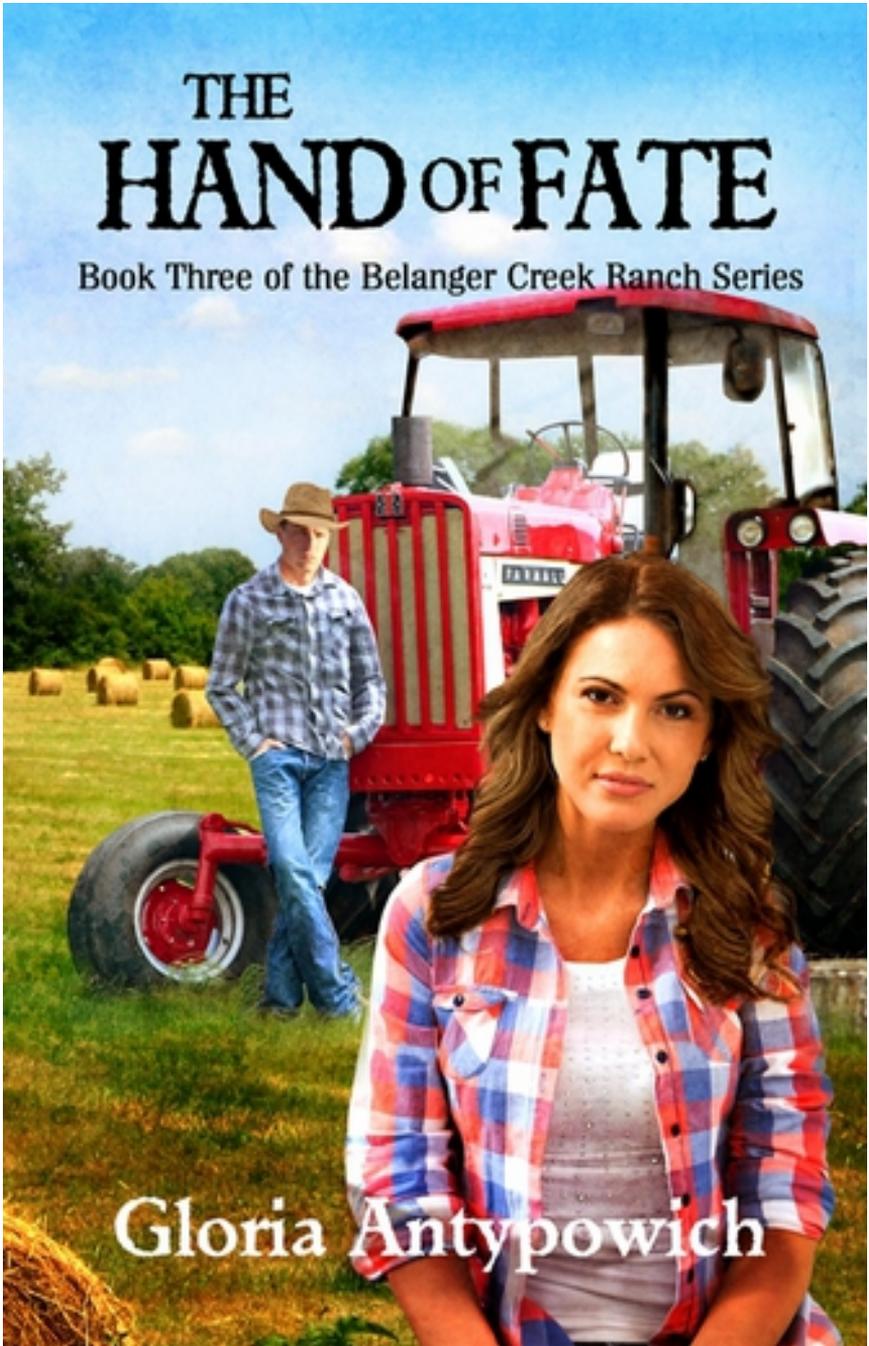


THE HAND OF FATE

Book Three of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series



Gloria Antypowich

The Hand of Fate

*Book Three
of the
Belanger Creek Ranch Series*

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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.

Contemporary Fiction/Western Romance/Adult Content

5 stars! Reviewed by Rabia Tanveer for Readers' Favorite

In *The Hand of Fate* by Gloria Antypowich, will Tim be able to tell Christina that having MRHK syndrome does not mean she is not cut out for the intimacies of love? Christina appears to be a healthy, happy woman. Since she took her job as an office manager at Swift Current Accounting and Bookkeeping Services, she kept her past to herself. After a heartbreaking divorce from her ex-husband because she had the MRHK genetics disorder, she has shunned love and intimacy from her life. She does not allow anyone to get too close and in return saves herself from future heartbreak.

Tim Bates did not have it any better. He was rejected and dismissed by his step-family. He came to Swift Current four years ago when he was reeling from a divorce from a woman who never truly loved him. When he was given the opportunity, he took it. When he met Christina for the first time, he did not like her. But time made them good friends. He comes across a mystery that could mean everything he knew about his birth could be wrong. He asks Christina to help him discover the truth. However, he starts developing feelings for her that he cannot ignore. Will she accept him or reject him like everyone else in his life?

The Hand of Fate by Gloria Antypowich was a wonderful read and I literally breezed through it. The mystery of Tim's past and Christina's battle with herself was very intriguing. In fact, this is probably the first novel that I have read in a long time that does not irk me in some way. Everything was perfect! I really enjoyed this book. The author has a nice flair with words.

