were here at the clinic. I wondered about it at times, but your family seemed happy. In hindsight, it was a damned selfish way for him to raise you.”

“Don’t you dare criticize my Dad. You’re supposed to be one of his best friends.”

“I’m still one of his best friends, but I’m not blind either. Maybe if he hadn’t guarded you so closely, maybe if you’d spent some time being a girl, maybe if you’d dated when you were younger...maybe you wouldn’t have fallen so hard for Martin. You had no awareness, no experience, no reference points....”

His phone rang. “Damn,” he muttered as he retrieved it from his pants pocket. “It’s Sadie. I have to answer this, but we’re not finished here, Frank.”

He gave her a stern look, as he spoke into the phone. “Hi, hon.

I got side tracked here. Frank and I have had that long overdue conversation.” He listened for a moment, and then said, ”She’s not very happy with me right now.” He was silent as he listened to his wife, and finally said, “I’ll let you talk to her.”

He handed the phone to Frank, who automatically took it.

“Hi, Sadie.”

“Frank, please come to our place for supper tonight. Going to your apartment to sit alone isn’t a good idea. I know you’re upset, but the three of us need to talk. I know where Jason is coming from and you need to understand that he has your best interests at heart.”

Frank didn’t answer right away.

“Frank,” Sadie implored. “Let us be there for you.”

“Okay,” Frank whispered and handed the phone back to Dr. Winters. Her eyes were full of tears.

The oppressive cloud that overshadowed Frank's life seemed to grow even darker and heavier as she followed Dr. Winters to his house. Sadie met her at the door with a warm hug, but even though she tried to show some enthusiasm, she couldn’t find it.

Sadie was a registered nurse. After dinner, she sat down with Frank and told her about her own sister, who had become deeply depressed. Like many people, Valerie had refused to admit that she was mentally ill, and she hadn’t gone for help as soon as she should have. The family had watched her languish in depths of despair for years.

Sadie said that it wasn’t uncommon for the illness to manifest after a person had gone through traumatic experiences, such as Frank had during the past nine months. She insisted that she go to see her doctor before she left town, impressing upon her that it was crucial for her long-term mental health.

Half an hour later Jason entered the kitchen. Sadie motioned for him to sit down at the table and join them. “Frank and I have been talking about what’s been happening to her. She says you told her to leave town.”

He grinned, ruefully. “I didn’t mean she should leave permanently. I think she needs to get away and give herself a chance to get on top of things. I told her to do something totally

different for a while. She doesn't have to tell anyone that she's a vet. That could raise expectations and put more pressure on her, and she definitely doesn't need that.

"She says she'd go crazy in Arizona, and the idea of waiting tables in a restaurant doesn't appeal to her. But it's calving time and I'm sure there must be a ranch looking for a hand that has her experience. It would be a total change of pace for her."

He looked at Frank. "I'd give you a good reference. You worked with animals for years before you became a vet and you've always been good with them. You understand animals; maybe better than you actually do humans."

Frank leaned her elbows on the table and closed her eyes while she massaged her temples with her slender fingers.

Sadie frowned and reached out to touch her shoulder. "Do you have a headache?"

Frank looked at her sadly. "Headache, heartache, body ache, brain ache...I have it. How do I deal with all of this?" She sighed. "I love my apartment and I waited so long to get one in that area. But if I go away, I'll have to give it up. And what would I do with my furniture?"

Dr. Winters leaned back in his chair and stretched out his legs. "Let's think about this, Frank. The bigger ranches pay decent wages and board and room is usually included. You wouldn't have a lot of other expenses. You could keep your apartment: you'll have your job at the clinic when you are well and ready to come back. All I ask is that you take enough time to get back on your feet. I want to see the twinkle in your eyes again and that beautiful smile on your face. I want to see a bounce in your step and hear your laughter. You need to take long enough to get over Martin, and come to terms with what happened to your dad."

Frank chewed her lip. "That's a tall order. Do you really think that in three or four months, I can get over losing the man I spent five years with? The man I was going to marry?"

"Then take six months or a year. I think you'll realize that he wasn't right for you in the first place. I know you'll eventually meet a man who will appreciate you; someone you can count on

through thick and thin.”

“This is too much for me to absorb right now. I need to go home and think.” She stood up and looked at Sadie. “Thanks for supper... and the talk too. I guess I needed that.”

She turned to the man who had been her boss. “Doc, are you sure you meant it when you told me I have to take a leave of absence?”

“Positively,” he replied without hesitation.

“I... I feel lost. What will I do if I don’t go to work at the clinic?”

“You’ll find another job. I’ll help you. Tomorrow, I’ll start looking online. Something will come up. The more I think about it, the better I feel about you going to a ranch. You’ll be working with animals, and you’ll be able to use some of your skills. I’ll check out the owner.” He grinned. “I don’t want to send you off to work with some lecherous old man who’ll try to take advantage of you when you’re stuck in the back of beyond.”

“He’d only try once!” she said heatedly.

Dr. Winters smiled. “Things are getting better; you’ve shown real emotion twice in the past four hours. You’re making progress already.”

She didn’t sleep much that night and she was still tired when she got up the next morning. As she wandered through her apartment, she railed against her situation, angry with Doc, Martin, and even at her dad for getting hurt.

