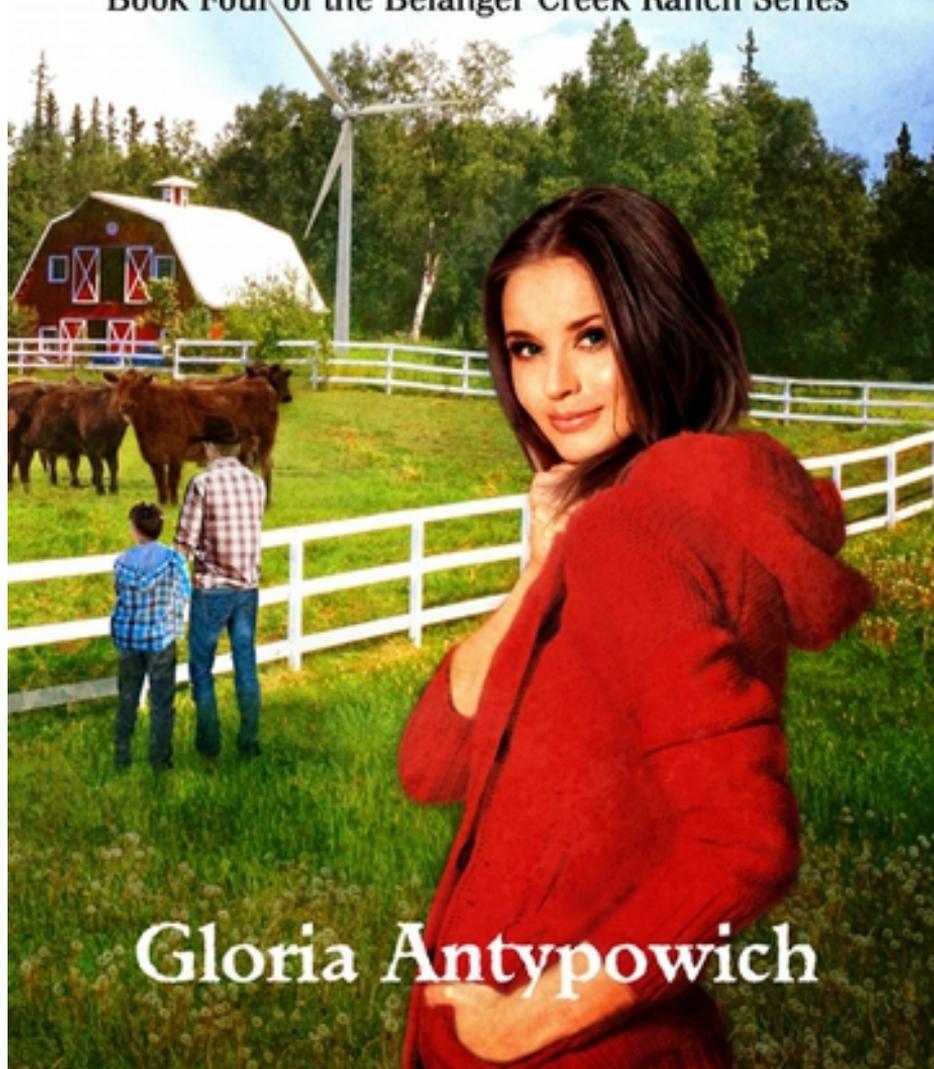


A SECOND CHANCE

Book Four of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series



Gloria Antypowich

A Second Chance
Book Four
of the
Belanger Creek Ranch Series

By
Gloria Antypowich

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Published by Gloria Antypowich
Amazon Edition

5 stars! Reviewed By Rabia Tanveer for Readers' Favorite

In *A Second Chance* by Gloria Antypowich, a mother has to make a decision. Either run away with her son or believe him when he says that the man they both love loves them back. Sarah Brite lived her life in fear of her violent husband. When the time came to choose between him and her son's safety, she chose her son. Together, they leave him and come to live at Belanger Creek Ranch. The peaceful community lives together like a family and finally Sarah finds time to actually breathe freely.