4 stars! Reviewed by Mamta Madhavan for Readers' Favorite

In *The Hand of Fate* (The Belanger Creek Ranch Series Book 3) by Gloria Antypowich, readers see the marriage of Christina Holmes

crumbling due to her rare congenital condition, MRHK syndrome. She has managed to keep it a secret at her current workplace, the Swift Current Accounting and Bookkeeping Services. Her condition makes her ashamed and also makes her wary of getting into intimate relationships. Tim Bates knows Christina from the time he joined Swift Current and he had no high opinion of her. But over the course of four years, they have come to know each other better and have started enjoying each other's company. The twist in the story happens when Tim discovers a picture at Belanger Creek Ranch. Will something unexpected happen in the lives of Tim and Christina?

The plot has many dimensions to capture the attention of readers and keep them guessing and glued to the book. The story is all about family bonding, friendship, unconditional love, loyalty, mystery and how dreams can come true. The author manages to weave a lot of things together with expertise, without losing the fluidity and pace of the plot and happenings in the story. All the characters are well sketched and they give good support to the main characters of Tim Bates and Christina Holmes. The narration is descriptive and the imagery is wonderful. Third in the Belanger Creek Ranch Series, this romantic fiction can stand on its own and readers will be able to connect with the plot easily, even without reading the first two books.

4 stars! Reviewed by Janelle Alex, Ph.D. for Readers' Favorite

Gloria Antypowich's *The Hand of Fate*: Book Three of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series kicks off with the main characters from the series all gathered to share Easter dinner. They were truly a "family" by heart, not by blood. Yet, Tim Bates discovered something that threw him into a tizzy that evening. Christina, having feelings for him she had not yet explored, wanted to understand and be there for him. He wasn't ready to share his discovery though. The passion between them was something they both kept denying until Christina admitted she had feelings. But,

Tim still needed to deal with his secrets and open his heart to allow Christina in. Somehow Ollie Crampton was connected to Tim's deceased mother, and he needed to find out how. Of course, Christina had her own secret and needed to share it with Tim if they ever hoped to have a relationship. Antypowich advances the story fairly quickly and continues it even after Tim and Christina get married. She puts Shauna Lee, a mutual friend, in a position that has a great impact on the Bates' lives. Even more, Antypowich brings a private investigator mildly into the mix to reveal the truth about Tim and Ollie.

You will discover a unique take on a modern romance in *The Hand of Fate*. If you have not read the first two books in the series, it is highly advised that you read them first. Otherwise, you may very well be confused by the numerous characters. Antypowich doesn't really give you much back story on the other characters or how they are connected to each other. This made the story hard to follow initially. Also, the author jumps between in depth events with Tim and Christina to Ollie and Ellie to others. Often the details go above and beyond what a typical romance novel might include. Yet, there are a number of beautiful and intriguing pieces within the storyline. From Ollie and Tim to how Tim and Christina might be able to have their own biological children, this is one to stick with because you will discover a heart-warming tale.

The Hand of Fate has some spots I found to be a bit choppy in the writing, but Gloria Antypowich has woven a story of sweet love and perseverance into this contemporary romance novel. The Belanger Creek Series is different, and helps *The Hand of Fate* stand out in the romance genre. Where will Antypowich take you in the fourth book in the Belanger Creek Ranch Series?

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to couples who are dealing with the issue of infertility. Infertility and miscarriages are more common than many are aware of. It isn't talked about because it is a painful subject and for those affected, there are often feelings of inferiority, shame, and sadness attached to their struggle. As one person told me, *it's a pain that cuts to the bone*.

This book is also dedicated to ***Dr. Sheila Boehm from Williams Lake, British Columbia, Canada***. She acted as a surrogate for a family member. Her wonderful, selfless act was the seed of thought for this book. I had heard about surrogacy before, but had never known anyone who actually participated in the program.

OTHER BOOKS

by Gloria Antypowich:

The Second Time Around, Book One of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series

Full Circle, Book Two of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series

Second Chances, Book Four of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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/> When my original editor became ill, I contracted Monicka to edit this book. She is honest, diligent and insightful and I am very pleased with the work she did.

Sharron Hynes is a long-time 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.

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

Christina Holmes gathered eighteen-month-old Leanne Johnson in her arms and sat in the rocking chair by the window. Her heart filled with warmth as she snuggled her best friend's daughter against her breast. Christina had learned to accept most of life's trials, but knowing that she could never give birth to a child of her own child, was the one disappointment that left a raw spot in her soul.

Leanne's blue eyes brimmed with tears as she pushed away and sat up. She was sucking her thumb as she looked up into Christina's face.

"What's the matter, baby?" Christina asked.

"The poor little tyke is probably tired," Ellie Crampton commented as she emptied a bottle of 7Up into the juice in a punch bowl. "It's a long drive out to the ranch from Swift Current. Add the excitement of playing with Selena and Sam all afternoon, and you know she's got to be exhausted."

Shauna Lee glanced at the clock on the wall, then, looked lovingly at her small daughter. "You're right Ellie; it's been a long day for her."

Colt Thompson turned to Brad Johnson, who was mashing a pot of potatoes by the stove. "I swear she was conceived through Immaculate Conception. I don't see any trace of you in her."

Frank Thompson reached across the island where they were all preparing Easter dinner and smacked her husband with a spatula. "Colt!"

"Hey, that stung!" He gave his wife a look of exaggerated pain, and then defended his words. "It's the truth. Look at her; she's a carbon copy of Shauna Lee!" Leanne's tiny bone structure, her wispy blonde hair and her big blue eyes fringed by dark

eyelashes supported his words.

Shauna Lee looked at Brad and smiled. “Oh, she definitely has his genes! Haven’t you noticed how she works her way around, schmoozing to get what she wants? She’s just like him; she simply doesn’t take ‘No’ for an answer.” Everyone laughed, knowing how tenaciously Brad had pursued Shauna Lee until he’d worn down her every resistance and convinced her that she loved him. She looked at Frank. “Dinner’s almost ready, isn’t it?”

Tim Bates spoke up as he put bottles of wine on the big country-style table that Christina had just set. “It looks like the boss just needs to finish carving the ham.”