She grieved again for the loss of the ranch that had been her childhood home. That afternoon she went for a drive and was filled with resentment when she saw the new sign at the driveway. It was no longer *Lamonte’s Paradise*. The new sign read *The Holloways*.

She drove to the vet clinic and parked at the back, where she always had. Despair washed over her. She still couldn’t believe that Dr. Winters had arbitrarily put her on a leave of absence. She stared at the building where she’d spent a large part of her life. Finally, she put the truck in gear and drove away: she began to accept that there was nothing to keep her in her hometown anymore.

She slammed the door when she went into her apartment. She looked around the place she loved. She wouldn't give it up! She had money in the bank; she would continue to pay the rent while she was away. She vowed that it wouldn't be long until she came back to work at the clinic.

She stalked into the kitchen and made herself a cup of coffee. As it brewed, she could hear Dr. Winters voice. *Get mad. That's good. You're showing some emotion.*

"Yes!" she stormed. "I'm feeling tons of emotion. I'm damned mad about everything! Doc was right about Martin. He's an insensitive jerk. The way he dumped me proved he isn't the man I thought he was: he can't be depended on in tough times. He's not worth the heartache. And, Dad is alive and getting better. I'm grateful for that. And, as much as I hate to admit it, Dr. Winters did the right thing last night; I do need to get out of here. I need to get away from the constant reminders, the painful memories. I need to heal. I like the idea of working on a ranch for a while. I'll put the past behind me, and in no time I'll be ready to face everything here."

She called Dr. Winters. He was pleased when she told him she was ready to move on. While he hadn't found anything promising that day, he said he'd keep looking on Sunday, and reminded her that Monday might bring new opportunities.

She felt more content when she woke up Sunday morning. The heavy dark feeling that had enveloped her for months seemed less oppressive. She felt better than she had since Martin had broken off their engagement, saying she wasn't any fun anymore. She wandered around the apartment, touching things and savoring her good memories, not just the pain. That afternoon she phoned her childhood friend, Becky Freemont and told her what she was doing. Becky was supportive, as she'd always been, and made her promise she'd keep in touch.

Monday afternoon, Dr. Winters called and told her he'd found a place in Saskatchewan that was looking for a ranch hand ASAP. He'd already phoned the number and gotten information about the job. It was at the Belanger Creek Ranch, three-quarters of an hour

out of Maple Creek. The owner's accountant in Swift Current was handling the search for applicants. The owner didn't live at the ranch; he had a ranch manager on site and the new employee would work with him.

Dr. Winters was excited about the job. He hoped he hadn't overstepped his bounds, but he informed her that he'd already sent her resume from his office, along with his recommendation. Frank thanked him for his help, thinking it would be unlikely to find a job on the first try.

She was shocked when he called early Tuesday morning and told her that he'd gotten an email saying they wanted her to get there as soon as possible. Due to ill health, the person she was replacing had left suddenly, leaving Ollie Crampton, the 60-year-old manager, with the overwhelming task of calving out over 500 cows without help.

Frank was shocked at how quickly things had fallen into place. She went to see her doctor first. Then she met with her landlord and explained that although she would be away for a few months, she would continue to maintain the rent with automatic payments from her bank account. Then she packed her personal necessities and a few clothes in her duffle bag, put her guitar in its case and tucked her laptop in its carry case. By evening, the apartment was neat and tidy. She took a quick drive over to Dr. Winters' place and said goodbye. When she returned home, she put her duffle bag, laptop, guitar and camera by the door. She was ready to leave the next morning.

Frank Lamonte's fingers tapped restlessly on the steering wheel of her Toyota Tacoma. She glanced at her watch for the umpteenth time. Five minutes had passed. An accident involving a semi-truck, a pickup, and a small car, had closed the highway. She'd been held up in the line of traffic for three excruciating hours and her frustration was running deep.

There wasn't anything she could do, but wait. She checked her watch again and groaned. The owner would be expecting her at the ranch in half an hour. It wasn't an impressive way to start a new

job.

She looked out across the fenced fields that stretched on either side of the highway. There wasn't a lot of snow, certainly not as much as there had been several hundred kilometers to the northwest, at Stettler. She wondered how much there would be at the ranch. It was situated close to the Cypress Hills in southwestern Saskatchewan. The Cypress Hills actually straddled the southern Alberta and Saskatchewan borders.

During the past five days, everything had happened with numbing swiftness. Last Friday evening, when Dr. Winters had taken her into his office and told her she had to take a prolonged leave of absence, she had felt like her world had collapsed. She'd felt betrayed and angry. Now she was on her way to a new job at Belanger Creek Ranch. For the first time in months, she felt a sense of optimism.

The clearance lights of the semi-trailer in front of her lit up as the driver started the big rig. "Finally!" she said with exasperation and eased her truck ahead. It took more than half an hour for the lineup to spread out and traffic was moving freely.

It was six-thirty in the evening when she drove into Maple Creek. Darkness had already settled over the land. She stopped to take out the email and study the directions to the ranch. They seemed pretty straightforward. *Turn south onto Highway 21 and follow the road until you come to the Belanger Creek Ranch sign on your left. Turn left into the driveway and follow it across the creek, past the corrals and barns, to the old ranch house.*

CHAPTER TWO

Colt Thompson set his coffee cup on the table and glanced at the clock on the wall... again. He was irritated. "Four hours late! I wonder if this guy's going to show at all. If punctuality is any indicator of his work ethic, he won't last long around here."