However, Grayson McNaughton has her on the edge. He is handsome, charming, and her son Taylor is getting closer to him every day. After many futile attempts at ignoring the attention, she finally gives in and lets herself be happy. Just when she gets comfortable, a revelation from Grayson's past makes her shudder. She wants to leave with Taylor, but he does not want to go. He believes Grayson and does not want to leave him behind. What will Sarah do? Should she listen to her son, or should she listen to her heart?

A Second Chance by Gloria Antypowich is an outstanding novel. Gloria did an amazing job. She showed a clear picture of really happens in the lives of single parents and how cautious they are in starting a new relationship. I really liked Taylor; where Sarah was over cautious, he was cool headed and believes Grayson the person, not his past. He is a really cool kid, and he will turn out to be an awesome man. I really enjoyed this book.

Note from the Reviewer to the Author:

I really enjoyed it. Although, I have not read the rest of the books, I'm looking forward to more from you with Grayson, Taylor and Sarah.

5 stars! Reviewed By Janelle Alex, Ph.D. for Readers' Favorite

A Second Chance is the fourth book in the Belanger Creek Ranch series authored by Gloria Antypowich, and this one has quite an interesting plot. A young woman, Sarah Brite, is on the run and hiding with her ten-year-old son, Taylor. The boy's father is a violent man and has already found Sarah and Taylor numerous times. With threats upon their lives, Sarah keeps her past a secret while working and living at Belanger Creek Ranch. That is until Grayson McNaughton finally encourages her to share her secret with him. He would love to build a romantic relationship with Sarah and be a father to Taylor, but he has his own deep, dark secret. When Sarah learns what that secret is, she pushes Grayson away. However, a freak accident on the ranch ends up bringing the two of them together again. Antypowich doesn't end the story there though. Instead, she continues on even after Grayson, Sarah and Taylor become a true family.

Gloria Antypowich writes with more in depth details than the average romance novel. You may find this style refreshing as it gives you more mundane details of the characters' lives or you may find it uninteresting. Also, there a slew of characters to keep track of in the Belanger Creek Ranch series; therefore it makes it easier if you read all the books in the series to avoid confusion. No matter, A Second Chance is quite enticing and sweetly romantic with an edge of suspense. To top it all off, Antypowich's main characters in A Second Chance are the epitome of second chances. Well done!

5 stars! Reviewed By Gisela Dixon for Readers' Favorite

A Second Chance (The Belanger Creek Ranch Series Book 4) by Gloria Antypowich is the fourth book in the Belanger Creek Ranch romance series. This book takes place on Belanger Creek Ranch whose owners, Colt and Frank Thompson, were introduced to us in the first book in the series. However, one can read each of the books in this series independently of each other.

A Second Chance starts with an introduction to Sarah Brite and her young son, Taylor, both of whom are on the run and in hiding from Taylor's

father. On the ranch, they meet Grayson McNaughton, who himself has some dark secrets in his past. Soon, Taylor grows to look upon Grayson as a father figure and becomes quite close to him. Sarah and Grayson are quietly attracted to each other as well until secrets from their past start coming out, casting a shadow on all of their lives. Can they ever become a family? Or will their past lives destroy their present? This novel has plenty of twists and turns and plenty of surprises in store until the last page.

A Second Chance (The Belanger Creek Ranch Series Book 4) is another well-thought out book with a solid plot written by Gloria Antypowich. I like the fact that this is not your typical boy-meets-girl book and the events and characters are real with real life problems and issues. I also liked the way in which the bond between Taylor and Grayson is portrayed. Overall, this is a good novel for a rainy day.

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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

The Hand of Fate, Book Three, of the Belanger Creek Ranch Series

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the many people who struggle with the consequences of decisions that they have made. I think we have all done smaller things that we wish we could change; however, some choices are more monumental and have lifelong consequences. I believe *self-forgiveness* is first step to healing. Forgiveness can be sought in external ways, but until a person makes peace within, they are unable to truly accept any form of forgiveness and rebuild a life with the support of those who love them as they are.

