

FULL CIRCLE

Book Two of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series



Gloria Antypowich

Full Circle

Book Two

of

The Belanger Creek Ranch Series

Gloria Antypowich

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Contemporary Fiction/Western Romance/Adult Content

Book Two of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series.

5 stars! Reviewed By Gisela Dixon for Readers' Favorite

Full Circle (The Belanger Creek Ranch Book 2) by Gloria Antypowich is the second book in the Belanger Ranch romance novel series. This book revolves around the relationship between Shauna Lee Holt and Brad Johnson. Frank and Colt Thompson, who were introduced in Book 1 of the series, still play a part in this novel, but not as the central characters. Full Circle is about the life and past of Shauna Lee that makes her go from one man to another without being able to achieve emotional intimacy. However, things start to change when she renews a relationship with Brad Johnson. Brad is genuinely interested in Shawna Lee, and is not ready to settle for anything less than a real relationship. However, their relationship is rocky as Shawna deals with the hurt and trauma in her past. Whether the couple are able to overcome the odds and lay the demons to rest forms the plot of this book.

Full Circle (The Belanger Creek Ranch Book 2) by Gloria Antypowich is an entertaining read, although at times I found it hard to keep track of all of the characters in the book. However, as I read more and the characters became more familiar, I was able to enjoy the story more. I liked the character of Shauna Lee as a strong, self-reliant person who, despite undergoing severe difficulties in her life and past trauma including death, is a fighter. Shauna and Brad seem to complement each other well. The Belanger Series keeps getting more interesting and I am looking forward to more books in the series.

5 stars! Reviewed By Mamta Madhavan for Readers' Favorite

Full Circle (The Belanger Creek Ranch Book 2) by Gloria Antypowich is a love story dedicated to all those who have gone

through painful experiences and have faced betrayal, wrath, and also unconditional love while being in their relationships. Shauna Lee Holt has left her past behind and worked hard to reach where she is today. She owns Swift Current Accounting and Bookkeeping Services. Though she is known for her accountancy skills in business circles, no one knows about her personal life and her pain. Brad Johnson, who has moved to Swift Current to set up his company, is attracted to Shauna Lee Holt. As their love story progresses, there are a lot of other things that get in the way to shake their relationship. It's a story of unconditional love, betrayal and passion, which portrays the nuances of human relationships.

The characters in the story are portrayed so well that they seem real and readers can connect with them. This love story has its complications and does not come that easily. The challenges that Brad Johnson and Shauna Lee face in their respective lives and their personal experiences give the plot many dimensions. It's a compelling read and the author's style of writing is elegant and simple but very effective. The narration is detailed, making the scenes visual to readers. What makes the read interesting is that the plot has love, betrayal, passion, denial, hatred, and anger all woven together to make it an undeniably engrossing love story. A love story readers will definitely enjoy reading.

5 stars! Reviewed By Rabia Tanveer for Readers' Favorite

In Full Circle by Gloria Antypowich, Shauna Lee Holt will have to decide whether to let the past win or her future prevail. When Shauna was eighteen years old, something really tragic happened in her life. Instead of curling into a ball and letting misery take over, Shauna worked her butt off. Right after graduation, she saved every single penny she could. She didn't take a relaxing breath until the day she purchased Swift Current Accounting and Bookkeeping Services. Now she is one of the best accountants. But even now, she never lets anyone near her heart. A wild romp in bed is the only intimacy she allows herself.

Brad Johnson owns Windspeer Energy and is totally in love with Shauna. But he wants everything from her. The woman is a constant dilemma, but he wants to know her and make her see how good life can be with the right partner. He has no idea what secrets she hides in her closet. And when her past is revealed, he is terrified because he knows that he can do nothing about it. It is Shauna who will have to fight her past and step into the future and love him. But is she capable of that?

Full Circle by Gloria Antypowich was very endearing. At first glance I felt that the story was going to be filled with clichés, but Gloria surprised me and I'm really glad about that. Shauna is a very powerful woman and I really loved that about her. Also, I really enjoyed the fact that her characters are middle aged, meaning that they are relatable and real! Great job. Another 5 star novel!

Reviewers note to Author:

I have to tell you, you are an amazing writer. You have put me in a state of frenzy. I'm crazily reading your books. I love them!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[DEDICATION](#)

[OTHER BOOKS](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[BUY YOUR COPY](#)

[BACK TO TOP](#)

DEDICATION

To all who have endured painful experiences in life:

“Cry. Forgive. Learn. Move on. Let your tears water the seeds of your future happiness.” - *Steve Maraboli*

“When we think we have been hurt by someone in the past, we build up defenses to protect ourselves from being hurt in the future. So the fearful past causes a fearful future and the past and future become one. We cannot love when we feel fear.... When we release the fearful past and forgive everyone, we will experience total love and oneness with all.” — *Gerald G. Jampolsky*

OTHER BOOKS
by Gloria Antypowich

The Second Time Around, Book One 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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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 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 *Gotleap 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

Shauna Lee Holt stared out the window in her office. A knot of frustration formed in her gut. She sighed as she looked back at her desk, her eyes resting on the folder in front of her. *Thompson Holdings: Belanger Creek Ranch and Cantaur Farms*. She flicked a loose staple with her long, brightly colored fingernail, then absently tapped the keys on her computer keyboard.

COLT THOMPSON—the name popped up on her screen. She stared at the door he had just exited. “Why did I let him go so easily?”

But, she knew why. When he had asked her to marry him four years ago, neither one of them had professed to be in love and there were no unrealistic, romantic notions. They were mature adults... friends, companions. He came from an esteemed family in the area. He was good looking and treated her with respect, was a great dinner companion and someone to go to high profile events with. They had vacationed in Mexico once, even though he was totally out of his element. And... he was great in bed.

Yeah—he was great in bed! She pushed her chair back and stood up, scooped up the file on her desk and carried it down the hall to the junior accountant that the client had been assigned to.

Then she walked back to her office and grabbed her jacket. Stopping at the reception desk, she told Christina Holmes that she was leaving early. As she pushed through the door, she took out her cell phone and quickly dialed a familiar number. She smiled when the deep, masculine voice answered. She knew he had read his call display when he said, “Hi sexy, how about dinner tonight?”

“Why did it take you so long to ask? I’m available, willing and ready!”

Josh Kendall laughed. “Alright sweet cheeks, but if you’re available, willing and ready, I’m definitely going to need some

nourishment first. We could grab a bite at The Steakhouse on George Street. Then we can head on over to your place.”

She gave a throaty laugh. “That works for me; I’ll meet you there.”

Shauna Lee pulled up in front of the restaurant and parked. She surveyed the parking lot but didn’t see Josh’s car. She hesitated for a minute, running her fingers through her blonde hair which was cut in a curly shoulder length bob. She looked in the rearview mirror and big, blue eyes reflected back at her. They were her most notable feature, wide and luxuriously fringed with sweeping dark lashes that she had inherited from her mother.

A quick glance showed that her mascara and subtle application of eyeshadow were still in place. She took a slim stick out of her purse and applied fresh lipstick. Josh still hadn’t shown up, so she decided to go inside and get a table and order a glass of wine for herself while she waited.

She picked a table against the wall, midway down the dining room. After ordering a glass of wine, she smoothed her stylish dress and stretched her legs while admiring her high heeled shoes. She sipped the wine and looked around the room.

People were coming and going. She watched them idly. Suddenly, she heard a familiar laugh and was suddenly alert. Colt had come into the dining room with another man; someone she didn’t recognize. Her heart leaped. What was he doing there? She thought he would have been back in his happy home by now. He had left her office an hour and a half ago. He hadn’t said anything about staying in town.