"It's a long drive. Maybe something happened on the road," Ollie Crampton said calmly.

"Hasn't he heard of a phone?"

"Can't tell you, Colt. I'm waiting, just like you are."

Colt looked at his watch again. "Well, I can't wait any longer. I'm two hours late already. Shauna Lee's going to kill me."

Ollie frowned. "Shauna Lee? Is she the hot date that's kept you itching in your pants all day?"

Colt grinned. "Not a hot *date*, Ollie. We're having dinner at eight, or at least we were supposed to."

"Are you gonna marry her?"

Colt scoffed. "You know the answer to that, Ollie." He stared at his friend and employee, defying him to judge him. "We're friends, and that's all either one of us is looking for. No romantic fantasies, no wedding bells, no promises we can't keep, no storybook ending crap. And I'm a damned quick learner; this way there's no worry about handing over half of everything I possess when we go our separate ways. For now, we enjoy each other's company; we're compatible in other ways. It works for us."

"You're too young to be so jaded, son."

Colt stood up. "Sounds like the pot calling the kettle black, old timer. I don't see a ball and chain attached to you."

"I'm not thirty-five either."

"You were at one time."

"Look, you young pup! My life was totally different from

yours. You've got security, a business. I was a rolling stone until I landed here. I had no prospects, could hardly support myself. But I can tell you from experience; life is lonely without someone to share it with."

"I speak from experience, too. It can be a whole lot worse than lonely if you get tangled up with the wrong one. I had my heart ripped out and my life turned upside down once already. I won't be going back for another crack at it."

Ollie shook his head. "You're wasting your time with that woman. Other than the fringe benefits, you have nothing in common. She has no interest in the life you live. You love this ranch, and you've been a farmer all your life. That's definitely not where she's at."

Colt pushed his chair up to the table and jammed his hat on his head. As he stomped to the door, he spoke over his shoulder. "I'm not listening to another one of your lectures. I've made it clear every time you get into one of these spiels; I'm definitely not interested in putting my heart and soul on the chopping block again, so put a sock in it, old timer." He shrugged into his winter coat. "I'll call in the morning to see if that Lamonte character shows up. If not, I'll come back out to help you until we find someone else." He slammed the door when he went outside.

Ollie shook his head as he listened to Colt's diesel pickup roar out of the yard and down the driveway. He poured himself another cup of coffee and sat down at the table. He glanced at the clock again. "Okay, Frank Lamonte, where are you?" He yawned as he ran his hands along his jaw and up into his hair. "I hope you're as good as your references. I need some help here."

When the phone rang, he pushed back his chair and hurried to the office. The line was filled with static and breaking up, but he could make out a woman's voice. "Could I s... to... Thom...son?"

"He just left for Swift Current."

"Oh..." He could hear the frustration in her voice.

"He was late getting away. He'll be there in a few hours."

The connection wafted off into a hollow echo and Ollie replaced the receiver. He went back into the living room and sank

down on the couch. He didn't need to check the cows for three-quarters of an hour. He'd just close his eyes for ten minutes or so.

Frank sighed as she shut off her phone. She'd lost service. *Damn! Thompson has already left. He probably thinks I'm a lost cause.*

She turned onto Highway 21 South and followed the road. Fifteen minutes later she met a pickup sliding around a curve. *What an Idiot!* Heart in her throat, Frank fought to hold the Tacoma onto the outside edge of the pavement. She lost the battle and the wheels sank into the snow and sucked her into its depth. She put it into reverse and tried to ease the truck back, but the wheels just spun. She turned the dial to engage the four-wheel drive, but the vehicle wouldn't budge. She leaned her head against the steering wheel. "Damn, damn, double damn," she cursed. "Can anything else go wrong?"

Colt Thompson handled the big pickup with ease. He'd driven the road so often, he knew it like the back of his hand and he'd barely noticed the smaller truck as he'd drifted through the curve. His mind was focused on the conversation he'd had with his ranch manager before he'd left. "Why doesn't he mind his own business?" he fumed. "He's right about Shauna Lee not wanting anything to do with the farm or a ranch, but it's not like I'm going to marry her. Why can't he get that through his thick head?" He was well out of the curve before the flash of brake lights caught his attention. "Shit, that guy must have gone off the road." He braked sharply, then backed up and jumped out.

A tall slender woman got out of the red pickup. He didn't get a good look at her, just a vague impression of a messy mass of auburn hair pulled untidily up on top of her head, but he definitely caught the tongue-lashing she threw at him. "Do you drive much, you idiot?" she yelled. "You hogged my side of the road when you barreled through here. You almost hit me!"

He bit back at her. "Do you drive much? This isn't the Trans Canada. It's a country road. You're the one who panicked and

pulled over so far that you got sucked into the bank. You're lucky I stopped." He looked the situation over, then stalked back to his truck and pulled out a short rope. "Look, I'm in a hurry. Get in your truck while I hook this to your bumper. When I give you a yell, put your truck in reverse and I'll pull you back onto the road."

Frank glared at his broad back while he hooked the tow rope between the two vehicles. When he walked to the open door of his truck, she jumped into hers. She had barely started it when he yelled for her to shift into reverse. He eased forward, giving her vehicle a gentle pull. When she felt it move she hit the gas pedal and the Toyota flew backward. She braked hard, bringing it to a stop inches before she crashed into the bigger pickup.