Below are two quotes that resonated with me, as I watched the main characters in this book come to life.

The best kinds of people are the ones that come into your life, and make you see the sun where you once saw clouds. The people that believe in you so much, you start to believe in you too: the people that love you, simply for being you. The once in a lifetime kind of people. (Unknown quotes)

Family isn't always blood. It's the people in your life who want you in theirs. The ones who accept you for who you are: the ones who would do anything to see you smile, and who love you no matter what. – (Unknown)

My second dedication is to *Chuck*, a quiet, caring, kind individual that my son and daughter-in-law knew many years before I started to work on *A Second Chance*. I had never met him: however, I knew where he lived, so I looked up his phone number through Canada 411 and cold-called him.

I introduced myself and told him why I was calling, and when I asked him if he would be willing to talk to me, he didn't hesitate.

Even though his situation was quite different from that of the character in this book, it was similar in the way that both circumstances were accidental, and their personalities were of the same nature. He gave me insight into the emotional repercussions of being responsible for a traumatic event. I found him to be an exceptional individual: warm, friendly, genuine, open, and honest. I have a special spot in my heart for him.

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 Rezanoff. 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 Skinner 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 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

It was Christmas Day. Sara Brite stood at the livingroom window and looked down over the buildings and corrals that were the heart of Belanger Creek Ranch. Coming here was the best thing that had happened for her and her son, Taylor, in recent years. The area was rural and not a place where the father of her son would be apt to find them. Of course, she would never let her guard down. She'd always remain aware and alert, ready to move at the slightest hint of danger. Duncan Talbot had resources and he'd tracked her down before. If that happened, and *if* they managed to get away again, she and Taylor would immediately disappear, slipping under the radar, just as they had done before.

The ranch 'family' was close-knit, and they looked out for their own. She and Taylor had been invited to the Bate's place for Christmas dinner, along with the rest of the 'family.' Brad and Shauna Lee Johnson and their two children would have come from Swift Current. Frank and Colt Thompson and the twins, as well as Ellie and Ollie Crampton, had left the ranch the day before, and drove to the farm at Cantaur to begin celebrating with all of the 'family' on Christmas Eve. Everyone was excited about Christina and Tim Bates new twins, but Taylor didn't care much for babies. He said they just cried and puked and messed their diapers. He had wanted to hang out at the ranch and help Grayson McNaughton do chores. Sarah appreciated the invitation, but she was reluctant to allow herself to get very close to anyone, so making the decision to stay home hadn't been difficult.

She smiled when she saw her son go flying down the steep driveway

on his plastic snow saucer. She watched him swerve around the ranch hand. The man jumped aside as Taylor narrowly missed him.

Her gaze settled on Grayson. He was a nice man; attractive, unassuming, gentle, soft-spoken, and kind hearted. But.... She frowned as she acknowledged that he was the biggest threat to her peace of mind at Belanger Creek Ranch.

Taylor Brite loved the feel of the wind on his face as he flew down the steep driveway. He swerved the well-worn plastic snow-saucer around Grayson McNaughton, spraying him with the dry, crystalline snow. Grayson jumped aside, and Taylor laughed with glee.

Grayson was really cool. In Taylor's mind, he was the best friend he had; even better than Sam and Selena, the Thompson twins, who were a year younger than he was.

Sam was OK. He was laid back and fun; but Selena was bossy and very competitive. She always wanted to win, and she pouted when she didn't. Sometimes he was tempted to push her down and wash her face with snow, but he knew he couldn't do that. He'd be in big trouble all around, if he did.

When Grayson reached the bottom of the hill, he tipped Taylor off the saucer and rubbed his ears against his head. "You little devil you. You tried to run me over, didn't you?"

Taylor was laughing when he protested. "No. I was just trying to see how close I could get."