She watched him intently, willing him to look at her. There was a time when he would have instantly been aware of her, but today he sat down at a table, absorbed in conversation with his companion.

Irrationally, she felt slighted. If she went to the washroom, she could go past his table. She got up and walked by, tossing her hair and swaying her hips. He didn’t notice her. Neither did his companion.

She went into the ladies' room, fluffed her hair and retouched her lipstick. Then she sashayed out and up to his table. She feigned

surprise when she stopped by him. “Colt,” she purred. “You didn’t mention that you would be in town tonight.”

He looked up at her, surprised. “Shauna Lee, I didn’t expect to see you here.” He didn’t ask her to join them or indicate that she would be welcome.

“I thought you’d be home by now.”

He motioned to his companion. “We’re going to an agriculture seminar at the Best Western tonight. Have you two met?”

They shook their heads, so Colt introduced them. “Shauna Lee Holt, this is Brad Johnson. Brad has set up a business here in Swift Current. He owns Windspeer Turbines. He’s giving a presentation about small wind energy generated turbines at tonight’s seminar.”

He looked at his companion. “Shauna Lee owns Swift Current Accounting and Bookkeeping Services. Her firm has looked after our accounting needs for years.”

She looked at Colt’s companion: tall, well-toned, dark brown hair, gray eyes. He was a long legged, good-looking guy wearing blue jeans, a soft shirt, a western cut denim jacket and cowboy boots. His cowboy hat lay on the table. He was definitely a real country boy.

She gave him an intimate smile and she didn’t miss the spark of interest that flashed in his eyes. “How nice to meet you, Brad. Are you new to the area?”

“Yes. I’m from British Columbia; Dawson Creek, to be exact.”

“If you need someone to show you around, I’m free and over twenty-one.” She flashed him a smile as she reached into her purse for a business card. “My number is on the card. If you need accounting services, my firm is the best.” She winked. “And, I’m good company too, aren’t I, Colt?”

Colt had been watching the exchange with amusement. Her question startled him. What the hell was she up to? “Oh... yeah... I guess you are.”

“Colt,” she chided him. “You guess? Have you forgotten already?”

She glanced up when the restaurant door opened and Josh Kendall walked in. He sauntered up to them.

“What’s this sweet cheeks? I’m late, and you’re checking out the competition already?” He winked at Brad. “You’re out of luck

this time, buddy. She's mine for tonight." He slid his hand familiarly around her waist, letting it rest on her hip, with his fingers trailing down toward her pelvic bone. "Sorry I'm late, babe. I got hung up at the last minute."

His words sent a flush of anger through her and she felt color rise in her cheeks. Then Josh tightened his arm around her waist and suggestively rubbed against her. She was suddenly embarrassed.

When Josh and Shauna Lee moved away, Brad looked at Colt and raised an eyebrow. Colt just shrugged and the two men resumed the conversation they were having before they'd been interrupted.

Shauna Lee led the way to the table where she had left her glass of wine. They sat down and Josh ordered a drink. While he downed it, he continued a commentary about his anticipation of the night ahead. It was a conversation they had shared before, but tonight it wasn't working for her. Before the waitress came to take their food order, Shauna Lee realized that she had lost her appetite for food, as well as for Josh and the distraction he offered. She had initiated the evening, but it had been a knee-jerk reaction to Colt's indifference to her. Josh was primed and ready for a night of sex, but his words gnawed at her. *He made me sound like a prostitute... or a common whore.* Embarrassment twisted in her stomach. Then anger surged through her. She would show him who was out of luck!

She set her wine glass on the table. "Josh, suddenly I don't feel very good. I'm going to pass on tonight. I'm just not into to it."

He looked at her in surprise. "What do you mean you're not *into it*? You're always into it." Then he laughed. "Are you playing hard to get?"

He reached across the table to caress her hand. He raised an eyebrow as she pulled away. "Come on, sweet cheeks. We both know that you're never hard to get. In fact, I'll bet you're hot and wet right now, and I'm ready to go." He reached for her hand.

"I'm serious, Josh!" She stood up, avoiding his touch. "I shouldn't have called you. I'm going home now, and I'm going alone."

“Like hell you are! You think you can tease me and get away with it? I’ll be at your door, right behind you.” He stood up and grabbed her arm, trying to pull her with him.

“Josh Kendall.” She had raised her voice and heads turned. “Take your hands off me. I said *no*.”

His face turned red and he let go of her. He swore as he turned and went to pay his bill. Then he strode outside.

Shauna Lee finished her glass of wine. She looked out the window and saw that Josh was still standing outside, waiting for her. Damn him! She cringed when she saw Colt look at her, and she decided to escape to the washroom. She avoided his table on her way.

Ten minutes later she thought it would be safe to leave, certain that Josh would have left by then. Colt and Brad Johnson were paying at the till when she slipped out the door. She had started toward her car when Josh stepped around the corner of the building.

“Thought you’d ditch me, eh?” He grabbed her arm. “What the hell’s gotten into you? I don’t appreciate being embarrassed in public.”

“And I don’t like having you talk about me like I’m a common whore.”

“Funny, you never seemed to mind acting like one before. What’s got you so high and mighty now?”

“You bastard!” She slapped his face.

Colt and Brad witnessed the scene when they came outside. Colt quickly realized that the situation could get ugly. In an instant, he made a decision and stepped into the angry tableau.

“All right, you two; it’s time to cool off.” He looked at Josh. “It’s none of my business, but she clearly said ‘No’ when you were in the restaurant. You’d be wise to walk away for now. Both of you need time to rethink things and work out your problems when you’re calmer.”

Josh’s face flushed. “Damned right it’s none of your business and aren’t you one to talk! How many years did she screw the balls off you?” He laughed harshly. “Why aren’t you home with that wife of yours instead of here defending her? Don’t tell me you’ve still got the hots for our Shauna Lee!”

“That’s enough!” Colt spoke with steely calm. He reached into his pocket, took out his cell phone and flipped it open. He pushed a button and waited while it rang. Then he spoke. “I’m calling to report a problem brewing in the parking lot at The Steakhouse on George Street. I’d appreciate it if you would send someone down here to diffuse the situation before it gets out of hand.”

He waited for a couple of seconds. “I’m Colt Thompson. Yes, I’ll wait here to fill you in and I’ll give you a statement.”

His hard, green eyes pinned Josh as he closed the phone and put it back in his pocket. “Don’t ever question my love and loyalty to my wife. Shauna Lee is my business associate, and I still view her as a friend! That’s it, period!

“But I won’t stand by and watch any man force himself on a woman. The fact that she and I had a relationship in the past makes no difference now. That is in the past.”

They heard a siren blip twice and the flash of red and blue lights could be seen coming down the street. Josh swore violently as he turned to his truck. “You’ll pay for calling the cops on me. I know people in high places.”

He laughed. “Hell, I know a guy at the cop shop that’s screwin’ her, too. Good luck, bitch!” He slid into his truck, started the engine and gave Colt ‘the finger’ as he eased past the patrol car that was pulling into the parking lot.

Shauna Lee covered her face and wished she could disappear. She had been insulted by Josh’s attitude and his lack of respect for her. Now she was humiliated. Colt had come to her rescue, but he hadn’t defended her honor. In fact, he had left no doubt about where she fit in his life. There were no lingering feelings of attraction there. What a fool she was; and now she had to go through all of this hassle with the police.