Colt nodded. “Call Grayson, Ollie and the twins. By the time you get the food on the table, I’ll be done.”

Tim walked over to the rocking chair and knelt down by Christina. He reached out to brush a finger along Leanne’s cheek. “Are you hungry little one?” he asked. The tearful blue eyes brightened as she broke into a big smile and a spate of baby babble. He smiled as he extended his hands and Leanne said “Me up,” and leaned forward to fall into them. His eyes met Christina’s as he took the child. There was a current of understanding between them. He talked to the baby as he stood up and then extended a hand to help Christina out of the chair.

While everyone else put the food on the table, Ellie went to the family room. Grayson McNaughton was watching hockey on TV and Ollie, her sixty-four-year-old husband, was on the floor with the Thompson twins playing *ranch*. He had built them a barn for Christmas and now they were ‘chasing’ cows and moving them into the realistic-looking corrals that he’d made to go with it. She smiled.

Selena and Sam had become the grandchildren he would never have—unless by some miracle they found his unknown son. Possibly, he had grandchildren but they wouldn’t know him the way the twins did. After four years of searching, it seemed unlikely that his son would be found. That was a fact that grated on his mind continuously.

“Dinner is ready.” Ellie reached down and ruffled Ollie’s

graying hair. He looked up at her with smiling eyes. They'd been married for two years, but they had 'lived in sin' as her indignant children had called it, for almost two years before they had made it legal. Ollie had never had a wife before and he would have married her right away. However, while the chemistry and companionship were perfect between them, Ellie had been wed before and was in no hurry to rush into a permanent relationship at her age. Now she wondered why she'd hesitated because she couldn't imagine her life without him.

The twins jumped up and held out their hands to grasp his. It had become a ritual, a game they always played and he grunted and groaned while they pulled him to his feet, winking at his wife when the children couldn't see him.

When everyone was seated, Colt honored the occasion by saying grace, giving thanks for this 'family' that had come together to share the Easter bounty.

Christina looked around the table, marveling at how they had truly become a family in every way, except for the ties of blood. Four years earlier they had all been mere acquaintances connected by one common thread; *Thompson Holdings, Belanger Creek Ranch and Cantaur Farms*

Colt, Frank, and the twins had been the nucleus of it. Shauna Lee and Brad had met through Colt. Ellie had joined the group as a babysitter for the twins and when they met at the ranch, she and Ollie had connected immediately. Colt had hired Tim to manage *Cantaur Farms*, and Grayson had joined the crew at *Belanger Creek Ranch* after Patch Bergeron had died. Christina had worked as Shauna Lee's receptionist and office manager at *Swift Current Accounting and Bookkeeping Services* for years, but they'd never had anything more than a business relationship before Shauna Lee and Brad had gotten together. Now all those 'strangers' had become a family.

During the past four years common threads of joy and grief, celebration and tragedy, work and pleasure had bound their lives together. The ranch had become the place to meet and share the good times and the sad.

After the dishes had been done, everyone sat around and enjoyed an evening of conversation. Grayson went back to the bunkhouse and Tim offered to go down to the old ranch house, where Ollie and Ellie lived, to get Ollie's prescription pills for acid reflux. He was gone for quite a while and when he got back to the house, he was very distant and unsettled. Christina tried to catch his eye, but he refused to look at her. Finally, she waylaid him in the hallway.

"What's up with you, Tim?"

"Nothing," he said brusquely. "I'm going home."

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He ignored her question. "You can catch a ride back with Brad and Shauna Lee."

"They don't have room for me. They've got the car seats and all the kids' stuff, as well as the kennel and Karma."

"They'll make room. I'm getting out of here."

"Tim, what's going on? You've been different ever since you came back from Ollie's."

"Damn it, Christina. Just leave it alone."

"But..."

"I said *leave it alone*. I'm going now. You'll get a ride."

His attitude chilled Christina. Suddenly he had morphed back into the old Tim, the cold, distant man who had arrived in Swift Current four years earlier. She wanted to shake him, but her instincts told her that something very profound had happened...and he wasn't about to tell her what it was. She couldn't let him leave in this frame of mind. "Tim, I'm coming with you. I..."

He glared at her. "I need some time alone."

"Well, now isn't the time. I'm going with you."

"I don't need anyone prying right now."

She glared at him. "Prying?"

"Yes, prying. You can never leave things alone."

"Fine. I won't ask any questions, but you're not going home

alone in this frame of mind.”

He swore as he turned away. He said an abrupt goodbye to Colt and headed out to his truck.

Shauna Lee looked puzzled. “What’s up with him?”

Christina shrugged. “God only knows. It’s like something flipped a switch; he’s gone right back to being the cold, miserable jerk, that he was when he first came here.”

“Maybe you should just let him go by himself.”

Christina shook her head. “He wants me to catch a ride back with you, but something’s really wrong. Even Tim wouldn’t regress that far in an hour...I’m worried about him.”

Christina said a hurried goodbye and went out to the truck that was idling while Tim waited for her. She got in and closed the door.

He scowled at her. “You’re so damn stubborn. You should have stayed.”

“Just shut up and get on the road. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us.”

He tightened his jaw and glared at her while he put the truck into gear and sped out of the yard. They drove in silence. When they were halfway to Maple Creek, it started to snow heavily. Then the wind picked up, whipping it into a blinding blizzard. “What the hell,” Tim snarled. “It’s almost the end of April. Where does this crap come from?”

Christina said nothing. The visibility became very poor, and he slowed to a crawl as he strained to look into the storm. At one point, he almost missed a curve in the road, his front wheel catching the shoulder. He swore again. Blinded by the blowing snow, all of Tim’s senses were on alert as he inched the truck forward. When they finally reached Maple Creek, they couldn’t see the lights of the town.

“Shit!” Tim exclaimed. “Why the hell didn’t you stay at the ranch?”