Grayson rolled him around in the snow and then reached out to take his hand and pull him to his feet. "I'm going start the snow machine. I'll pull you behind on your saucer if you want me to. Do you think your mom would like to come along?"

Taylor was jumping up and down. "That'll be fun. I'll go get her." He turned. "Where are we going?" he asked, as he started to run up the hill to the house.

“We’ll go across the road.”

Sarah Brite was still watching from the big window in the living room at the main ranch house. Taylor had blossomed during the year and a half since they’d come to the ranch. A day didn’t go by when she wasn’t thankful that Colt Thompson had hired her. Although she remained alert and ready to act for Taylor’s safety, she felt safer on the ranch, than she had since she’d worked for the Harahan’s in Toronto. The only thing that shadowed her peace was Taylor’s attachment to Grayson; for her son’s sake, she knew it was a relationship that she shouldn’t have allowed to develop.

She smiled as she watched Grayson roughhousing with her son. She saw them exchange friendly banter, then watched Taylor start running up the hill. He was out of breath, but grinning from ear to ear, when he came in.

“Hey, Mom! Grayson wants to know if you’d like to go for a ride on the snow machine. He’s going to go across the road into the pasture, and he’s going to pull me behind on the saucer.”

She frowned. In recent months, she had grown very aware of Grayson as a man, and he hadn’t hidden the fact that he liked her. She hadn’t encouraged his tentative advances because she didn’t want to get involved with anyone. She knew how uncertain the future could be.

“Aww mom, come on. Have some fun for a change. All you do is work.”

“Taylor... you know why I do what I do.”

He looked crestfallen. “We’re safe mom. Nobody will find us way out here.”

“Taylor! Not another word about that. We can’t get too comfortable.”

His smile disappeared. “I know. But it’s Christmas. Won’t you come out for a ride? For me?” he added pathetically.

She sighed. *He knows how to push my buttons.* “Oh...alright, I’ll pull on a warm pair of pants and my winter coat. Just give me a minute.”

The smile reappeared and his eyes twinkled again. *It takes so little to make him happy.*

He fidgeted while he waited impatiently. When Sarah followed him outside, he persuaded her to sit on the snow saucer with him and they sped down the hill.

Grayson was surprised when he saw the sparkle in her eyes and the color in her cheeks. Most of the time, Sarah looked like she was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. He often wondered what her story was. Why was she on her own with ten-year-old Taylor?

He watched Taylor lean back and shove her off the saucer.

“You rascal,” she gasped. “I’ll get you for doing that.”

Taylor landed on top of her and pushed her down in the snow. It feathered into her dark hair and snuck over her collar.

“Taylor,” she squealed. “You’re getting snow down my neck.”

“If I let you get up, will you promise not to come after me?”

She shook her head and struggled to push him off.

“No? Then I guess I can’t let you up.”

“Taylor. I’m your mom. You have to listen to me.”

“Sorry; I’ve got to look after myself.”

Grayson started to laugh. “Do you want some help, Sarah?”

Taylor lifted his head and looked at him in disbelief. “You trait...”

“Got you,” Sarah cried as she threw him down and pushed him into the snow, burying him as he had her.

Grayson grinned as he listened to Taylor giggle while he thrashed around in the softness, struggling to get out from underneath his mother.

When Sarah finally let him up, he turned onto his hands and knees and crawled away from her. Then, he stood up. He pulled off his gloves and began to shake snow out of his hair. He ran his hands along his collar, under his coat and up his back, around the waistband of his snow pants and finally digging tiny balls of it out of the fabric around his wrists. “You’re mean.”

“Hey! You started this, remember?”

He grinned good-naturedly and grabbed the saucer, giving his mother a hip-check as he walked by her.

Grayson smiled as he walked to the back of the snow machine. He knotted a light nylon rope to the hitch and tied it to Taylor’s snow saucer. “Have you ever done this before?”

Taylor shook his head.

“What? Where did you grow up?”

Taylor laughed nervously and looked at his mom.

“We didn’t have snow machines,” she said flatly.