Two officers stepped out of the patrol car. Colt stepped toward the one nearest to him. He extended his hand. “Colt Thompson, sir. I made the call.” He introduced Shauna Lee and then briefly sketched out what had happened.

Brad Johnson stood back, not wanting to get involved. He was grateful that Colt hadn’t drawn him into the situation, even though they were together. He was surprised by this steely, calm side of Colt Thompson. Clearly he was a man who didn’t stand for much

nonsense. He thought about the way he had made that call, knowing it would involve him in an awkward situation.

His eyes moved to the woman standing by Colt. She was clearly someone from his past; he had left no doubt about that. She was good looking. It would seem that she was pretty hot too. Josh Kendal was probably ten years younger than her, and he had left little doubt that their relationship was all about sex. She was definitely trouble; the kind of woman a smart man would steer clear of.

Colt walked over to Brad. "I'm sorry about this. I have to stick around for a few minutes. Go ahead and get set up. I'll get there as soon as I'm finished here." Brad nodded and walked across the street to the Best Western.

Twenty minutes later, Colt came into the small meeting room, followed by a subdued Shauna Lee. Brad had saved a seat at the front for him and he was surprised when Colt ushered Shauna Lee into it. "The place is packed. I'll find a spot against the wall at the back," he said softly as he stepped away.

Brad scarcely looked at Shauna Lee, but he could sense the tension in her body as she sat next to him. Shauna Lee shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and he couldn't help but notice the way the slim skirt of her dress rode up on her thigh, or the curve of her ankles and the slender length of her legs. She was petite and delicate looking.

He had set up his laptop when he had first arrived, so all he had to do now was turn it on and start his PowerPoint presentation. He fidgeted, waiting for his turn; wanting to get up and move away from her. He was uncomfortably aware of her.

He had been an onlooker in the parking lot, but he couldn't push aside everything that had happened; like the way she had smiled at him when Colt had introduced them. He had recognized the invitation. Then she had baited Colt and that had thrown him. Colt's cool, disinterested response had piqued his interest. Then Josh Kendall had shown up and the whole picture had deteriorated.

Brad gave his presentation about the innovation of wind energy and its potential for use in agriculture. He didn't miss the change in Shauna Lee's demeanor as he spoke. She became alert,

with unfeigned interest. She watched the slides and listened to the questions from the audience and paid attention to his answers.

The seminar broke for coffee after he finished and people started circulating around the room. He fielded several questions about his company's wind-energy program. Eventually, he noticed Shauna Lee standing at the edge of the group listening and talking with the others. He noticed the professionalism in her manner and the respect in their demeanor as she conversed with people. She was all business. There was no sign of the coquette he had seen earlier.

He had to wonder. Who was the real Shauna Lee Holt?

After the meeting, Colt joined Brad and helped him pack up his presentation. He looked directly at Brad when they were finished. "I need to ask a favor of you."

"OK."

"The cop said that Shauna Lee shouldn't go home right away. He wanted to have a talk with Josh and tell him to back off, and he was concerned that Josh would show up at her place before he tracked him down.

"I suggested that she come here with me. I told him that I'd make sure she got home all right after the meeting. I hate to ask you, but would you come with me? I'd rather not go there on my own. Do you understand?"

Brad sensed the tension in Colt. "Yeah—I think I do."

"It won't take long. She doesn't live far from here. I just want to make sure that she gets in the house all right. Then I'll bring you back to your pickup and I'll head home to my wife and kids."

Shauna Lee sank onto the couch in her living room. Colt had been a perfect gentleman. He'd followed her home in his truck, walked her to the door and made sure she'd gotten safely inside.

She couldn't ignore the emptiness in her gut. What the hell was wrong with her? She couldn't get Colt out of her mind. It was insane. He was married and nauseatingly happy with Frank and had the family he never thought he would have. Even though she'd never seen him exclusively, she and Colt had been 'friends with benefits' for four years before he'd gotten married. She'd watch

him change into a wonderful, loving husband and father, and she'd began to regret that she'd let him slip away.

She winced. She had made several subtle advances to him throughout the past year, but he was so involved in his own happiness he hadn't even seemed to notice.

And tonight... she cringed remembering how he had made it very clear to Josh that she was part of his past.

She stood up and walked into her bedroom. She threw her purse on the chair, stripped out of her clothes and went into the bathroom. She turned on the shower and let uncomfortably warm water sluice over her, feeling the burn, wanting to wash away the humiliation that Josh's words had left with her.

She stepped out on the mat and gave herself a brisk rubdown, then quickly blew her hair dry. She didn't look too closely at her reflection in the mirror, unwilling to meet her own eyes.

As she turned to step back into her bedroom, she muttered *Screw him*, as she flipped the switch to turn off the bathroom light.

Her eyes lit on the bed. She laughed with irony. *That's exactly what he planned to be doing; right there on that bed, just like they'd done how many times before?* She felt a flush of disgust. She wasn't certain how many times they had wrinkled the sheets there.

She sat on the edge of the bed, thinking. He'd been a voracious sexual companion. She hadn't asked for love. But he didn't respect her. *What do you mean; you're not into it? You're always into it.* His words played a loop in her mind. *We both know you're never hard to get.*

She cringed remembering his response when she had told him she didn't like having him talk about her like she was a common whore. *Funny, you never seemed to mind acting like one before. What's got you so high and mighty now?*

Anger washed through her, followed by embarrassment. *Hell, I know a guy at the cop shop that's screwin' her, too.* Her breath hitched. He had to have meant Jim Wiley. She had been with him a couple of times. Had they compared notes? Revulsion washed over her.

She buried her face in her hands. "How did I get to this place?" she groaned.

She turned back the covers and shut off the light on her night table. She lay down, pulling the sheets up under her chin. She tried to force the tension out of her body and relax, but her mind would not shut off. She could hear Josh's voice saying, *you're out of luck this time, buddy. She's mine for tonight.*

What had Colt and his friend thought? Not that it really mattered but damn it, it did matter to her. She turned the light back on, then went to her dresser and pulled out a pair of cotton pajamas. Usually, she didn't wear anything to bed, but tonight she felt naked and she needed something; as if the pajamas would cover her humiliation.

She went to the bathroom. She opened the medicine chest and took a sleeping pill, then after a hesitation, swallowed a second one to ensure the oblivion of sleep; a respite from the devil that beleaguered her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

Frank Thompson tiptoed into the nursery to peek at the three-year-old twins who were sleeping soundly in their beds. Selena's dark curls were tousled on her pillow. Her 'blankey' was clutched tightly in her fingers, tucked up under her chin and pulled up against her cheek.

She was a combination of both her mother and father. She had Colt's dark curly hair and Frank's dark brown eyes. Her cupid bow lips were parted softly and a slurp of drool ran out of the corner of her mouth and onto the pillow. She was a wisp of a child; pixie-like, but determined and feisty.

Sam was curled up in the other bed, his back to her, moonlight spilling softly over his sheets. She could hear the slurping sounds he made as he sucked his thumb. He was as sturdy as a linebacker; quiet and unexcitable. He had inherited his mother's auburn hair with the same fiery glints, but his eyes were calm blue ponds like those of his namesake, Frank Samuel Lamonte, his great-grandfather, and the man she had been named after.

Her hand moved to the subtle roundness of her tummy. "I hope you have your daddy's green eyes," she whispered as she turned and eased out of the room silently, closing the door gently behind her.

She went downstairs and into the living room and walked over to the bay window. Pushing aside the ruffle of the gauzy white Priscilla curtain, she looked out past the veranda, her eyes traveling down the tree-lined driveway that lead into the farmyard from the gravel road.