He got out of the truck, cursing. "You almost hit my damned truck!" He glared at her in the dim glow of the taillights and shook his head. He was still mumbling while he unhooked both ends of the rope and threw it into the box of his pick-up. Then he turned toward her and brushed his hands together as if he was washing them of her. "I have no idea where you're headed, lady, but you're an accident waiting to happen. I'm just glad I won't be around for the next disaster." Then he jumped into his vehicle and sped away.

Frank was embarrassed. It had been a long day and she was tired. In hindsight, she realized she had panicked when she saw him careening around the curve, with the rear end of his truck drifting slightly to her side of the road. And then, she'd let his attitude unnerve her and she'd lost her cool. She felt like a fool; she'd known better than to hit the gas pedal so hard. Fortunately, she'd been able to stop before she slammed into his truck. She sighed and shifted the pickup into drive. "Well, thank God for small mercies. I'm sure I'll never see him again."

Half an hour later, the lights of her pickup shone on the sign she'd been looking for: *Belanger Creek Ranch*. She put on her signal light and turned left into the driveway. She drove across the creek and sighed with relief when she saw the lights that flooded a long line of corrals. She kept following the road until she drove past a barn and various outbuildings, and then pulled up in front of an older ranch house.

She yawned as she turned the key to shut off the motor, then sat for a moment, staring at the house. There was no sign of life, but a dim light shone inside and she noted a constant flicker of light that could be a TV playing. *This has to be it. Let's hope he's not so ticked about how late I am, that I'm fired before I start the job.*

She opened the truck door and slid out onto the packed snow. "Oh...it feels so good to stand up and stretch." She walked along the shoveled walkway, stepped up a couple of steps and then knocked on the door. No one came, so she knocked harder and waited.

She was getting cold. Finally, she tried the doorknob. It wasn't locked, so she opened the door and leaned inside. "Mr. Crampton, are you here?"

No answer. She stepped inside and yelled again, but there still was no answer.

Maybe he's out checking calves. I'll put on my work clothes and walk out to the corrals. I can give him a hand. Frank walked back to her pickup and opened the back door. She took out her insulated overalls and pulled them on over her jeans. Then she slipped into her warm jacket, grabbed her gloves and a toque and headed toward the corals.

Most of the cows were lying down and those with calves had them sleeping close by. A few were standing, calves latched onto a teat, tails flicking happily as they sucked. Frank was alert, watching for any animal that might decide to take a run at her. Cows were very protective of their young calves and anyone strange could be interpreted as a threat. She worked her way from the pen to pen and was puzzled when she didn't find Ollie Crampton there. *It looked like the TV was on. Maybe he fell asleep. I should have called him again.*

She wandered through the rest of the herd, making note of two new births. When she circled back through the pens, she noticed a young cow standing by itself, in the corner. The animal's back humped as it strained. Frank moved nearer and watched, thinking it must just be starting to go into labor. After a few moments, she

realized that the membranes had broken, but there was no sign of feet. As she stepped closer, the animal moved away. Frank herded her against the windbreak that sheltered the corrals on the north side. The animal hunched and pushed again.

“Something’s not right here,” she said softly as she reached out to put a hand on the cow’s hip. As soon as she got close, it moved away. “We need to check you out!”

Frank looked around, remembering that she had seen a chute for loading cattle into trucks when she’d come to the corrals. She walked back and discovered a handling system that was set up under a roof. She climbed over the corral and went to check it out. The cattle squeeze chute was modern and well looked after. She set the automatic headgate and opened the rear gate so the cow could walk in. Then she walked along a high, narrow alley until she came to a swinging gate. She swung it open and followed a wider runway that ran parallel to four handling pens. She continued along it until she reached the end, where she found a gate that swung into the corrals.

“This is good,” she said softly to herself. “I can move her alongside the shelter and push her into this runway. She won’t be hard to move until we get to the narrow alley that goes up to the cattle squeeze, but she may be so tired she won’t put up much of a fight.”

She opened the gate, then hurried across the corral and turned the cow around, moving her along the wall of the shelter until they reached the open gate into the walkway. As the cow walked through the open space, Frank closed the gate behind them. Frank encouraged the animal to keep moving, stopping occasionally to let her pause for a contraction. They moved slowly, and the animal finally made its way to the squeeze chute. The cow balked at stepping into it. Frank leaned against her back end and pushed until she moved forward.

The clang of the rear gate falling into place broke the silence of the night. Frank didn’t see the figure that appeared by the sturdy corral fence that ran parallel to the handling facilities.

Ollie Crampton stared at the stranger in his corral. The person

removed its coat. It pushed up its sleeves in preparation to push aside the cow's tail and reach in to help deliver a calf. Stunned, he walked back to the loading chute and flipped a switch, flooding the area with light.

"What the hell is going on here?" he yelled.

Frank was concentrating on what she was doing. "Is that you, Mr. Crampton? I knocked and then I opened the door and called..." She grunted as she pushed against the backside of the calf that the cow was trying to force into the birth canal. "Oh great," she groaned as the cow heaved with another contraction. "This calf is presenting in a breech position. I have to turn it. If I can't, I'll have to do a C-section."