Ouch, that hit a nerve, he thought. He turned to the boy. “Okay, first of all, you have to wear this helmet.” He tossed one that he had hung on the snowmobile handlebar to him. “When I start to pull, let the rope tighten. Then you’ll have to hold on and try to steer the saucer, but if it starts to tip or flip, let go. You don’t want to get dragged. I’ll keep an eye out for you.” He looked at Sarah. “Your mom will too.”

Grayson handed Sarah the second helmet that was on the seat behind him. While Taylor settled on the saucer, Grayson sat on the snow machine seat. He motioned for her to get on behind him. She tried to sit back, ramrod stiff. He turned to look over his shoulder. “Have you ever done this before?”

She shook her head.

“Put your arms around my waist and hang on. You’ll need to move with me as we ride or you’ll throw the machine off balance.”

She felt conflicted, and it showed.

He winked. “Come on Sarah. It’s just a ride. I’m not going to get any crazy ideas.”

She blushed. “I wasn’t thinking that.”

He smirked, even though he almost felt sorry for her. “No? What were you thinking?”

“Just...”

“Aww mom, just put your arms around him so we can get moving. You’ll fall off if you don’t, and I’ll run right over you.”

“You would, too,” she muttered as she slid her arms around Grayson’s waist.

He didn’t go too fast, keeping an eye on Taylor. Sarah gradually relaxed and rested against his back. Her mind spun off, remembering another life when she had ridden with her arms wrapped around another man.

CHAPTER TWO

Fourteen years earlier, she had eyed Duncan Talbot with distaste when he'd swaggered into the corner store where she worked. *A bad ass biker*. He was everything she'd been warned about when he came through the door; leathers, chains, tattoos, a scarf tied backward over his head, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. *Degenerate*. Her dad's summation of him rang in her ears.

He'd shopped for smokes and beer, further confirming that opinion of men like him.

Duncan Talbot was in many ways a degenerate, just as her dad had declared him to be. He was twenty-five years older than her, but he was a charming degenerate, and he came back repeatedly throughout the next year. In the end, he wore down Sarah's resistance. She had fallen for him, and despite her mother's tears and her father's outrage, she had hopped on behind him on his bike and sped away. She had threaded her arms around his waist and rested herself against his back, moving in unison with him as they rode through the curves and passed in the traffic.

Sarah was jolted from her memories when Taylor yelped. Grayson uttered a curse and turned the machine around. She became alert immediately and turned to see what had happened. The saucer had flipped and was bouncing crazily behind the snow machine. Taylor had rolled off. As she watched, he rose up on his knees and shook off the snow. He was wearing a happy grin.

A wave of love flooded through her. His father may have been a useless, violent, degenerate, but their folly had produced the most precious

thing in her life. While she feared and detested everything about his biological father, Taylor was the one thing she cherished more than anything.

She watched as Grayson helped him get straightened out and settled on the snow saucer again. *He's good with Taylor. Duncan would never have been like that. He didn't want a child and he had no patience with the inconvenience of having one.*

She stood up to let Grayson ease himself onto the seat in front of her and then settled down behind him. She slid her arms around his waist, conscious of their position, and more acutely aware of him as a man than she wanted to be.

He eased the machine forward until the rope tightened and then he accelerated. As he became more confident, Taylor wove crisscross paths behind the machine, whooping with glee as the snow saucer briefly became airborne on occasion, then dipped down to catch the snow and whipped across the other way. Sarah's heart filled with happiness when she turned her head and saw her son's exuberant, smiling face. *Coming here has been the best thing that could have happened. I don't know when I've ever seen him so uninhibited. He's always been so serious and careful.* She swallowed hard.

Grayson slowed the machine and stopped. He looked up at the sky, noting the position of the sun. "I think it's time to head back to the ranch. It's about two-thirty."

"How do you know that?" Taylor asked.

"See where the sun is?"

Taylor looked toward the hills in the west. "Yeah, it's just above the trees."