She glanced at her watch, noting that it was nine-thirty. Colt should be getting home any moment. He had gone to Swift Current earlier in the day. He'd had an earlier appointment at the accountants and then later in the evening he was attending a

meeting that the district agriculturist was hosting at the Best Western Hotel.

Restless, she wandered over and turned on the electric fireplace, then sank into a deep armchair and watched the artificial flames flicker in the darkness. A few minutes later, she heard the crunch of tires on the driveway.

Colt bounded up the steps onto the veranda and was opening the screen door as Frank opened the inside one to meet him.

“You had a long meeting!” she said with a smile, as she clasped his hand and pulled him inside. She shut the door behind him and he pulled her into a warm embrace.

“Yeah, it was interesting—not just the meeting!” He released her, took off his hat and put it on the rack, and then turned to her.

“What else happened?”

“Oh, Shauna Lee....” He shook his head. “She was at the restaurant where Brad and I went for supper before the meeting. She came by and said hello and made a hit on Brad right off the bat!” He grinned and shook his head. “That woman never changes. Then Josh Kendall came in. He’s a young high roller who works in the oil business and he has an office in town. I guess they had arranged to meet there. When he arrived, she was talking to us. He got territorial and let Brad know that she was his for the night.

“I think she was embarrassed by the way he said it. She got pretty red. They went to their table, and I have no idea what happened, but obviously the evening didn’t go as planned. They got into a disagreement and she told him ‘no’ loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear. He was pissed off. He paid his bill and stormed out.

“She stayed at the table until he went outside. She waited a few minutes and then she went to the washroom. I think she was giving him time to get out of there. She must have slipped outside while Brad and I were paying for our meal.

“When we went outside, Josh was still there and they were going at it again. She slapped his face and he grabbed her. It was getting ugly. I thought I could diffuse the situation if I stepped in and got them both to cool off.”

He looked at her sheepishly. “It didn’t work. He just got uglier and made her sound like the town tramp. Then he got personal,

bringing up the fact that she and I had been together in the past and suggesting that I still had a thing for her.

“I set him straight on that score, but his attitude really put me off. I called the cops, and then he was really pissed off. He threw some more insults at Shauna Lee and sped out of the parking lot just as a cop car arrived.”

“Colt!”

“He won’t be a problem. He was embarrassed as much as anything. I suspect he was planning to spend the night at her place, but she plainly told him ‘no’ and he was trying to force her into the situation. When the cops came, I told them what I’d seen and they talked to Shauna Lee.”

“Where was Brad when all this happened?”

“He stood back and watched the whole mess unfold. After I called the cops, I told him to go set up for the meeting and I’d meet him there when I was finished. He left right away. I’m sure he was relieved.”

“I wonder what he thought.”

“He didn’t comment. But after Shauna Lee talked to the police, they said she should wait for a while before she went home, so they had a chance to track Josh down and warn him to leave her alone.

“I ended up taking her to the meeting with me. After it was over, I asked Brad to come with me, and we followed her when she drove home. I made sure she got into the house and heard her turn the dead bolt. Then I took Brad back to his truck and came home. That’s why I’m so late.”

He put his arm around her and pulled her back into his embrace, kissing her deeply. “I love you,” he whispered. “I can’t begin to tell you how much I appreciate having you in my life.”

She nibbled on his bottom lip. “Let’s go to bed.” They turned off the lights as they moved through the house and up the stairs, stopping at the nursery to check on the twins.

“Little angels,” Colt whispered as he looked at them, smiling.

She chuckled. “They look like angels when they are sleeping,” she whispered. “But sometimes the halo needs a little polishing when they are awake.”

He led her into the bedroom, where he began to unbutton her blouse as he kissed the corner of her lips. His fingers gently brushed her skin as they slid down to undo the tiny clasp between her breasts, releasing her bra. His mouth followed the same path, dropping soft feathery kisses all the way down her throat, over her shoulder to where the bra strap had lain, then down along her breast, coming to rest on her full nipple.

She moaned and pushed against him. Three years of marriage and the birth of the twins had not dimmed the fire that his touch stirred in her. The flames leaped hungrily as they helped each other undress. They tumbled on the bed and lost themselves in the ageless ritual of sexual fulfillment.

Exhausted and satiated they dozed, Frank lying in the circle of Colt's arm, her cheek against his chest. An hour later, they stirred and moved to pull back the sheets and get into bed. Colt was quiet.

"What are you thinking?" Frank whispered.

"About how wonderful our life is; you and me, the twins, and in a few months our new baby is arriving." He reached over and rested his hand on her belly. "When I think about where I was stuck before, in my anger and bitterness; all I would have missed if you hadn't come along...."

"That goes for me too, Colt. When you told me what happened with Shauna Lee tonight, I had to feel sorry for her. I wonder if she'll ever find what we have."

"You know, I'm not sure what she's doing these days, but if any of the stuff Josh was rattling off is true, I'm concerned about her. He made it sound like she is pretty promiscuous. When I was with her, she was definite about not wanting to get into a real relationship.

We spent a lot of time together over those four years, but when I asked her to marry me; she wasn't very keen on it. If I hadn't been so insistent, I doubt if she would've agreed."

"What is she running from, Colt? Obviously, it's not sex because she seems to gravitate to that. So what has hurt her so much?"

Colt sighed. "I know her dad was an alcoholic. Shauna Lee had a brother quite a bit younger than her and she worshiped him. He died in an accident on the farm when he was three or four."

Frank groaned. "It makes me sick to think of that. How could any of them deal with it?"

"I think that is part of her problem. It was like the straw that broke the camel's back. From the little she said, her dad just buried himself deeper in the bottle. Her mother slid into depression. Shauna Lee was about thirteen when it happened. She had no support at home.

"Her dad eventually left them and I think her mom died. She moved in with a local guy when she was really young. I don't know if they ever actually got married. I have no idea what happened after that, but eventually she was on her own again. She's got guts. She pulled herself together, finished her education and got her CA."

"I wish she could meet someone she would truly be happy with."

"I doubt if she'll meet that kind of guy doing what she seems to be doing now."

"Do you think it would help if you talked to her, Colt?"

He frowned. "I'd really have to think about that. It bothered me to hear the insinuations that Josh made tonight. That's why I asked Brad to go with me when I followed her back to her place. I don't want to do anything that could be misinterpreted. I don't want to put us at risk."

Frank snuggled close. "I'm not worried about that. We're solid."

The phone rang at six-thirty the next morning. Frank was pouring coffee when Colt answered it. The conversation was brief.

"That was Ollie. He's wondering when we're going to bring the cows and calves in from the lease."

"I want to go with you this year. I'd enjoy a few days in the saddle again!"

Colt frowned. "Will that be okay? You know; for the baby and all?"

"I'm not sick! I'm pregnant. That's the oldest condition in the world and I'm as strong as a horse!" Her smile was radiant. "I was riding range when I was carrying the twins and it didn't hurt me.

I've missed being on the roundup the past three years, but I really couldn't go while the twins were so small.

"They're old enough to leave with your mom now if she'll look after them. It would be great if your mom and dad would come out to the ranch and watch them there. Then we could give them a kiss goodnight and tuck them in. What do you think?" Excitement sparkled in her eyes.

Colt thought for a moment. "Ollie would sure be happy to have you there. He still swears you are the best ranch hand he ever had." He reached out and took her hand, pulling her onto his lap. He nuzzled the curve of her neck. "And I'd love to have you with me. We made some wonderful memories out there."