“And what difference would that have made? It’s insane to try to drive in this, whether I’m here or not.”

“I’d go on home if you weren’t here.”

“Then go.”

“I don’t want to be responsible for something happening to you.” His frustration was evident. “I didn’t ask you to come along.”

“Hey, buddy, you could have left, but you waited for me. On some level, you wanted my company. And, I sure didn’t come because you’re so charming. The fact is, you’re acting like a miserable jerk. I came because I felt like I needed to be here for you. So get over it. You’re stuck with me.”

He snorted. “Why would you feel you needed to be here for me? You don’t have any responsibility for what happens to me.”

“*Well, excuse me*--I consider you to be a friend. Friends are there for each other.”

“I have no friends.”

Christina exploded. “You stupid bastard—who do you think all those.....”

He slammed on the brakes, then reached over and grabbed the front her coat. “Don’t ever call me a *bastard* again!”

She pushed at his hands, but he had a firm grip. His blue eyes were blazing.

“Let go of me,” Christina yelled. He released his hold on her coat and she frantically unhooked her seat belt, opened the truck door and hurled herself out into the storm.

“What are you doing?” he yelled. “You can’t go out there.” He bailed out after her, running to catch her as she floundered through the snow. He grabbed her by the arm. “Are you trying to commit suicide? You’ll get lost and freeze to death.”

“Right now that might be a better option than being beaten up by an ungrateful, hotheaded maniac.”

“I’d never beat you.”

“You lost your cool, mister, and I don’t take kindly to being pushed around.”

“I...I wouldn’t hurt you,” he stammered. He kept a firm grip on her arm while he led the way back to the truck. When they reached it, he opened the passenger door to help her get in. He looked into her face in the glow of the interior light. Suddenly he

pulled her against him and kissed her angrily.

“Are you crazy?” she gasped, pushing him away. She clamored inside and he slammed the door. She rubbed away the feel of his kiss with her coat sleeve, as she glared at him plodding through the snow in the front of the truck.

His mind was in turmoil. *What the hell was wrong with him? Why had he kissed her?* He stood, staring into the storm for a few seconds before he got in. Then he started the truck and edged onto the highway, squinting against the blinding whiteness as he turned toward Swift Current.

Suddenly, emergency lights were flashing across the road in front of him. “A god damned roadblock?” Tim swore again, as he rolled down his window. Christina noted that she had heard him curse more in the last two hours than she remembered him doing in the past three years. He didn’t normally swear, although he had when he’d first arrived at the farm at Cantaur. He’d been cold, angry and bristling with defensiveness and, he’d cursed a lot.

Two policemen approached the truck, bracing themselves against the fury of the storm. “The highway is closed in both directions.” The RCMP officer rested his hand against the truck door and peered inside to look at them. “You’ll be up against it to find a place to stay for the night. The hotels and motels are full. The restaurants and bars have stayed open, but there’s not much room left. There is a small bed and breakfast just up that road behind you and to your right. We’ve sent two parties there already, but they might be able to make more room.”

Frustration oozed out of Tim. “We came from Belanger Creek and it wasn’t snowing when we left.”

“This storm moved in from Swift Current. There hasn’t been any traffic for about an hour and a half. Last reports estimated up to three-foot drifts in places. I’d advise you to try the B&B. It’s the best chance you’ll get tonight.”

Tim rolled up the window and stared ahead. “Could things get any worse?” He looked across at Christina. “Now what do we do?”

She shook her head. “Well, we can’t drive any further, so

we'd better try the B&B."

He shifted the truck into reverse and eased backward, then turned onto the adjacent road. The drifts were already hardening and the truck had to fight through the snow in four-wheel drive. They reached the B&B sign and turned into the yard. The lights were a dim haze in the snow. There were three snow-covered vehicles in the yard.

Tim looked at Christina. "He said they'd sent two parties here; there are three cars."

Christina shrugged. "Maybe they have a couch, or if nothing else the floor will do. We don't have many choices." She unclasped her seatbelt and opened the door. "Let's go see what they have."

When they stepped onto the porch, the door opened and a tall, slender man stepped into the light to greet them. Tim shuffled uneasily. "The police said you might have a vacancy."

"We're fully booked."

Christina bit her lip. "You know, a blanket on the floor will do. We just need a place to stay warm and safe."

"Well...come in and I'll talk to my wife. We have a bed in the attic. We don't use it for the business because it's only a double so it's smaller than most people expect, but seeing this is an emergency..."

"Actually we need two," Tim growled.

Christina glared at him. "No! If that's what is available, we'll take it."

Tim scowled.

Christina sighed wearily. "For cripes sake, Tim, it's better than sitting in the truck, freezing. We can't piss each other off any more than we already have tonight. We might as well make up our minds to get a decent rest." She opened her purse. "How much is the room?" She paid, saying, "I'm Christina Holmes, and Smiley here, is Tim Bates."

The man nodded. "This is my wife, Lily and I'm Alvin Bronson. This is a rare storm for this time of the year, but it's not unheard of. It caught a lot of people off guard. We've had a couple

of other groups come in tonight. Do you have any luggage?"

"No. I have a small bag in the truck, but I'll sleep in my clothes and get it in the morning," Christina replied.

Lily stepped forward. "That room is pretty chilly at this time of the year. We only use it for the grandkids in the summer. I have a king-sized down filled comforter that'll provide more warmth." When she came back, she handed Tim an extra pillow and the comforter. She handed Christina a pair of long, thermal underwear. "These are mine. We're about the same size so I think they'll fit you and they'll be more comfortable than trying to sleep in your clothes. I'm sorry, but there are no services up there so you'll have to use the washroom down here."

She looked at Tim. "Our son is about your size. He has a fleece jogging suit here. I'll get it. I'm sure you'll be a lot more comfortable in it than in your jeans and shirt."