"In a couple of hours it will be dusk, so we'd better head in and do the chores for the night."

When they got back to the ranch, Grayson drove up to the house. He let Sarah get off and she walked to her apartment. He helped Taylor

unhook the snow saucer and then they both got back on the machine and rode down to the barnyard. Taylor wrapped his arms around Grayson's chest and hugged him. Grayson's heart lifted with happiness. It felt good to be hugged so freely.

Later, the three of them sat around the table, chatting as they enjoyed the Christmas feast that Sarah had made. Minutes before Taylor had come to ask her to go with them on the snow machine ride, she had put the turkey in the oven. She had prepared the vegetables earlier too, so she only had to cook them when she got back. Taylor heaped his plate with turkey and mashed potatoes and gravy and corn casserole. He wolfed it down and went back for seconds. Grayson looked at Sarah and chuckled. "This guy's got a hollow leg."

She nodded. "It must be from all that fresh air."

Taylor was grinning from ear to ear. "Come on you guys. I had a great day; I don't know when I've *ever* had so much fun." He pushed away his plate. "What's for dessert, mom?"

Sarah looked at him with disbelief. "Dessert? Are you serious?"

He rubbed his stomach and then felt down his leg. "I'm pretty sure I have room...right here in my hollow leg." He looked at Grayson and smiled.

Sarah shook her head. "Why don't we have dessert later? Maybe we could play a game, or watch a movie and give all that food time to settle. Would that be alright with you, Grayson?"

Taylor was up in a shot and pulling on Grayson's arm. "Please stay. We could watch a movie. The Thompsons lent us some good ones."

Grayson messed his hair and looked at Sarah. "That sounds like a nice way to spend the evening." Sarah nodded and asked him if he'd like a drink. He thought for a moment and said, "I'll make my own after I help you clean up the kitchen."

Taylor hurried into the living room and picked out three movies while Grayson helped Sarah clear the table and made his own drink. Sarah

poured herself a glass of red wine. Taylor was leaning against the doorway, waiting impatiently for them. “Which movie do you want to watch, Grayson?”

Grayson studied the three Taylor had lain out. He winked at Sarah as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “They all look interesting, son. You pick one and we’ll watch it.”

A flush stole over the boy’s face. “You called me *son*.”

Grayson shot a look at Sarah. She bit her lip and looked away. He didn’t miss the glisten of tears in her eyes.

“Hey Taylor, if you’d been my son I’d be proud of you.” He hugged him. “Now let’s watch a movie.” He knelt by the DVD player and let the boy slide the disc into the empty slot. Then he handed the remote to the youngster and taking his other hand, lead him back to the couch. Taylor sat in the middle, with the two adults on either side. Sarah noticed that he rested his head against Grayson’s shoulder and eventually the man lifted his arm to drape it around her son’s shoulders, letting the child’s dark head rest against his chest.

A knot of anxiety rose in Sarah’s chest. Grayson was a great guy and he’d make a wonderful father, but he wasn’t Taylors. She squeezed her eyes shut. *Why couldn’t he have felt that way about Colt?* She sighed with resignation. *Colt is Sam and Sarah’s dad. Taylor wants one of his own, so it’s easy to see why he’s drawn to Grayson.*

She felt Grayson’s hand touch her shoulder. Her eyes flew open and she met his questioning look. Their gaze held for a moment, and then she looked away. Taylor reached out, took each of their hands in his, and leaned against the back of the couch. “Sitting here like this is nice isn’t it? It’s just like we’re a family.”

Sarah squeezed his hand. “Taylor, Grayson is a wonderful friend, but you are going to embarrass him if you keep saying things like that.”

Taylor leaned over and looked into Grayson’s face. “Am I embarrassing you, Grayson?”

“I’m not embarrassed, Taylor. But, you have to realize that for us to be a family, your mom and I would have to have a different relationship than we have. When you say things like that, you are putting us in an uncomfortable spot. We’re friends and I like your mom a lot, but we’re not...well, we’re not like a mother and father.”

