

A woman with long dark hair is shown in silhouette, standing in a desert landscape. She is looking towards a large, layered rock formation with a prominent spire in the distance. The sky is blue with some clouds. The foreground is a reddish-brown desert floor with some sparse vegetation.

An Introduction to
Sarah

B GIBSON

B GIBSON BOOKS

from The Teacher Learns Love Series

Sarah

An Insightful Glimpse into Her Life

(A Companion to *The Teacher Learns Love*)

The first day of high school had been hard for Sarah Johnson. She was a sophomore coming into a new school with no friends and no relatives to help her. She had been in this position before. Her parents had moved her around often, from one eviction to another. Never staying too long in one place. There was never enough money to pay the rent and buy groceries *and* liquor. That came first. The liquor. Above all else, for them. Which is why there was never any money for rent or groceries. Her parents were always drunk.

The family of three got assistance but it was never enough, and Sarah knew they sometimes cashed in their food stamps for booze. It was not legal, but it happened anyway.

They had been turned in to the authorities for neglect many times, which is another reason they moved so often. From town to town, state to state and now they had come home again to The Rez. She wondered how long they would stay this time.

She was late to her first class because she couldn't find it. Everyone was already seated when she entered and, of course, all eyes went to her. The boys quickly assessed her from head to toe, their eyes lingering on her small breasts and slender hips for longer than necessary. The girls just as quickly made their estimation of her: she was Native but not one of them; she wore secondhand clothes, as many of them did, but she had a style most of them lacked; she wore no makeup, unlike most of the rez girls, but her wholesome beauty shone through. Most disliked her instantly for no other reason than that they saw that she possessed something they did not. She had quality, though they would never have been able to put those thoughts into words.

"Take a seat, Sarah," the teacher said.

She looked quickly for a spot near the back of the room where she could hide. There were none. The only space open was near the front. Reluctantly, she slid into it. To one side was a girl who gave her a fake smile. To the other was a boy, who hardly glanced in her direction.

Why? she thought as she opened her book. *Having History the first hour was unfair.* Her lack of reading skills would be discovered soon.

“God in Heaven,” she muttered under her breath, wondering for a split second if it was a prayer or a curse. She opted for the former. Her mother, even drunk, would have slapped her for swearing. She would not allow the Lord’s name to be taken in vain. Sarah had often wondered at the incongruity of that. Her mother would sell her own soul for a drink.

The teacher was talking, asking the homework assignment to be handed forward. There was a lot of paper shuffling as the students rummaged for their work.

She realized that the boy beside her had heard and was giving her a sideways smile. *Understanding?* she wondered. She wasn’t sure.

“Manny Littleman, do you plan to participate today?” a voice scolded from the front of the room.

The boy’s head whipped around to face the teacher. “Yes, ma’am! Sorry.” He grabbed his paper and handed it forward. Then he prepared for the work of the day. But not before giving her a wide grin.

At lunch, she found a seat by herself, not yet wanting to play that game of “may I sit with you?” with the girls that she had rightly decided didn’t like her. She had just settled in when the young man called Manny sat beside her.

“Hi,” he greeted cheerily.

She merely smiled in his direction, trying to be invisible.

He began eating and was soon joined by one of his male buddies. Manny introduced her to his friend, John.

“Hi,” she smiled shyly.

It continued this way until the whole table was full of Manny’s friends, both male and female. Before long, the space around the table was filled with a cacophony of the laughter, squeals and hoots of young people enjoying themselves.

As they were preparing to finish lunch and go back to class, Sarah turned and gave Manny a grateful smile. “Thank you,” she said quietly. He knew what she meant; she had not had to sit alone.

On the bus ride home, no one sat with her or paid her any mind. She was glad. It gave her a few minutes to mentally and emotionally prepare herself for whatever might greet her when she got there.

The trailer was down a long lane and fronted by a stand of scrub brush that effectively hid it from view. At least, the worst part of it. It belonged to a distant relative and had been loaned to the family free of charge until they 'got on their feet'. She knew that would never happen and wondered how long they would be allowed to stay. It wasn't much but it was shelter and a place to keep her meager belongings.

There was no running water inside the house. For drinking and cooking, she had to haul water in buckets in the back of their battered old truck from five miles down the road. There was a spicket there where people could fill up for free, as long as they didn't take too much. She went three times a week because they had so few good containers to keep the clean water in.