She turned her face to settle her lips on his. Their kiss deepened and she could feel him harden as she rested against him. He shifted and turned her to face him, his hand moving to her breast. Fire leaped in her groin.

"Do we have time?" he whispered. She nodded and he swept her up in his arms and carried her up to their bedroom. They tore off their clothes and fell onto the unmade bed that they had left little more than an hour before.

Fifteen minutes later they lay together, panting and sweaty. Colt ran his fingers through the tips of her hair. "You're still hot, woman!"

"And you're still horny!" she said with a laugh. "We'd better get up and have breakfast. The coffee will be cold and the twins will be up in half an hour. Quickie time is over!"

He sighed. "You're right. While you make breakfast, I'll call Mom and see if they'll come out to the ranch and watch the kids."

Colt was frowning when he came to the kitchen after he'd called his parents. "Mom can't come; she and dad already have plans. She suggested a nanny that one of her friends knows. The woman was an elementary teacher. Her husband died ten years ago and her kids are grown. She retired and the last couple of years she's been a nanny for Mrs. Chapman's daughter. Mom says she comes highly recommended. We could check her out. What do you think?"

"I don't know. We don't know her and the twins don't know her. I'm not sure if..."

“We could meet her and see how we feel about her. If it feels right, we can bring her out here and see how it works with her and the kids. I’ve been thinking about this for a while... I want to get someone to help you. You handle everything so well, but sometimes I’m just blown away by all you do. I see how much work the twins are, and now with you being pregnant again, I’d like to get someone to give you a hand.”

“Colt, I don’t need help—”

He laid two fingers across her lips. “I have a selfish motive in this, too. I’d like you to be able to come to a meeting, like the one last night. Or go with me to a horse race when I go, and you could come out to the ranch for a day without having to worry about the twins. You should have a bit of time for yourself. I didn’t marry you to keep you barefoot and pregnant. I wanted you to be my companion as well!”

“I... all right, we can check her out. When are you moving cows?”

“Ollie and I decided next week will work best, so we’d better get on this nanny thing right away. I want you to be on the roundup this year.”

“Did your mom tell you her name?”

“Ellie Raines. Mom is going to call back with her phone number.”

“Does she know if she’s available now...?” Her keen senses detected a whimper upstairs. “That’s Selena! The kids are awake!” Frank whirled and went flying up the stairs to the nursery. Colt shook his head. She was so in tune with the twins that it amazed him.

He could hear her crooning to their daughter. Selena would be rubbing her eyes with her little fists, her face all scrunched up on the verge of tears, protesting grumpily as she shed the drowsiness of sleep. Sam would be sitting on his bed, calm and wide-eyed. They were as different as night and day.

The phone rang. Colt answered it, ignoring the call display. He didn’t recognize the callers’ voice.

“Could I speak to Colt Thompson?” a youthful sounding female voice asked.

“Speaking.”

“This is Ellie Raines. Connie Chapman talked to your mother this morning. She said you were looking for a babysitter next week.”

“We are. Of course, we need to meet you first.”

“I could drop by any time today.”

“That would be great. Do you know where we live?”

“Connie said you lived on a farm near Cantuar, but I don’t know your exact address.”

Colt gave her directions and she said she would be there around eleven that morning. Then he bounded up the stairs to tell Frank and the twins.

Ellie Raines was punctual. She drove down the tree-lined driveway and parked her silver colored compact car in front of the older two-story house. She noted how well-kept the house and grounds were. As she stepped out of her car, she looked through the tall trees that formed a dividing line between the lawn around the house and the equipment yard.

She looked with interest at the huge, modern combines parked in front of a large machine shed. Experience told her that harvesting was finished. The weather had been good for harvesting. She noted the large metal grain bins lined up. The little tell-tale piles of grain on the ground in front of each one told her that grain had been augured into them and they were probably all full.

She turned as she heard the house door open. Her eyes met a tall, good-looking man with the greenest eyes she had ever seen. She decided he was probably in his late thirties or early forties. She smiled as she sized him up.

“Hi. I’m Ellie. I was just looking at the combines and the grain bins. My husband and I had a mixed farm near Chitek Lake. Our kids weren’t interested in the farm and it was too much for me to handle, so I sold it after he died. But, I’ve always loved harvest time.”

Colt smiled as he watched her walk up the sidewalk. She was dressed in comfortable brown chino slacks and a fresh-looking pink blouse. She was probably about five foot four, pleasantly rounded and motherly looking; not fat, but definitely not thin. He guessed that she was in her early sixties. Her hair was a warm

brown with golden highlights and a few threads of silver showing up in the temples, It was cut in a smart style that suited her well. Her eyes were a cool gray; warm, open and friendly. His first instinct was that he liked her. He reached out to shake her hand and invited her in.

“Fran,” he called. “Mrs. Raines is here.”

He heard her answer from upstairs. “I’ll be right there. I’m changing Selena’s clothes. She spilled a glass of milk on herself. Will you make a fresh pot of coffee? Oh, and watch where you step by the table. I didn’t get the milk all wiped up.”

Colt motioned for Ellie to follow him into the kitchen. He pulled some paper towels from the roll and turned toward the table. Ellie reached to take them from his hand. “Let me clean up the spill while you make the coffee. I’m dying for a cup.” She smiled as she took the paper towels from his hand and nimbly bent down to wipe up the spill.

Frank and the twins came down the stairs, and smiles of unfeigned delight wreathed Ellie’s face. Colt introduced her to Fran and each child in turn. Selena ran to Ellie, open and accepting and Ellie stooped and picked her up. Frank and Colt watched the immediate connection between them and looked at each other with mutual understanding.

Ellie moved slowly toward Sam, speaking to him softly as she knelt down in front of him. She gently stood Selena on the floor beside her, cradling her close to her as she held her hand out to Sam. She spoke to both of the children, letting Sam make the next move. At first he clung firmly to his mother’s legs, but he gradually relaxed as Ellie gained his confidence and reached out to touch her fingers.

She looked up at Colt. “Well, daddy, is that cup of coffee ready?” She took both children by the hand and followed Frank and Colt to the kitchen table. As they drank coffee, Ellie told them she was looking for full-time work and asked them to phone her past employers, particularly the family where she had last worked. She was no longer needed there because the mother had been laid off, but she had been sad to leave. She said she loved working with small children.

She left, giving them time to make a decision and assuring them that she could be available immediately. That evening, after they had checked her references and talked to her former employers, Colt phoned Ellie and confirmed that they wanted to hire her for two weeks. If the five of them worked well together, he assured her there was a good possibility that they would want her to stay on full-time.

She was thrilled and agreed to be there the next day.

“Where is she going to stay?” Frank asked.

“Well, she could stay in the spare room.”

Frank wrinkled her nose. “Not enough privacy. That cuts out early morning activities like this morning.” She grinned as she arched her eyebrow.

“We can’t have that! What else can we do? We don’t have anywhere else to put her.”

“Could we buy a mobile home; something that’s not too big, yet roomy enough for her to be comfortable? Then she would have her own place to stay. She’ll have enough space to do whatever she wants, and we’ll have our privacy too.”

“That is a great idea. We’ll have to figure out how to get power and water and sewer hooked up for it right away.”

CHAPTER THREE

Shauna Lee struggled to consciousness. Her thinking was fuzzy, still affected by the extra sleeping pill. She stretched out and rolled over onto her back, pushing the covers away from her face. She squinted against the light that streamed in through the bedroom window and then looked at the clock on her night table. “Ten o’clock. Jeez, I simply died!”