“But you could be. Then we’d be a family, wouldn’t we?”

Sarah placed her hand over his mouth. “Enough! *I’m* embarrassed now.”

Taylor pushed her hand away. “But mom, Grayson’s said he likes you a lot, and he’s nothing like Duncan. We aren’t afraid of him. He isn’t mean and he wouldn’t hurt us.” He looked at her earnestly. “He’d be like Mr. Thompson. He’d take care of us...”

“Taylor Brite! That’s enough.” She jumped up. “I’m sorry you had to listen to all that Grayson.”

Grayson stood to face her. “Sarah.” He reached out and touched her arm. “Please don’t apologize. Taylor is a great kid; as I said before, under different circumstances I’d be honored to be his dad.”

Sarah looked at Taylor. “I think it’s time for you to go to bed.”

“Aww, Mom. It’s Christmas. And we haven’t had dessert yet.”

“Taylor...I mean now! Grayson and I are going to have a talk.”

“About him becoming my dad?”

“No, about why he cannot become your dad.”

CHAPTER THREE

Taylor's disappointment was obvious when he ejected the disc and stood up. He threaded his arms around Grayson's waist. "Thanks for the best Christmas ever! Don't listen to mom when she tells you that you can't be my dad. I'd love it if we were a family."

Grayson rubbed his head. "This was the most special Christmas I've had in ten years, Taylor, and people are what make my Christmas special. I'll see you tomorrow."

Taylor hugged his mom and gave her a peck on the cheek. "I love you Mom." He gave her a cheeky grin. "And I know everything is going to be okay."

After he had gone to his room and shut the door, she turned toward Grayson. She felt awkward because of her embarrassment, and she couldn't quite look into his eyes. "Uhhh...would you like another drink?"

"Are you having one?"

"Yes. I think I will. I need to help you understand Taylor and me... where we come from, what our life has been like and what it will be in the future."

"Okay. I'll make my own drink. Can I pour you a glass of wine?"

She nodded, walked over to sit at the table. She watched him as he mixed his drink, and then poured her a glass of wine. He carried them to the table and she sighed deeply as he put the glass in front of her. He walked back to the island, collected the bottle of rye, a can of coke and the wine and brought them to the table with him. "I think we might need

these.”

Sarah laugh was strangled. “You must be clairvoyant.”

He touched his glass to hers, his expression serious. “Alright, Sarah Brite; tell me why you are carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

Her head snapped up, her expression one of quick denial.

Grayson held up his hand. “You initiated this talk, Sarah. I recognized that you were hiding something when you first came here.”

Sarah’s mouth dropped. “Wh..a.. t do y..ou mean?” she sputtered

He reached out and touched her arm gently. “Even after a year and a half, you’re still always on guard. You’re careful about how much you tell about your past, and so is Taylor. You’ve schooled him well. If he lets anything slip, one look from you and he covers it up and changes the topic.

“You’re constantly checking to see where he is. I’ll bet the two of you could find each other and disappear in a shot if the right situation came up. I’d say you’ve rehearsed it, practiced it, and possibly even done it. Today is the first time I’ve seen you relax and lose that haunted look for a few minutes.”

Sarah rested her elbows on the table and entwined her fingers, resting her forehead against them, her thumbs pressing against her temples. Tears slipped down her cheeks.

Grayson moved to the chair beside her, putting his arm around her shoulders. “Sarah, tell me what’s going on. If you are in danger, if someone is looking for you and Taylor, we need to know so we can protect you. In the city, you can slip away and get lost in the crowd. Here in the country, you might be harder to find, but it could be harder to get away too.”

Sarah began to sob. “I’m so tired of looking over my shoulder, and it’s not fair to Taylor.”

Grayson pulled her head against his shoulder and let her relieve her

tension. Finally, she snuffled and heaved a big sigh, then pushed away and sat up. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. I think you needed to let all that go.”

“I can’t say I *feel* better right now, but it was a release. If I ever really let go, I couldn’t stop.”