Tim started to protest, but Lily cut him off. "I don't want to hear another word. I think you're going to have enough trouble getting comfortable."

Lily came back with a blue jogging suit and handed it to Tim. Alvin led them up the narrow stairs to the room in the attic. After Alvin had left, they looked around the small room. Frost was forming on the single window, and they could see wisps of their breath floating in the chilly air.

Tim glared at Christina. "I guess I get the floor."

"Quit being an ass and get a grip on yourself. There is no need for anyone to sleep on the floor. I'm sure we are mature enough to make the best out of this rotten situation. I'm not going to freak out if your leg touches mine. It's not as if either of us is interested in anything other than sleep and keeping warm."

He stared at her. "Are you suggesting we share the bed?"

"Cripes! Pretend I'm your brother."

"My brother? Then I definitely wouldn't be getting into bed with you. I like him even less than you."

Christina shook her head. "Pretend I'm someone you don't dislike then. What would you do if I were Colt or Brad? You'd damn well get in bed and sleep. I'm going downstairs to change

into these long johns and I'll leave my socks on too so you won't be able to accidentally touch my skin. I suggest you get into that fleecy thing she gave you and hustle into bed." She went towards the door, paused and looked back at him. "Turn off the light so you can't see me when I get back. That way you can pretend it's someone else on the other side of the bed."

When Christina returned, the light was off. She leaned over to touch the end of the bed in the darkness and felt her way along to the far side. She was edging her way to the head of the bed when her foot hit something, and she lost her balance. She gave a muffled gasp as she fell over Tim's body.

Fury, hot and raw, exploded in her chest. "What are you doing down there on the floor?"

"I'm not sleeping in that bed with you. I laid down here so you could just walk in and get into bed when you came back."

"I always sleep on this side of the bed," she hissed.

"How was I to know that?" he huffed as he tried to push her away so he could get out from under her.

She tried to get her balance as she struggled amid the twists of his legs, knees and hips under the quilt.

Finally, he got up on all fours in the tangle of the quilt and pushed her up. The room was pitch-black, but she felt her way to the foot of the bed, reaching out for the wall. She slid her hand along until she felt the light switch, and she flipped it on, bathing the room in shocking light.

Their stare locked. Her fury was tangible, radiating off her with a heat he could feel. Tim looked away first. She walked over and stripped the quilt off him and threw it on the bed, then turned to him, sparks snapping in her eyes.

"You're not sleeping on the floor in this cold room. Stop acting like an adolescent and get in the bed. I don't know what happened to you today, but the man I've come to know as a friend, has regressed into an idiot. Grow up, Tim!"

She switched the light off and felt her way up to the head of the bed and crawled in. She pulled the sheets and the quilt up around her neck, turned on her right side with her back to him and

lay still, waiting to feel his weight settle on the mattress. It seemed like an eternity before it did.

Tim lay on his left side, with his back to her, crowded as close to the edge of the bed as he could get. He was tense as a board, his senses alert. He listened for every breath, every stirring she made, and was shocked, almost angered, when a few minutes later he heard her breathing become a whisper, slow and relaxed, and he realized that she was sleeping. *How could she be asleep already?* He shifted gingerly, desperate not to wake her. He was uncomfortable. He usually slept on his back, sprawled across the whole bed. He hadn't shared a bed with anyone since his wife had left him.

His mind was in turmoil. Not only was he in a damnable situation there in the bed, but so many unanswered questions raced through his thoughts. What had he really stumbled upon when he'd gone to Ollie and Ellie's house? Why was that picture laying on the desk in Ollie's office? Seeing it there had shocked him. At first, he'd thought he had to be mistaken, but when he picked it up and looked closely, he knew he'd seen it before. It was his mother.

Then Christina had insisted on coming home with him, and she'd called him a *Bastard!* The word swirled in his mind. Why couldn't he push it away? He tossed and turned, then finally found refuge in sleep. The warmth of the bed lured him.

Hours later, Christina surfaced slowly, instinctively relaxing into the warmth against her back and the weight encircling her waist. The comfort of it lulled her back into the depths of slumber.

CHAPTER TWO

About twenty minutes after Tim and Christina left that evening, snow started to fall heavily at *Belanger Creek Ranch*. Shortly after, the relentless winds came, driving in a blinding blizzard. Colt and Brad drove down to the barn to check on the two hundred head of cows with late calves housed in the corrals. The high board shelters on the windward side of the corrals protected them from the brunt of the storm, and most of the calves were huddled in the calf shelters.

Ollie and Grayson were already there. They had moved a couple dozen smaller calves inside a covered area because they were newborns and the heavy wet snow would weaken them, promoting scours or pneumonia in the herd.

Ollie voiced Colt's main concern. "This doesn't bode well for the cows and calves that we turned out into the feeding area down by the river."

Colt nodded. "I know. They won't fight against the storm. They'll put their backs into the wind and drift with it. That'll take them down off the hilltops where we've been feeding them, into the shelter of the ravines or clumps of willow."

Ollie's look was sober. "I've seen it happen. If it's bad enough, they'll get down in those narrow sheltered spots and crowd in like sardines in a can. The calves can get trampled pretty easily."

Colt looked into the storm. "The calves in that group are older and stronger, but when three-hundred cows start to crowd, even the bigger, healthy animals can lose footing and go down."

Ollie nodded. "It depends on how long this lasts. I've seen these storms last for a couple of days. The cattle can get hung up in the willows and suffocate under the drifts that blow over them. I

haven't been checking the weather forecast the past couple of days, so have no idea what they are predicting for this one. I didn't even realize it was coming."

Colt looked at Brad. "I didn't either. We were playing cards when it started to snow, but I didn't pay much attention until the wind came up. I just figured it was a quick spring flurry. I should've been more aware."

Ollie brushed the snow off his jacket. "I should have, too. The Cypress Hills can drop some unpredictable surprises on this country."