She swung her legs off the bed and sat up. Her pajamas were uncomfortably twisted around her slender frame. Her head was still foggy. She rubbed her eyes and yawned, thinking that a cup of coffee would bring her back to the world of the living.

She stood up and wandered into the kitchen. After she had set up the coffee pot, she wandered over to the front window and looked outside. Idly she watched a couple strolling hand and hand down the street, enjoying the beautiful September morning. Another family came into sight; a husband and wife and two small children.

The girl swung on her father’s hand. The little boy was about four years old. He was running ahead, then spinning back and charging toward his mother. He stopped just beyond her reach, eluding her as she smiled and leaned forward to catch him. Then he ran back up the street again, laughing as he went.

Shauna Lee’s eyes fastened on the boy. She bit her lip as she watched him. Feelings she had buried twenty-one years ago bubbled to the surface. She shook her head, pushing them away, but she couldn’t seem to tear her focus away from the child. Tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision, then escaping down her cheeks. She turned from the window, dashing them away with the back of her hand.

She stumbled to the table and sat on a chair. Sobs racked her body and she cried uncontrollably until she was exhausted and

drained. Then she sat, staring out the kitchen window, her emotions numb.

Ben would have been twenty-two now; the son she had loved with all her being and the son whose father, Dave Trutcher, wouldn't accept because he had been born with a physical deformity that revolted him.

Shauna Lee couldn't hold back any longer. She ran to the bathroom and vomited the bitter acid that roiled in her stomach. It burned her throat and lingered sour in her mouth. She hadn't eaten anything since late the afternoon before. The coffee she had made sat in the thermal carafe on the counter.

She was cold and sick. She filled a glass with water and rinsed her mouth, then crawled back into bed and huddled under the sheets, willing her thoughts to go away. Gradually the exhaustion of her emotions claimed her in sleep.

She awakened later in the afternoon. Her watch showed it was four-thirty. Her head hurt and she knew she needed to eat. She went to the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee. The carafe had kept it lukewarm. She sipped it mindlessly and opened the fridge to look inside. Nothing looked appetizing. She closed the door, uncertain what she would do. She knew she needed something, but what? She looked like hell and she was definitely was not leaving the house. Pizza? She could order in. She reached for the phone and then hesitated.

In her mind, pizza was meant to be shared. Suddenly she realized that she couldn't think of anyone to share one with. At one time, she would have called Colt. In the years since then... well she'd seldom had lonely weekends. Men like Josh hadn't been hard to find for company.

What the hell had happened this time? It was as if Josh had opened Pandora's Box with his crude remarks and things just kept tumbling out. She had been forced to look at her life, like Scrooge at Christmas time, but she wasn't Scrooge and it wasn't Christmas. However, as it had been for Scrooge, it was difficult for her to accept what her life had become.

She picked up the phone and ordered a pizza. She decided to have a shower while she waited for it to be delivered. She would

eat it by herself while she watched TV and escape reality until she got back on track.

Shauna Lee woke up crying at four-thirty on Sunday morning. She had been dreaming about the night Ben had died. The horror of it clung to her as she fought off the cloud of sleep. Dave's rage hung in the room, so real she could feel it.

She lay there thinking about that soul-destroying time in her life. She hadn't told anyone about Ben, not even Colt. What had triggered those memories, making them come to the surface now?

She got up and went to the bathroom. She was still wearing her pajamas from the day before, and they were creased and damp with sweat and tears. Glancing at the clock, she noted that it was only five in the morning.

What day is it? she wondered. She went into the kitchen and turned on the soft light under the microwave that was installed above the stove. Automatically she emptied the thermal coffee carafe and set up a new pot of coffee. She poured herself a bowl of dry cereal, splashed some milk over it and added a sprinkle of sugar.

Then she sat down at the table. She ate mindlessly, purposely pushing her clamoring thoughts aside. It must be Sunday... it'll be another long day to get through. What am I going to do? I can't just sit here and drown in my memories.

She sighed and got up to pour herself a cup of coffee. "Maybe I should go for a drive, but where would I go?" She wandered over to the couch and turned on the TV, but there wasn't much that interested her at six in the morning.

She surfed through the channels and clicked on a program about small wind turbines. She listened with idle interest as the spokesman explained to the interviewer how the new small wind turbines were helping the environment by replacing dirty grid power with free, clean, green, wind-energy that was economical and affordable too.

When he introduced their newest dealer, she became alert. She recognized Brad Johnson. She heard him say, "Years ago the landscape of western Canada was dotted with windmills that were mainly used to pump water out of the ground."

The rich timbre of his voice and the smooth way he delivered his words caught her attention. Its cadence captured her. She watched his expressions and the way he moved his hands as he talked, shifting slightly on his feet from time to time. He was confident and sincere, an earthy, unpretentious, solid individual. She'd been aware of that Friday night, but now she was really struck by it.

She picked up his words again... “and eventually I can see this type of landscape recreated again with our small power-generating wind turbines popping up on farms and ranches across the country. They are highly efficient, require very little maintenance and are simple to install. A truck or a tractor will easily pull the assembled tower into place.”

The sound of his voice washed over her. She studied his physique. He was tall; over six feet she was certain. And she'd bet he didn't get those muscles pumping iron in the gym. He probably got them from throwing bales or wrestling calves.

He was wearing blue jeans again, and a western shirt that accentuated the gray of his eyes. He wasn't wearing a Stetson today, and his rich brown hair was ruffled by the breeze. Did he have cowboy boots on? She watched closely as the camera moved back. “Yes!” she murmured “And nice ones, too. He is a hunk!” She watched him dreamily until the camera shifted away to show a wind turbine being installed.

“And... I'm sure he thinks I'm the town tramp. He probably wouldn't come near me.” The reality hit her like a punch.

Discontent washed over her as she surfed through the channels a few more times, then stood up and turned off the TV. She dropped the remote on the coffee table and glanced at her watch again, debating what she should do. It was only eight-thirty. She sighed deeply. “This is going to be a long day. Well, I have laundry to do. That will take up some of my time.”

As she gathered her laundry from the hamper in her bedroom, she wondered what had happened to her. Why haven't I made friends? Right now, I wish I had someone to talk to—maybe a girlfriend. But I've never had a real girlfriend, she thought as she dropped a load of whites in the washing machine.

The phone rang as she was closing the lid. She turned the washer on and ran to answer it. Glancing at the call display, she hesitated, trying to recognize the name. It was from the Country Lane Inn in town.

Who the heck? she wondered as she answered. "Hello?"

"Shauna Lee, this is Mitch...."

"Mitch...?" There was a question in the word. Who...?

"Mitch Wagner, from Saskatoon."

"Oh, Mitch. It's been a while. You caught me by surprise."

"I'm in town. I have a meeting tomorrow, but I was wondering if you wanted to get together today. I think the Eliminators Car Club has its show and shine at Riverside Park. We could stop and check it out if you like."

"Hey, I'd love to get together. I'm just sort of kicking around here on my own!"

"All right, I'll drop over in an hour or so to pick you up. It'll be great to see you again!"

"I'll be waiting," she said with a smile. *Mitch, you're a wish come true. You've rescued me from myself. Thank you! Thank you!* She quickly shut off the washing machine and ran to the bedroom. She opened a dresser drawer and selected a sexy, lacy set of matching panties and bra. She dashed into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

She washed her hair and lathered her body quickly and then reached for her razor and shaved her underarms and legs. As she rinsed off she ran her hands over her skin. Smooth as silk, she thought with a smile.