This calf is presenting in a breech position? What kind of high falutin' talk is that? It's 'coming backward' in a rancher's language. And she's talking about doing a C-section? He swallowed hard. She! It's a woman? What the... Colt is going to go ballistic. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded as he approached the cattle squeeze.

"I'm..your..new..ranch..hand," she stuttered, as she struggled to turn the calf."

She kept on working inside the cow, straining as she used her hand and arm to manipulate the calf. "This calf isn't that big. I'm sure I can turn it and save them both."

"What happened to Lamonte?"

Frank turned her head momentarily and glared at him. "Are you going to help me or not? This cow wants to lie down. Get in here and keep her on her feet so I can do this."

Ollie mumbled under his breath when he stepped forward to push against the cow's belly. She grunted, and straightened up. While he helped keep the cow on her feet, Ollie watched how intently the woman focused on what she was doing.

Suddenly she smiled. "That's it, baby! You're where you should be now. Let's get you started on your way." The cow pushed again, and this time tiny hooves peeked through the opening. "Thatta girl. Keep pushing; as soon as I can get a grip on that baby, I'll help you."

The cow gave another heave, and Frank grabbed the legs and held on. She worked gently with each contraction, pulling until the head and then the shoulders came out. She started a gentle continuous downward pull until the calf slipped to the ground.

Frank grabbed it by the back legs and lifted it up as high as she could, to facilitate the drainage of mucus and fluids. “Come on, little one. We have to get this stuff out of you so you can start breathing.” She worked, her eyes filled with concern. “Come on baby, you can’t give up now!”

She laid it on the ground, then picked up a straw, kneeled down and tickled the inside of its nostril. The calf’s nose twitched. It sneezed. Mucus flew, and the animal’s side heaved as it sucked in a breath. “Thank you,” Frank whispered as she rubbed the calf’s head.

The baby lay there, stretched out, hollow sided, but gulping shallow breaths of air. Frank stood up and looked at Ollie. “Do you have penicillin and boluses for infection? This was a pretty crude delivery, certainly not as sterile as it would have been in a clinic, but I didn’t have much to work with.

Ollie nodded.

Frank looked at the cow. “She’s not out of the woods yet. Ideally she should have had a C-section, but we weren’t prepared for that and she didn’t have time to waste.” Frank sighed as she looked down at her bloody hands, arms and clothing. “Is there an electric water trough where I can wash the worst of this off?” Ollie pointed across the corral to an orange box.

She nodded when she turned and saw it. “I’ll clean up a bit first, and then I’ll finish up here. I’ll give her a shot of penicillin when I’m done. I’ll need a bottle with a nipple, too. I have to milk the colostrum and feed it to the calf.”

Frank walked toward the electric livestock waterer, while Ollie went to the tack room to get the medicine and the nipple-bottle. When he came back, he could see the weariness in her face, but she wasn’t trying to hurry things. She finished checking out the cow and then took the bottle and stripped as much milk as she could get from its teats. Then she coaxed the liquid down the calf’s

throat. When she finished, she turned to him. “We should put them in a pen by themselves. Could we use one of those along the alleyway over there?”

He nodded. “We can take them this way.” He motioned to an alleyway to their left. There are gates on this end of those pens too. It’s closer and it’ll be easier.”

When they were finished, the cow and calf were resting comfortably on fresh, clean bedding. Now time and keeping infection at bay would be the deciding factor for both of them.

Frank and Ollie walked back to the house. She grabbed her duffle bag out of her pickup, and once they were inside, Ollie showed her the bathroom. Fifteen minutes later, after she had showered, she came into the kitchen and sat down at the table. She wore a terry cloth robe and her hair was wrapped in a towel.

“Would you like a cup of coffee or something to eat?” Ollie asked.

“A drink of water would be great. What I really need is sleep. I’ve been up since four o’clock this morning. I’m sorry I was so late, but there was an accident on the highway, and I got hung up in the traffic for four hours, with no cell service.” She yawned and rubbed her eyes. “It was frustrating, but I couldn’t do anything about it. I was stuck there until the accident scene was cleared and traffic could move.

“And then, after I got onto Highway 21, I met some idiot who was driving like a bat out of hell and when he came into a curve, his truck drifted into my lane. It was one of those big diesel pickups and I panicked and got too far out on the shoulder. The snow pulled me in and I was stuck. Thank goodness he stopped and pulled me out, but he was so rude I wanted to plant the toe of my boot against his backside when he bent over to hook up the tow rope.”

She brushed her hand across her eyes and yawned again. “I hope Mr. Thompson didn’t leave because he’d given up on me. I tried to phone, but I lost service. I need a better phone.”

Ollie handed her a glass of water. *He’d have sent her packing as soon as she introduced herself. What am I going to do?* He sat

down and watched her drink it thirstily. *I'll deal with this tomorrow.*

When she set down the glass, he said, "I'll show you to the bedroom. You need to get some sleep."

Frank stooped to pick up her duffle bag where she'd left it by the bathroom door. Ollie showed her into a comfortable room that had a private bath. The bed looked like heaven. She set her bag on a chair and turned to look at him. "Thanks."

He looked at her with appreciation. "You did a good job out there tonight. Obviously you know what you're doing."