For showering, and other water needs, she had hooked up a water hose from the old well that still functioned in back of the house. The water was probably contaminated with uranium runoff, but she took the chance that it wouldn't kill them. Better to be clean, she rationalized.

The toilet was broken so they had to use a privy situated outside about a hundred feet from the house. Now, in the fall, it was not too bad to make the trek out there. But in the winter, when it was cold and dark, it would be more of a trial.

The electricity was on when they moved in. She wanted to believe that her father had paid the deposit and had it turned on lawfully. But she knew he had probably done some creative wiring and that they were actually stealing electricity from a neighbor. Because of that, she tried to be thrifty with the precious commodity. However, no one else in the household seemed to share her frugality; the tv was always on, casting its blue glare everywhere, all day long and most of the night.

Sarah was happy to note as she came up to the house that only their old truck sat out front. She hated it when her parents 'friends' were here. She was never sure how they had always managed to meet people so quickly after a move. But people just like them seemed to gravitate to wherever they were.

She particularly hated it when a group of her father's friends were there. She tried to stay in her room, away from their prying eyes, and not attract attention to herself. But sometimes her father would call to her to bring more beer or whiskey and she would have to make an appearance. The first time, she hadn't understood why he had done it. Her mother was right there in the room. And he was quite capable of getting the drinks. But she knew now why he called to her.

The first time he had sold her had been when she was thirteen. She had matured early and was developing breasts and hips. And she had noticed how the men who hung around leered at her. It made her uneasy and she tried to avoid them. But her father would have none of that.

The first time was fast and brutal, and she was bruised and bleeding when she made it to the bathroom to try to clean up. The stench of the man was all over her and she ran to the toilet and threw up. She had no idea what her father had charged the man for the chance to take her virginity. She hoped it was more than a bottle of cheap whiskey. But she doubted it.

This had been her life ever since. Sometimes she could go for several months without it happening then, for reasons known only to him, her father would look at her with something akin to hatred and would turn his cronies loose on her. Absent-mindedly, she wondered how she had managed to not become pregnant and wondered how she would handle that if it happened. She prayed every time one of them burst into her room that no child would come from the animalistic behavior the brutes visited upon her.

Since they had moved here, to The Rez, it had not happened. She tried to stay out of her father's way and, therefore, his line of fire. She did everything she could to make the hovel of a trailer as much like a home as possible. She had even started school two weeks late just to assure that things could go as smoothly as possible.

School had surprised her. She had actually made friends. Not many, but it seemed the ones she did have were quality. She liked that. And she believed Manny Littleman and his presence in her life had a lot to do with that. Without knowing any of the connections, she could tell that he was someone important to the community. And she was content right now to benefit from his association.

One afternoon, she missed the bus that would take her home. She was about to head out on foot to walk the five or so miles when Manny and one of his friends offered to take her home. She was happy for the ride but became a little upset when Manny refused to let her off at the road to walk the long drive instead of driving up to the house.

"It's no problem," he said. "What kind of gentleman would I be if I let you walk?" He grinned at her. "If my mother ever found out, she would whoop my ass, for sure."

She smiled weakly.

When they drove up to the house, Manny saw why she had not wanted them to see it. He didn't understand how it was even standing. It looked like a good wind could toss it over.

Sarah got out of the car immediately, thanking them profusely. As she turned to head into the house, her father appeared through the front door, in a fury.

Manny heard the groan escape from her and saw the look of dread and horror come over her.

"Where you been?" Her father yelled.

Sarah glanced quickly at the boys. "You'd better go. Now." Then she turned toward the simi drunk man glaring at her and explained, "I missed the bus."

"What are you doing with them?" Her father pointed to the two boys in the car with his chin.

"They..." she began

"We just gave her a ride, Mr. Johnson..." Manny interrupted and began his explanation as he got out of the driver's seat.

"I'll bet you did!" Mr. Johnson said vulgarity and, producing a gun from just inside the door, waved it at them. "She's not for the likes of you!"

With a look of alarm, Manny threw up his arms and immediately retreated back into the car.

"Go," Sarah pleaded with them.

"Will you be okay?" John asked.

"Yes," she assured them. "Just go." She hurried to the house. They both, father and daughter, disappeared behind a loudly-slammed door as Manny and John quickly sped away.

A few days later, Manny managed to whittle the truth out of Sarah. They were walking together outside on their way to their respective physical education classes and the whole story just spilled out. At first, Manny was not wont to believe that such a thing could actually happen. He wasn't a prude but it seemed so unrealistic that a father could abuse his own daughter so horrifically. Then he recalled the look on Mr. Johnson's face the day he had driven her home. And decided that the man was capable of anything.