She blew her hair dry, applied her makeup and added a light spray of seductive perfume. Then she slipped into her bra and panties and checked out the closet to decide what to wear. After some thought, she selected a silky, bayou blue top that closed with a crossover tie and showed a lot of cleavage. It brought out the color of her eyes.

She picked out a pair of stretchy jeans that fit her like a glove and grabbed a long, tweedy blue sweater. She rifled through her sock drawer, grabbed a pair of white ones and then slid her feet into a pair of running shoes. She was ready. She went into the

kitchen and tossed her purse and house keys on the table. She poured herself a cup of coffee, just as the doorbell rang.

She had totally slipped into predator mode without even thinking. She waited a minute and then strolled to the door. *Can't appear too eager*, she mused as she opened it. She smiled coyly at the tall blonde man that stood in front of her.

"Mitch, imagine seeing you again!" She stood aside to let him step in, then closed the door behind him. She looked him over from top to bottom, then slid her arms around his neck and pulled him to her.

He smiled as he bent his head to kiss her gently. "It *has* been a long time," he said softly.

She nestled her head against his shoulder. "It has." She slipped her hand into his and led him into the living room, pulling him down onto the couch beside her. Her hand slid to rest on his thigh. "You're looking handsome," she said, smiling into his admiring eyes.

"And you're still gorgeous! You never change. How long has it been; three or four years? What's been going on in your life? I heard once that you were engaged to a farmer. That surprised me!"

"What surprised you; that I was engaged or that I was engaged to a farmer?"

He laughed and raised her hand to his lips, nibbling on her fingers. "Both. I couldn't picture you with a farmer; or for that matter, one guy. You always said you never get married."

She gently pulled her hand away. "And I didn't."

"I heard something to that effect."

She stood up. "So what are we going to do?"

He raised his eyebrows and looked at her quizzically.

"Hey, cool your jets boy! We've got the whole day ahead of us." She playfully punched him in the shoulder. "I at least expect a nice dinner and a good glass of wine," she said, laughing as she walked to the table and picked up her keys and purse.

"It's just that you're looking so..."

"I'm sure I heard you say something about going to the Eliminators Show and Shine." She walked to the door and stood waiting for him. "I thought they usually had that in August."

“There was a change in schedule this year.” He grinned as he pushed himself up off the couch and walked over to join her. He pushed the door closed and pulled her against him, kissing her deeply, his tongue slipping into her mouth, dancing with hers.

She could feel the bulge in his crotch as he rubbed against her and fire leaped in her groin. She moaned as he ravaged her mouth. Then he swung the door open, pushing her out in front of him. “We’ll do it your way for now; then we’ll do it my way tonight!”

It was a beautiful, fall day and there was a large crowd at the show. Shauna Lee smiled for the first time in two days. She loved looking at the hot rods and old classic cars. She knew a lot of the people there; several of them were her clients. She stopped and chatted with them as she moved through the rows of cars with Mitch.

Mitch met a man he knew and stopped to talk business, so she kept wandering down the line. A hopped-up old truck caught her eye. She wandered closer to look it over. “Sweet!” she said softly as she trailed her finger along the polished grill.

“It’s well done,” a deep rich voice commented from behind her. Shauna Lee jumped and whirled around, almost losing her balance. She stared into a pair of warm gray eyes that widened in surprise. Brad Johnson was standing there.

Her heart stood still momentarily. “Oh... you... I didn’t hear you come up behind me.”

She looked so shocked, so defenseless, he couldn’t help but smile. He reached out and touched her shoulder in a gesture meant to steady her. “I didn’t realize it was you.”

She flushed. *Or you probably have gone the other way*, she thought. “Isn’t this a cool old truck,” she babbled, trying to hide the fact that seeing him had thrown her off balance. She slid a caressing hand along the bright red fender. “It’s a 1949 model!”

“It’s custom built. These guys rebuild old cars and trucks for a hobby, and it’s an expensive one!” He touched his toe against the spokes of the chrome tire rim. “Look at these wheels, and did you notice the chrome stacks behind the cab?” He rubbed his hand along the top edge of the box. “This baby never looked so good; even when it was new.”

They fell into step and moved along the line to the next vehicle.

“Oh! I saw you on TV this morning.”

He looked puzzled and shook his head.

“Yes; you were being interviewed about the wind turbines.”

“Oh, I see.” He smiled and her heart missed a beat. “They recorded that last week. So you saw it this morning?”

“I don’t know what channel it was on. I was surfing and I happened to hear a guy talking about the wind turbines. And then, there you were. Actually, it was quite interesting. Listening to you today and having seen your presentation the other night, I can see where there is a lot of potential, especially in the outlying areas for farmers and ranchers.”

“The potential is incredible, and not just in the rural areas. Hydro isn’t as expensive here in Canada, as it is in other parts of the world. The manufacturer is a forward thinking guy and most of his market is overseas now. But hydro costs will eventually go up here, too. Then people will be looking for the opportunity we offer. It’s just a matter of time.”

“I can see where a few of my clients could be interested in them; especially ranchers and farmers. So many of the smaller places have amalgamated into the larger ones; in some areas you travel miles without seeing an active home site.”

Brad looked at her, seeing the intelligent businesswoman he had gotten a glimpse of on Friday night. They stopped and inspected a bright yellow Ford Fairlane. Brad ran his hand along the front fender. “My dad owned one of these fifty years ago.”

Conversation flowed easily between them, and neither of them noticed that an hour had passed before Mitch caught up with them. He came up behind Shauna Lee and slid an arm over her shoulder.

“Sorry for leaving you on your own. I ran into a client and I needed to talk to him.”

“Not a problem. I ran into Brad. He markets and installs wind turbines. He gave a power-point presentation on them the other night, at a seminar that the DA put on. They are a fascinating concept.”

She turned to Brad; she could see the speculation in his eyes. *Jeez*, she thought fiercely. *What must he be thinking?* “Brad

Johnson, this is Mitch Wagner. We've known each other for several years. He's from Saskatoon, but he's in town for a meeting tomorrow, so he looked me up this morning."

The two men shook hands and made small talk for a few seconds before Mitch reached into his pocket for his cell phone. She saw him frown as he turned away and answered. His face blanched. "I'll be right home. No; forget about the meeting. I'll reschedule. You just hang in there! I'm on my way."

He turned to Shauna Lee. "I have to go home."

"Is something wrong?" she asked with genuine concern.

"M- my son, Kyle. He was playing baseball and got nailed in the head with a bat. They're taking him to the hospital right now."

Your son? "How old is he?" she asked, her voice choked.

"Eleven... I've got to go." He looked at Brad. "Look, I'm sorry to do this, but could you give Shauna Lee a lift home?"

"Don't worry about me, Mitch. Just go... your son needs you and you should get home as soon as possible. I'll have no problem catching a ride. I know a lot of people here."

"I'll take her home," Brad said. "Just get on the road, man! I hope your boy is okay."

"Thanks, guys. I'm out of here."

Shauna Lee watched him run through the cars. *That bastard! He's married and has a family. A few hours ago he was trying to get in my pants.*

Brad touched her arm, mistaking the reason for the troubled expression on her face. "All we can do is hope that everything is all right. Getting hit in the head with a baseball bat is rough. It's hard to say how bad it is until the doctors examine him."

"Poor kid." *You have no idea!*

"Look, it's four o'clock. Are you in a hurry to go home?"