Her expression was weary. "Thanks. I've done it a few times before, but I cringe when I think about how unsanitary everything was. I hope she doesn't get an infection."

He nodded as he turned to close the door. "Get a good sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

Frank was awake by five o'clock. After a quick visit to the bathroom, she dressed in a clean pair of jeans and a warm sweater. The house was quiet, so she went to the entry and put on her coveralls and her work jacket. After she had stuffed her feet into her boots, she grabbed her gloves and slipped out the door.

When she arrived at the corral, she went directly to the cow and calf and was pleased to see the cow standing and the calf nursing. She opened the gate and walked into the pen. "Good morning, girls," she said softly. She looked at their eyes and was happy to note that they were bright and clear. Their noses were moist, which was a good sign. She let out a sigh of relief. "Nature is truly amazing. Give it half a chance and it'll heal and survive," she said softly.

Then she began to walk through the corrals, looking for new calves and any potential problems. She noted three new calves and was on her way back to the house when Ollie came down the path.

He looked startled. "What are you doing out here so early?"

She grinned. "Good morning to you, too, Mr. Crampton. As far as I know, that's what ranch hands do during calving season. They take their turn at checking the herd. Can you tell me you weren't up a couple of times since we went to bed last night?"

He smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, but that’s my job.”

“Well, since I came here to work, it’s my job too.”

He frowned. *How am I going to handle this? Who’d have guessed that Frank Lamonte was a woman? Certainly not Colt! I don’t know how that slipped by on her resume’, but he’s not going to be happy.* He looked toward the corrals. “Did you check all the pens?”

“I did. I see there are three new ones since I was out here last night, but you probably know that.”

He nodded.

“And my baby is up and doing well. The cow was standing and the calf was nursing when I went into the pen. Mom seems to have lots of milk. So far, so good; I’ll give her penicillin for the next few days, to help fight infection.”

“Well, since you’ve already done this shift, let’s go have coffee.”

When they went inside, Ollie set up the coffee maker and put two pieces of toast into the toaster. Frank asked if she could put cups and plates on the table and he told her where to get them. She was there at every turn, willing to help where she could and she didn’t sit down to drink her cup of coffee until he did.

He looked at the woman across from him. *She’s got a good attitude and she’s a hard worker. Colt’s going to blow a gasket when he finds out, but after seeing what she did last night, and finding her up and at it so early this morning, I’d be crazy to send her packing. Frank Lamonte is staying. Colt doesn’t have to work with her anyway. I do.*”

A heavy weight seemed to lift off his shoulders and he smiled at her. “Welcome to Belanger Creek Ranch, Frank Lamonte. I’ll be honest, with that moniker I wasn’t expecting a woman, but from what I’ve seen in the last twelve hours, I’m confident you can and will do the job.”

Her dark brown eyes sparkled and she brushed back tendrils of auburn hair that glistened with fiery highlights. “Thank you. It feels good to be here. I’ve been in a slump and for the first time in months, I feel optimistic.” She sipped her coffee and then frowned.

“I never imagined my being a woman would raise an eyebrow. I thought we were past that in this day and age.”

“It shouldn’t, but the boss...well, he took a rough ride a few years ago, and he’s pretty skittish.”

She frowned. “Could this be a problem?”

“I’ll take care of it. He’s seldom out here anyway. Belanger Creek Ranch is a division of Thompson Holdings. They have a big grain farm near Swift Current and Colt looks after that end of the business.”

“Well, thanks for taking care of things, Mr. Crampton. I’ve had more than enough drama in my life. I don’t want anymore.”

He leaned forward and looked into her eyes. “Let’s get something straight right now. No one calls me *Mr.* anything. The name is Ollie.”

She reached across the table to shake his hand. “Ollie.” She smiled. “You’re probably wondering if I have a nickname, but I was named for my grandpa and I wear it proudly. I’ve been called Frank all my life, and that’s what I answer to.”

He shook her hand. “Frank it is.”

She got up and went to the toaster. She took out the slices that had popped up seconds before and put in two more. She looked at Ollie. “Butter?” When he nodded, she spread it thinly, then took the plate to the table and set it in front of him.

“I could get used to this,” he said with a smile.

“You could, but don’t take it for granted. We’re a team.”

“Right,” he said with a chuckle. *I like this girl*, he thought.

At eight o’clock, just after he and Frank had finished breakfast, Ollie phoned Colt Thompson. “I thought I should let you know that Lamonte arrived about half an hour after you left. I’m impressed. We had a backward calf last night and Frank turned it and delivered it. Mom and calf are doing great this morning. This is going to work out fine.”

“That’s good,” Colt replied. “Thank goodness he missed the ditsy city slicker I met on the road. She met me on a curve and panicked. She got out too far in the snow and ended up going into the bank and getting stuck. When I stopped to help her out, she lost

her cool and blamed me for what happened. I have no idea where she was headed, but I'm certain she's either buried in another snow bank, or maybe, she got lucky and managed to make it out of the country. Either way, all I can say is good riddance! We don't need that kind hanging around."

Ollie almost choked. *Damned—that must have been Frank.*

CHAPTER THREE

The remainder of the calving season passed without serious problems and Frank and Ollie worked together like a well-fitting pair of gloves. March slipped into April, April slipped into May. One evening, Ollie and Frank were discussing plans for branding while they lingered over supper.