Manny liked Sarah. More than he probably should. He knew he had to do something to help her. He went to Sam.

He told his uncle the whole, sordid story, or at least, as much of it as he knew. He astutely figured that Sarah had not told him everything.

Sam looked grim as he listened. His young nephew looked away as he related what Sarah had told him. Then Manny added his own opinion.

“They live in that old trash heap of a trailer on the back of the Begay place. Five miles out of town. A dog shouldn’t have to live there.”

“I’d heard they were back,” Sam said. “They float on and off the rez. They move a lot. When things get tough.”

Sam knew the Johnsons. They were scum-of-the-earth worthless. Amelia. Such a pretty name for such a trashy creature, he thought. And Joseph. Sam wished he’d never met him. How they had ever been sober enough to beget a child was beyond him. Thankfully, there hadn’t been more children.

“What do you want me to do?” Sam quietly asked his nephew.

“I don’t know, Uncle. You’re the Headman. There must be *something* to do. Sarah’s nice. Not like her parents. I’ve been helping her with her schoolwork. She’s really having trouble though. Her homelife has to be part of the problem.”

Sam grunted his agreement as he looked at the boy, scrutinizing his face. There was more to this story, he thought. Manny was a good kid, but he didn’t usually take this kind of interest. “You two aren’t...?”

“No!” Manny said much too quickly. And loudly.

It was obvious to his uncle that the girl was on his nephew’s mind. Probably a lot!

“There isn’t much I can do except put the fear of God in him.”

Manny laughed. “You’re very good at that!”

When Joseph Johnson opened the door to find Sam Littleman filling the doorway, it was all he could do not to gasp.

“Sam,” he finally greeted, recovering himself.

“Joe,” Sam replied flatly and pushed himself inside.

“Just stopping by for a visit?” Joe managed to ask.

“Sort of...” Sam replied, scanning the room. *How could anyone live like this?* It was nauseating. “Amelia not home?”

“She’s in bed. Bad sick.”

Sam made a snorting sound of disbelief. *Drunk, you mean, you filthy cur.*

“I’ll get right to the point,” The Headman continued, not wanting to spend any more time here than necessary. “I understand there have been some less than appropriate activities going on here.”

Joe raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“Activities that involve your daughter.”

“What’s she been telling?” Joe was instantly on the defensive.

“Nothing. I’ve never even met your daughter. But word gets around. Especially that kind of word.”

Joe was suddenly red in the face with fury. “You think you’re such a big man…” Then he lurched at Sam but found himself propelled back into his chair.

Sam had a hold of the front of his shirt, bunched up tight in his fist. “You always were a sorry piece of shit, Joe.” He was in the man’s face, closer than he wanted to be. “If I ever hear of something like this happening again, I’ll come back. There are lots of places out here to hide a body where nobody would find it. And nobody is gonna miss *you*.” Sam let go of Joe with a shove. And a look of disgust. “For your own sake, you’d better not let anything happen to her again.”

As he turned to go, his eyes were caught by the figure of a girl at the end of the hallway, in shadow. He had no idea she had stayed home from school today to take care of her mother who was, in fact, very sick.

Their eyes held for an instant; hers with gratitude and his with sympathy. Then, to acknowledge her presence, he lightly touched the brim of his hat and left.

“How did he know?” Sarah asked Manny the next day.

“I told him. He’s my uncle and I thought he could help.”

Sarah laughed slightly. “Well, he scared my father witless!”

Manny laughed, thinking about the imposing figure of his uncle. “He can do that! It’s a gift, I think.”

On impulse, for otherwise she might not have done it, she leaned over and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “Thank you.”

Manny beamed, feeling for all the world like the preverbal white knight. So, he had done the right thing by telling his uncle, he thought with relief. He no longer felt like he had betrayed her trust.

They both sat quietly, having suddenly run out of things to say. Finally, to fill the awkward silence, Manny blurted out, "I like your outfit."

"Do you?" she asked, preening slightly.

He nodded.

"I made it myself."

Manny looked duly impressed.

"I learned a long time ago that I'd better learn to sew if I wanted to have decent clothes. And I really enjoy it. I like making my own designs."

Another long, awkward pause.

"Well," Sarah finally said, "I'd better get to class."

"Yeah. See ya..."

Manny watched her go, suddenly aware of the hole in his heart caused by her absence.