Colt slapped his gloves against his jeans. "I think this storm actually came in from Swift Current way. There isn't much we can do right now. Even if we were able to ride out there, the cattle would fight us at every turn. Hopefully, this will have blown itself out by dawn, and then we'll ride out with the horses. Right now, we're better off to get some sleep and conserve the horses. Can you stick around and give us a hand in the morning, Brad?"

"We won't leave until you get everything straightened out here. Tomorrow is a holiday anyway, and if I need to, I can get one of the installers to go to the shop for me on Tuesday. Christina will be home, so she'll open the office for Shauna Lee."

Colt looked at Grayson. "Will you help Ollie attach the blade to the tractor in the morning before we go? Fran will ride out with Brad, you and me. Ollie can follow us with the tractor and plow the snow off the road so we can drive the truck in if we have any animals that need to be hauled home."

Ollie & Grayson nodded in agreement and everyone went their separate ways. At five o'clock, they were up again. Frank and Shauna Lee had breakfast ready and after they'd eaten, Frank left with the men to saddle up.

Shauna Lee could barely see them ride out in the early dawn light and a few minutes later she watched Ollie leave with the tractor, plowing their tracks in the snow off the road. She watched until he was out of sight, and then started to clean up the kitchen.

Thirty minutes later, Colt sighed with relief as they rode into

the pasture. “It looks like we lucked out this time. This could have been a disaster. Fortunately, it stayed mild and we’ve only had a foot of snow here. It’s so wet and heavy that it won’t have piled up in the coulees and ravines the way a dry, cold snow would have with those strong winds.”

Brad nodded in agreement. “It’s fortunate that the wind only lasted a couple of hours.”

Colt and Frank rode through the upper end, checking the ravines and willow bluffs as they went. Brad and Grayson rode the lower end of the field, along the river fence and up the east side. Fortunately, no calves had been trampled, and no cows were down. They drove the animals back to the feeding areas.

By then Ollie was plowing snow in different sections of the pasture so it would be easier to feed. Colt and Brad went to the feed yard. Colt started the big tractor with the bale buster hooked on behind it. Brad waited at the gate, and watched as he backed up to the stack and loaded one of the sixteen-hundred-pound bales into the tub and then picked up a second bale with the machine and headed out into the field.

Brad open and closed the gate so no hungry cows could get into the stack yard. He watched with fascination, as the bale buster shredded the bale and augured it out into a long windrow on the ground. When the first bale had been fed, he dropped the second one into the tub and shredded it as well. The cows lined up along the windrows to eat. Colt made three more trips to different areas of the pasture before he was done with the feeding.

Frank and Grayson rode their horses among the cows as they ate, watching for any signs of a problem; an injured foot or leg, a bruised rib causing breathing problems, early stages of pneumonia or scours. Frank’s veterinary training alerted her to conditions that might have been missed, but during the past four years she’d learned to count on Grayson’s quick eye for problems in the herd, and they conferred regularly.

After the feeding was finished and the tractor parked back in the feed yard, the four of them mounted their horses to ride home. Ollie had plowed the drifts out and riding was easier for man and

beast. The sun was shining and it was clear that, except where it had drifted in the shaded areas, the snow wouldn't last very long.

Ollie had gone back to the ranch as soon as he'd finished plowing and when they arrived, he was finishing up the chores. They tied their horses to the hitching rail by the barn. Colt and Brad went to help Ollie, while Frank and Grayson took a quick walk through the calves. They found no obvious problems, so they led the horses into the barn, unsaddled them and brushed them down. They had turned them into stalls and were giving them each a portion of grain when they heard the quad coming down the hill.

Seconds later, Sam came dashing in the barn door. "Hey, Mom! Ellie and Auntie Shauna Lee are making something to eat at our place. Everyone is supposed to come up there.

"That sounds great. I'll catch a ride back on the quad with you. Dad and the other guys can come in the truck."

"Okay, Mom." They went out and got on the quad. Sam started it, revved it up, and sped up the hill, sending a plume of wet snow and water spraying away from the wheels.

"Sam! You're going to get me soaking wet! Slow down."

"You're wet already, Mom. Didn't you look at your pants and boots?"

She looked down at her clothes. "I am, and I'm cold too."

"How can you be cold? It's nice out and the snow is melting like crazy. Look at the way it's running down the tracks on the road. "

"Well, buddy...you haven't been out riding since dawn. We've been wading through snow banks and walking around, looking at the cows and calves. Your turn will come one day and then you'll know what it's like. You'll be chilled to the bone just like we are!"

The quad rolled to a stop at the door and Frank tweaked her son's ear as she got off. "Thanks for the ride, big guy; even if you did soak me again."

The pickup pulled into the yard right behind them and Colt and Brad got out.

"What happened to Grayson and Ollie?" Frank asked.

“They’re supposed to come too.”

“They’re changing into some dry clothes. Then they’ll come up.”

The smells from the kitchen greeted them when they opened the door. “All of a sudden I’m famished.” Colt looked at his watch. “It’s no wonder. It’s after two o’clock. We were out there for more than eight hours.”

Frank and Colt went to their bedroom and took a quick shower to warm up. When they joined the others in the kitchen, Brad was already there and Shauna Lee was handing him a hot cup of coffee spiked with a shot of Baileys.

“I’ve got one here for you, too, Frank,” she said handing her a hot cup.

“Mm... this is wonderful,” she cradled it in her hands, savoring the warmth.

“And me?” Colt asked with a hopeful grin.

“Coming right up,” Shauna Lee answered. “It sounds like Ollie and Grayson are here now, too,” she said hearing the porch door open. “Do you guys want coffee with Baileys in it?”

Grayson said yes, but before Ollie answered, Ellie was pouring a shot of Jack Daniels into a glass for him. Ollie smiled as she handed it to him. “Thanks, love,” he said and raised the glass to the others. “This is my poison—it warms you right to the core!”