"Brad, you don't have to worry about me. I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

"Hey, your friend asked me... and honestly," he chuckled as he looked her over from head to foot, "you don't look like a very big girl to me. If you're in a hurry to get home, I'll take you straight there. If you're relaxed about it, we could go have supper somewhere and then I'll take you home."

"Well..."

“Look, we both need to eat sometime. Company with supper would be a nice change for me.”

“Well, when you put it that way, I have to admit you’re right. We can go anytime you like.”

“We could swing by The Steakhouse. What do you think?”

She nodded. They turned and walked back to the parking lot. She felt disappointed when he didn’t reach for her hand or curl his arm around her waist and draw her close against his side. It would feel good to snuggle against his shoulder.

The restaurant was busy, but they found a table in the corner where it was a little quieter. Brad asked her what she would like to drink. She opted for red wine; he ordered rum and coke and when their drinks came they slipped into easy conversation.

“How long have you lived in Swift Current?” Brad was looking down at his drink, swirling amber liquid over the ice as he spoke.

“I’ve been here for thirteen years. After I had got my CA, I came here to work for the previous owner of my business. I worked for him for three years. He had a good clientele, and I’d worked with him long enough to earn their confidence. He wanted to retire so I bought the business from him.”

She caught her bottom lip in her teeth and then sighed as she released it. “I had worked hard through the years; in fact, I did little else but work and study.” She twirled the stem of her glass between her thumb and index finger. Then she looked up to find him watching her intently. “I’d saved enough to buy the business. He did give me a break though; he was happy to have me take it over. It’s done well over the past ten years.”

“You can be proud of what you’ve accomplished. What about your family? Didn’t you have support from them?”

“I don’t have any family.” She decided she needed to shift the conversation away herself. “Now tell me about you? The other night you said you were from B.C.?”

“I’m from Dawson Creek.”

“Where is that?”

“More northern; if you drew a line from North Battleford across to Dawson Creek, you would find that they are pretty close in latitude. I took the Wind Turbine Maintenance Program at

Northern Lights College and that got my toe in the door. Experience got me here.”

The waitress came to take their food order and Brad checked with her to make sure that it was all right before he ordered another drink for each of them.

“So were you born there?”

“Yeah, my dad owns a bulk station in town. He handles diesel, gas, oil and grease. Mom’s retired now, but she was a teacher.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“We’re the ‘perfect’ family; there is two of each of us.”

She smiled. “So what did you do for fun? Did you play hockey or football?”

“The truth? Neither one, but I like to watch both. As far as football goes, I’m a Saskatchewan Rough Riders fan now, but it’s hard for me if they are playing the B.C. Lions. I still cheer for the Vancouver Canucks when they play hockey, but I like junior league hockey as much as the NHL. They are young and full of piss and vinegar. They usually deliver a good game. Are you a hockey fan?”

Shauna Lee shrugged. “Not really, but I’ve never actually checked it out. I’ve seen games on TV in the bar, but I wasn’t actually concentrating on them. But, tell me more about you; what do you do for R&R? Somehow, I don’t think you’re a couch potato.”

He grinned. “No; I’m an outdoors guy. I like to hike in the mountains. Dad and I hunted together from the time I was a kid; we used to pack in with horses. We would ride back into the mountains where you seldom saw anyone else. I loved doing that. I also rode bareback in the high school rodeos.”

Her eyes sparkled. “Wow! A real cowboy; sexy.”

“Don’t get carried away. I wasn’t big time or anything like that. I loved to ride and I still do. Give me a horse and turn me loose and I’ll be happy for days.”

“You are Colt’s kind of guy; you both like cows and horses.”

“I like Colt. I think we have a lot in common.”

“So,” she said leaning across the table toward him. “Are there any women in your life?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you always so direct?”

“Well, you’re a good-looking man. I’m just curious.”

“How many guys are there in your life?”

She blushed. “Touché.”

The waitress brought their meals and they ate in silence.

When he was finished, Brad put his utensils onto the plate and pushed it aside. “Are you ready for coffee?”

“I am stuffed. You could take me home and stop for coffee. It would give me half an hour to digest the steak.”

He looked at her for a long moment. Her heart accelerated as she wondered what he was thinking. “If you’d like to do that, we could,” he said soberly.

“Sure, let’s go. I might even offer you some dessert.”

Brad paid for their meal, and then held the door open for her as they exited the restaurant. His hand touched the small of her back when they walked to his truck. His touch sent a hot tightening into her belly and down into the heat of her femininity. He opened the door and helped her up onto her seat in the truck. He was smiling when he got in on his side. “These trucks are so high. It’s quite a stretch for a shorty like you to get your little tush up onto the seat.”

“Now, a gentleman wouldn’t have noticed,” she said with a sexy little giggle.

“I guess I’m not a gentleman then because I did notice.”

When they pulled up in front of her house, he got out and came around to open her door so he could help her get out. Shauna Lee felt giddy with anticipation when they walked the sidewalk to her house. She smiled as she opened her front door and stepped inside, standing aside to let him in.

“You can leave those beautiful boots on the mat.” She spoke over her shoulder while she moved into the kitchen and tossed her keys and her purse on the table. “Just grab a spot to sit and I’ll put on the coffee.”

Brad looked around the open kitchen and living room area. It was beautifully decorated, but he noted the lack of personal things. There were no pictures of family or friends and no books: all she had was furniture and a top-of-the-line TV and stereo system.

He eased his long frame down on a kitchen chair. “Nice place.”

“It works for me,” she said with a warm smile. “Do you want a tour of the rest of the place while the coffee pot does its magic?” She smiled at him, raising an eyebrow. “There is a laundry room, bathroom and a bedroom with a queen-sized bed.”

“I just got settled here. Why don’t we just sit down and chat until the coffee is ready.” It wasn’t a rebuff. It struck her as meaning that there would be plenty of time later. As they talked, her eyes registered an unspoken invitation, her inherent sexual essence oozing out.

Brad smiled, accepting the cup of coffee she gave him. Her fingers brushed his softly, lingering with promise. When their cups were drained, he leaned back in his chair and looked at her, his gray eyes cool and intent.

“Shauna Lee, I told you I’m a hunter. I have hunted cougars in the wild. That is where I like to keep them: in the wild, with me doing the stalking.”

Her face went scarlet. “Are you calling me a cougar?” she asked, indignantly.

“I think the description fits you fairly accurately. You’re no teenybopper getting her first hormone flushes. If you were looking for a wedding ring, you’d have one. You’re successful, and I’m not blind; you’re hot.

“I’m not stupid either. You’re on the prowl for sex. You’ve been stalking me all evening. I could take you to that queen-sized bed that you mentioned earlier and do it justice. But I seldom hunt where everyone else has been working the territory.”

He stood up. “I enjoyed your company today. I enjoyed having supper with you, but I’m not into playing this game. I’m not willing to be another one of your boy-toys.” He walked to the door and opened it.

“I’m sure you don’t want my advice, but I’ll throw it out there anyway. Figure out who you are before it’s too late. You’ve got a lot more to offer than sex, but you’ll never find that out if you keep running from real intimacy. Bed hopping with your ‘nothing serious, no strings attached, no risk’ attitude is never going get you there. One day, you’ll wake up and find yourself old and alone.”

He stepped out and closed the door.

She stood immobile for a second, stunned. She grabbed his cup off the table and flung it against the door. It shattered into pieces, but she didn't even flinch. "Who the hell do you think you are, Brad Johnson?" she raged. "A shrink? Well, I don't need one."

She kicked the leg of the chair he'd been sitting on. "I've got news for you. I know just who I am and I've been old and alone since I was eighteen years old."

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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; overheard 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”.