“Colt will come out to help,” Ollie remarked as he toyed with his fork.

“I’ll get to meet him then. I’ve been here for two and a half months and he’s never come around. It seems weird.”

Ollie shook his head. “It’s not unusual. He pretty much leaves the ranch up to me. His accountant and bookkeeper in Swift Current handles payroll, and as you know, she deposits our paychecks directly into our bank accounts. Colt and I talk on the phone regularly, but unless I have a problem, there are times when he doesn’t actually come out here for months.

“Right now he’s seeding. It’s been a late spring, so he’s on a big push to get everything done. His heart is here on the ranch and he used to live here until his dad had a serious heart attack a year and a half ago. Then Colt had to go back to the farm. Bob Thompson has been warned to avoid stress, but he’s always worrying about things and trying to stay in control. It’s tough on Colt because it’s a constant battle. At times, the old man resents him and gets pretty owly. And, of course, Bob wants to run the equipment, even though he’s been warned not to push it and get overtired.”

Frank nodded. “He sounds like my dad, but when he got hurt, the doctor laid it on the line. He told Dad that he had to sell the ranch. It was a tough thing to accept, but Dad had so much recovery ahead of him, that he knew he had to listen.”

“Colt lives with his parents. I feel sorry for him because he’s caught in the middle. He grew up on that farm. He’s an only child and it’s his birthright. Ideally, Bob and Serena would’ve moved into town and Colt would have hired a manager to run the farm. But, Bob went ballistic when Colt made that suggestion, so everything stays as it is.”

“What a position to be caught in. I feel sorry for him.” Frank picked up the dishes and took them to the sink. “When do you usually brand?”

“We’ll get at it as soon as Colt finishes seeding. That should be any day now.”

Colt drove to the edge of the field and parked the tractor. The last few acres had been seeded, and the air seeder was still attached to it. He yawned and glanced at his watch. It was one-thirty in the morning. He scowled as he looked at the truck parked on the approach. *That stubborn old man just won’t give up*, he thought as he shut off the motor.

He groaned when he pushed open the cab door. He stood up and turned to place his foot on the ladder step, then began to ease himself down it. When his feet touched the ground, he stretched his back before he turned toward the pickup. Moonlight bathed the scene and he saw movement in the shadow of the cab. Before he reached the truck, the diesel engine sprang to life and the lights came on.

He opened the passenger door and shook his head as he looked at his dad. “You crazy old fart, what are you doing out here at this time of the night?”

Bob Thompson smiled. He was tired, but he felt like he was being useful. “I came to give you a lift home.”

“I’d have driven the tractor in.”

“I know what it’s like keeping the hours you’ve been doing. You’re tired. You can bring the tractor home tomorrow, or maybe you’ll let me do it.”

“Damn it, Dad; you know I can’t do that. The best thing you can do is look after yourself and let me look after the farm.”

Bob looked sad. “Have you any idea how it feels to be put out to pasture like a useless old horse that’s waiting to die?”

Colt sighed. “You know that’s not what’s happening. You’re supposed to take it easy and stay stress-free.”

“Stress-free?” The older man put the truck in gear and eased it out onto the gravel road, heading toward home. “Give your head a shake, boy, there’s nothing stress-free about watching everyone else do what I’ve done for years, what I still want to be doing.”

Colt sat in silence as they made their way down the road. *I guess he’s right. It has to be hell for him.* He stared out at the moonlight bathed fields. *But the doctor made it clear. Part of his heart muscle was damaged by the attack; we’re lucky he’s still alive. Sure they put stents in his arteries, but he’s still short of breath when he exerts himself. And Mom... she watches him like a hawk. She’d kill me if I let him on the equipment.* He turned his gaze across the cab. “Does Mom know you’re out here?”

Bob shrugged. “I hope not. She was asleep when I left the house.”

Colt shook his head with exasperation. “Are you trying to give her a heart attack too?”

Bob swore under his breath when they pulled up in front of the house. Lights were on everywhere, and as soon as the tires crunched to a stop on the gravel, Serena Thompson came out the front door with her hands on her hips.

“Bob, what are you doing? It’s after one o’clock.”

“I know, Mom,” Bob replied.

He always calls her Mom, Colt thought.

“It’s no big deal. I couldn’t sleep, so I drove out to pick up Colt.”

She shook her head. “No. Big. Deal!” Anger and exasperation filled her voice. She turned around and went inside.

“I’m in shit now,” Bob said ruefully.

“You have it coming, Dad.”

Colt slept in the next morning. By the time he came downstairs, breakfast was over and the dishes were done. His mom was working in the backyard; his dad was sitting in the wicker

lounge on the front deck.

Colt made himself a couple of pieces of toast and poured himself a cup of coffee, then went out and sat beside him. They shared casual conversation while Colt ate his toast and sipped his coffee, but he noticed his dad was quiet.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he looked at him more closely.

“Right as rain. I’m just a little tired, but I can’t let your mom know that. She’d chain me up, padlock and throw away the keys.”

“Why don’t you catch a snooze? I’ll give Ben Norland a call and if he’s busy, I know Norm Walters will come by and drive me out to the tractor.

Bob scowled. “Judas Priest man, quit trying to baby me. I can drive you out to the tractor. I’m tired, not dead. Those two have been working the same shifts as you. They need a break too.” He stood up. “Let’s go.”