Everyone sat down at the table and enjoyed a flavourful meal of hot stew and baking powder biscuits. They ate until they were content, and then sat and talked about the storm, and how fortunate things had turned out.

“I wonder if Tim and Christina got caught in it,” Colt said thoughtfully.

“That was strange,” Frank commented. “You know, the way he decided to leave so abruptly.”

Brad nodded. “Yeah, what the heck happened there, anyway? He was happy and relaxed all day, and then all of a sudden he just did a complete turn around.”

Shauna Lee shook her head. “I have no idea. Christina didn’t know what was going on either. She was so concerned that she

decided to go home with him, even though he didn't want her to."

"Is there something going on between those two?" Colt asked.

Shauna Lee shook her head. "No. They're just friends."

"I've wondered about that," Brad commented. "Lately they're pretty comfortable with each other."

"I've noticed it, too" Frank commented.

Shauna Lee nodded. "Well, I think they've worked out most of their angst by now. He was so bitter when he first came and she really took a dislike to him. Christina always referred to him as the *cold fish*. But they're civil now."

"I'm really impressed with how he's managing the farm," Colt added.

Brad nodded. "He was a great guy when I knew him in the Peace River country. He loved being a farmer and he was a smart businessman. When he got married, everyone who knew them wondered how it had happened. They were like water and oil from the very beginning. I think she thought there were diamonds sparkling in the grain bins and had big ideas about being a rich land owner's wife. The marriage sort of hung together for about eight years, but it was over long before they split.

"When Tim's mother died, it was a big blow to him. His siblings are nothing like him. They're a lot younger and spoiled rotten. He has one brother and he was a cocky, egotistical brat that never did a day of hard work in his life. He gave Tim a bad time when he got old enough to think he could flex his muscles as far as the business went. When his dad died, the farm was worth millions, but they just tore it apart trying to get their hands on all the money. They killed the goose that laid the golden egg, and Tim got 'plucked' in the process."

CHAPTER THREE

Tim awakened slowly, savoring the warmth. A fragrant cloud lay against his cheek, tickling his nose. It smelled like lilacs. He softly blew a tendril from across the tip of his nose. Hair!

He became aware of the softness resting against his chest, molding to his hips, his thighs and the leg that intertwined with his. He felt the hip bone beneath his arm as it lay over a curvy waist. He stiffened. *What the hell is she doing?*

Realization flooded through him. No! What the hell was he doing? She was curled up on her side of the bed. He was the one who was cuddling her, snuggled up as close as he could get. Panicked, he listened to the rhythm of her breathing. If he was careful, possibly he could ease his body over onto his own side without waking her up. He inched away carefully.

She stirred and murmured something, stretching her legs gently. Her hand groped, searching for the warmth that had moved away, but she stayed asleep. He eased over slowly and turned onto his left side again, clinging to the edge of the bed. He exhaled slowly. He'd made it!

His breathing was rapid, and he tried to calm it. He couldn't keep his thoughts in line. It felt good to wake up to a warm, soft, fragrant body next to him. He thought he put that behind him, but that primal instinct was still there. Damned women, they were always a temptation to a stupid, vulnerable man. He lay quietly, thinking about life; his life.

His mother had been the one constant in his life and he'd worshiped her. He thought he knew everything about her, but he didn't know how she figured into Ollie Crampton's life. She'd always said she didn't have any family, so why was her picture on his desk? He had turned it over and looked at the back of it. It was

date-stamped four years earlier, just a few months after he'd come to the farm, and it bore the name of a legal firm in Vancouver, British Columbia. She had died over eight years before.

He rolled onto his back with a sigh and flung his arm across his eyes. *Could Ollie be checking me out? But why? I could understand if Colt had done that before I started working for him, but I was already at the farm when that picture was dated. Ollie and I have talked lots of times over the past four years; we've had some serious conversations about life. Why didn't he say anything about having Mom's picture?*

And why would anyone send a picture of Mom to him? It would have come to Shauna Lee's office, not to Ollie. So what is going on here? Don't they trust me? After Bob Thompson died last year, Colt sold me his shares in Cantaur Farms. We're partners now, and we haven't had any problems. None of this makes any sense. I've considered those guys to be my friends. I hope I'm not going to get screwed over again.

"You survived the night!" Christina said softly, breaking into his thoughts.

He lowered his arm and looked across at her. His eyes strayed to the curtain of dark hair that spilled onto her pillow and the intoxicating scent of it came back to him. He smiled crookedly. "I see you did, too."

"I was so tired, I just died! And the bed was so warm and comfy." Her fingers plucked at the comforter. "It must have been this feather quilt. I'm going to have to get one for home. It was heavenly. Were you warm enough?"

"It was more comfortable than I'd expected it to be. I needed a good sleep."

"So are you in a better frame of mind this morning?"

"A good sleep can't fix everything, Christina, but I'm okay."

"Am I still the enemy, or do you see me as a friend now?" She giggled. "After all, we've slept together; that's closer than most friends ever get." Her look turned serious. "I'm a good listener, Tim. I don't break confidences either. I've got my own ugly secrets. Honestly, it probably would help to discuss whatever

happened yesterday and get it off your chest. It had to be big to make you do such a complete turn around .”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I have to figure out what actually happened by myself, and what it means to me. I’m going to get up and check the road report.” He threw back the blankets and stood up. He looked out the small window, but all he could see was frosted edges and a sea of white. “That doesn’t look very promising,” he grumbled. He grabbed his jeans and his shirt. “Look away; I’m going to put on my clothes.”

She buried her head under the quilt and waited until he said, “Alright, I’m out of here. I’m warning you, it is damned cold in here. You’d better dress downstairs in the bathroom.”

She looked up as he opened the door. He hesitated, and then said, “Christina... I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” She grinned. “Oh, you mean for keeping me warm? To be honest, I’d forgotten how good it felt to cuddle with someone.”