“I’ll put my dishes inside and let Mom know what we’re doing.”

“Just keep your mouth shut. We’ll be back before she knows we’re gone. No point in riling her up again. She’s still mad about last night.” He walked toward the pickup and got behind the wheel.

Colt took his dishes inside, then leaned out the back door and yelled to his mom, letting her know that they were leaving to bring the tractor home. When she nodded her head with resignation, he said, “We won’t be long, I promise.”

The two men rode in silence on the way to the field. Bob got out of the truck and watched Colt put the seeder in transport mode. He waited until Colt had pulled out onto the road, then he got into the pickup and followed him home.

He should have gone ahead, Colt mused. The poor guy, I feel sorry for him. He’s probably trying to make the drive last as long as he can.

When they reached the farm, Bob parked in front of the house and went inside. Colt came in twenty minutes later after he parked the equipment by the machine shed and walked around it, kicking a tire or two and looking for any obvious problems.

He smiled at his mom when he closed the screen door behind

him. "Well, that job's done for another year." He looked around. "Where is Dad?"

She frowned. "He said he was tired. He's asleep on the couch."

Colt frowned. "Already? Is he alright?"

"It makes me nervous when he feels so tired. Last time...."

"Don't go there, Mom. He was up late. I gave him heck, but I can see things from his point of view too. He's frustrated. He said he feels like an old horse that's been put out to pasture, waiting to die."

Serena huffed. "He just needs to change his attitude. We can still have a good life; it will just be different. I wish he'd agree to move into town and let you put a manager here, so you could go back to the ranch."

"Well, we both know what happened when I brought that subject up before. This isn't so bad for me Mom. I love the farm and I have my horses here, but it's true, if I had my druthers, I'd be at the ranch."

He looked at his watch. "Speaking of the ranch, I have to phone Ollie today and set up a date to start branding. We need to get that job out of the way. It'll be time to move them out to the lease soon."

Serena let Bob sleep through lunch. She and Colt sat on the wicker lounge where he and his father had sat a few hours earlier. They balanced the cold plate she'd made on their laps and chatted amiably while they ate. When they were finished, she took the dishes inside and Colt went to the shop and started the tractor. He took the air seeder out of transport mode and looked at every hose and coupling, making sure there was nothing that needed repairs before he put it in the large equipment shed, where it would stay until next spring. He was engrossed in his work and the hours slipped by.

It was late afternoon when Bob came up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Mom's got supper ready."

Colt looked at his watch. "Six thirty? Where did the day go?"

“Are you almost done here?”

“Yeah.”

As they walked to the house, Colt noticed Bob seemed to be struggling to breathe. “You okay, Dad?”

“Don’t start on me, Colt.”

“You just seem short of breath.”

“I’m always short of breath. It’s nothing new.”

After supper, Colt went to the office and phoned the ranch. He listened to Ollie rave about the new hand. It seemed like the guy was the best thing since sliced bread and Colt felt relieved. Colt made arrangements to go out to the ranch two days later to start branding.

Then he called Shauna Lee. “What does a guy have to do to get an invitation to your house for the night,” he’d asked. His voice was low and sexy. He wasn’t interested in marriage, but he had a healthy appetite for female company, and Shauna Lee had happily met those needs during the past four years. A smile played over his lips when he walked into the bedroom and laid his phone on his night table. He took a quick shower, put on clean clothes and shoved his phone in his jeans pocket as he went out the door. He smiled when he saw his parents sitting together on the wicker lounge on the front porch. *I guess they made up*, he thought.

“I’m going to Shauna Lee’s place. I’ll be back in the morning,” he said over his shoulder, as he strode to his pickup.

Bob scowled. “That boy can’t be my son.”

Serena gave him a gentle poke in the arm. “I beg your pardon? You know darn well he is.”

Bob chuckled as he shook his head. “Naw... I had good taste in women. His is deplorable. First he got tangled up with that damned Sharon. She was totally no good for him. Now he’s hooked up with another woman, who has absolutely no interest in the things that are important to him.”

Serena sighed. “Well, they’ve been seeing each other for a long time, so obviously they have something in common.”

He snorted. “She’s nothing but a convenient piece of tail.”

“Bob! That’s a disgusting thing to say.”

“No, it’s the honest thing to say.”

Serena looked out across the field. “I always wanted to be a grandmother,” she said thoughtfully. “Colt would be a wonderful father. He’d have made someone a great husband too, but he’s so gun-shy now, I doubt if that will ever happen.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photograph by Suzanne Englund

Gloria Antypowich grew up on a farm and most of her married life has been lived on a ranch. Human relationships fascinate her. Ideas for stories can be found everywhere; over-heard conversations in a public place, a couple fighting in a restaurant, a story in the news, even a chance remark in a conversation with a friend. She is enamored with the power of words and she loves to use them to paint images of characters that become so real, they feel like they could be your next door neighbor.

Gloria is an avid reader of several different genres and listens to a wide selection of music. A good game of cards, sharing a laugh with a friend over a glass of wine and spending time with her family are a few of her favorite things to do. She loves to write and says her husband was her inspiration for the heroes in this series of books. He was a cowboy, a rancher—and a lover. Gloria lives with

her husband, in the central interior of British Columbia, Canada.
They are retired now, but they still have “chemistry”.