His jaw slackened, and then his face flushed red.

“Yes, Tim, I know. I woke up earlier; there’s no harm done. Warmth and sleep are basic essentials.”

“You are a bitch.”

“I know...and you’re still a bastard, too. A good sleep can’t fix everything.”

He slammed the door and went down the stairs. She got up and got dressed. She shivered. The room *was* cold.

“Good morning.” Lily greeted her when she entered the kitchen. “Did you sleep well?”

“I was so tired, I just passed out. The bed was warm and toasty. It had to be that marvelous quilt.”

“I’m glad the bed worked out alright. Tim said he had a good sleep too, and he seemed a lot more relaxed this morning. Would you like a cup of coffee? Tim went out to get his razor and he’s bringing your overnight bag in. He’ll have a cup when he comes back.”

Christina turned to look when the entry door opened and Tim

stepped inside. Their eyes met as he handed her bag to her. Her amber eyes were twinkling when she took it. “Thank you, Tim.”

He tried to scowl but didn’t quite succeed. “I knew you’d need your hairbrush and I’ve heard you complain about your morning breath and needing your toothbrush.”

“I’m shocked you remembered all that. Obviously a good sleep does improve some things.” She winked at him as she turned away and went to the washroom.

When she returned, Tim was sitting at one of the tables in the dining room, drinking coffee. A glance told her that a full cup was waiting for her too, so she joined him. He looked at her with a twinkle in his eye and grinned. “Hey, you look pretty good now.”

She sat down and took a drink of her coffee. *Is he flirting? No, that couldn’t be happening.* “Hmm...I’ve never seen you with a five o’clock shadow before. It’s looks kind of rakish on you.” She rubbed her hand down her cheek and along her chin.

He looked at her for a long moment. *Is she flirting with me? Get a grip man. That is not happening.*

“So, what do you want for breakfast? The B&B package comes with cold cereal and toast or hot baking powder biscuits and jam or a croissant and a bowl of fresh fruit; your choice.”

“I’ll have a hot biscuit and jam. I love biscuits.” She looked at him curiously. “What are you having? Let me guess; cold cereal and toast.”

“How did you know?”

She smiled and gave a shrug. “You’re pretty predictable.”

He snorted in reply and went to get their breakfasts while she smirked as she finished drinking her coffee.

The highway was open by ten-thirty that morning and Tim and Christina were on the road as soon as they got word that they could travel. Most of the trip was made in silence, but it wasn’t the hostile silence of the previous night’s journey from Belanger Creek. It was a companionable silence, two friends traveling together.

About two-thirds of the way home, Tim sighed deeply and looked at her. “About yesterday...when I went down to Ollie’s

house to get his pills, they weren't in the medicine chest in the bathroom, or on the windowsill by the kitchen sink. They were on the desk in his office."

Christina waited for him to continue, but when he didn't, she said, "Okay. What was so significant about that, Tim?"

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, staring ahead, down the road. "I saw my Mom's picture."

"What?"

"It was there on his desk. Just lying there, as if he'd been sitting there looking at it before he'd left the house."

"But why? I mean... are you certain it was her?"

"At first, I thought I was imagining things, but I picked it up and studied it. It was a picture taken when she was young, probably in her twenties. There's no doubt that it's her. I've seen it before among her things."

"It doesn't make sense, Tim. How would Ollie get a picture of your mom? And why?"

"I've been asking myself the same thing, and I have no idea why. There was a date on the back. It was four years ago, in late May, and the name of a legal firm in Vancouver B.C. was stamped underneath it. I was already at the farm then. I'd been there a few months by that time."

Christina frowned thoughtfully. "And neither Colt nor Ollie has ever mentioned it to you in all this time?"

"No. To be honest, that's what really bothers me about this whole thing. What the hell is going on? Why has no one mentioned that they knew her or had a picture of her? God, I've come to feel like I was part of the family; like they are all my close friends. Honestly, Christina, why would the people I consider friends keep something like that from me? It wasn't shoved away and forgotten in a corner. It was right there on the desk, in front of his chair. Ellie has to know. How would you feel?"

"Why didn't you ask Ollie? You could have done it when you came back up to the house."

"When I first saw the picture, I was shocked and I just sat there for a long time, feeling confused. To be honest, I felt

betrayed. Then I got mad and I didn't know who I could believe or trust. I just wanted to get out of there."

"Tim, I haven't really known everyone much longer than you have. I've worked for Shauna Lee for years, but until she met Brad, she was nothing more than an employer. I knew she had gone out with Colt before he married Frank, and I'd seen Colt and Bob come into the office, but I didn't really know them on a personal basis. I saw Ollie off and on over the years, but just in passing.

"But now, I believe in all of them; they are true friends. I... you...we've seen it over and over again. They...we... support each other through thick and thin. We're there for each other when things go wrong, we celebrate together when things go well. Everyone works hard, they play together...they're awesome people. There's something that we're missing."

"But what can it be?" He sighed and looked out the side window. "I'm so tired of having life go sideways on me. I was beginning to settle in, feel a part of things." He thumped the steering wheel with his hand. "And then this happens and now I'm questioning everything again. I can't deal with another betrayal."

"Okay, let's try using some logic, instead of emotion. Was your mom still alive when you came here? Somehow I thought your dad died last."

"He did. That's the thing. Mom was gone for six years before Dad died. So, why would anyone be sending out her picture four years later?"

"Don't assume the worst, Tim. You should talk to Ollie and Colt. You need to go back to the ranch as soon as you can and get it all out in the open. If you can wait until next weekend, I'll go with you, for support."

His eyes met hers. "You mean you'd do that for me after I've been such a miserable..."

"Bastard?" Her expression became thoughtful. "What is it about that word that really gets to you?"

"I am one."

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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”.