He pushed her glass of wine in front of her again. “Have a drink and then we’ll talk.”

Sarah sipped at first, and then took a long drink. When she sat the glass on the table, Grayson refilled it and then moved back to the chair at the end of the table, so they were facing each other.

Sarah reached out and twirled the stem of her glass with her fingers. “When I finished high school, I was a typical teenager. My dad was old fashioned in his thinking and his attitude really grated on me. To him everyone, who didn’t see life through the same prism as he did, was just a useless, degenerate. That was his favorite word. In his mind, every teenager’s brain was fried by drugs; they drank themselves into oblivion and partied endlessly. They were just bone lazy and didn’t want to work and they would steal the good folk blind.

“His plan was for me to remain at home and help mom. I would look after my younger brothers and sisters, do housework, work in the garden and help in the office where she did the books for his logging operation, just like I had all through my adolescent and teenage years.

“But I was ready to get out and spread my wings. I wanted to live a normal life, outside the four walls that had confined me through all of my growing up years. So against his will, I got a job at the corner store in town. It was a minimum wage, dead-ender, but I felt so free, I felt like I could fly.” She looked into his eyes with appeal. “Can you understand that?”

He nodded.

“I went home once in a while, but dad was so critical and disapproving, it spoiled the visit. Mom and the younger kids were happy

to see me. My older brothers kidded and joked with me, but dad just heaped guilt on me every chance he got, pointing out how heavy mom's workload was. He mocked my minimum wage and asked me what park bench I was sleeping on, or how comfortable the local YWCA digs were. Then he'd remind me that my room was still there." She shook her head sadly. "He never did get it...he never understood how controlling he was and how he drove me away from him, and the home where everyone else that I loved lived. I needed freedom to breathe and grow.

"I worked at the corner store for a year. I wanted to be a teacher, but on my wage, I couldn't save any money to go to university, so I just went to work day after day like a rat on a treadmill. Shortly after I started working there, Duncan Talbot came into the store. He pulled up next to the sidewalk on a big Gold Wing. He had a black silk scarf tied backward around his head, wore sunglasses, and was covered with tattoos and leather. When he came swaggering through the door, I could hear my dad's derisive description ringing in my ears. *Degenerate!* I have to admit, he didn't fit my idea of a stand-up guy either. The average logger or millworker around town didn't look anything like him.

"He had stopped to buy a package of cigarettes, but he was scoping out the territory too, though I was too innocent to know it then. He was a lot older than me, but he flirted a bit and I flirted back. I thought he was just passing through.

"He wanted to know where the parties were around town or where everyone hung out. It was a Monday night and as far as I knew, there wouldn't be much happening again until the weekend when all the bush monkeys came back to town. The weekend would be a blur of activity and then they'd all head back out to work. The guys that worked at the mill just carried on with their shifts. If they happened to have the weekend off, they'd join in. If not they'd just get together in small groups, often at someone's home.

"He left and I never expected to see him again, but he came back on

the weekend. Then he started coming in a few times during the week. I got to know him better and he seemed like he might not be such a bad guy, so when he asked me out for dinner I went. On my day off, we started traveling on his bike to other small towns.

“I introduced him to my older brothers. Brian is easy-going and willing to accept anyone. Al is more like dad and he picked up on the age difference right away. I didn’t take Duncan to meet Mom and Dad until he asked me to move to Montreal with him. Of course, mom was shell-shocked. Brian and Al had mentioned him, but she couldn’t believe I was moving to Montreal with him...for God’s sake *Montreal?* That was so far away and they didn’t even speak English there!

“Of course, Dad blew his stack and he ranted on and on. What was I thinking? Well, as usual I wasn’t thinking! What did I know about this degenerate? He was old enough to be my dad. Look at all those tattoos, and... Jesus Christ, did he have pierced ears? Didn’t I remember anything that he’d tried to teach me? What did Duncan do to make a living? He’d bet his bottom dollar he was a drug dealer.

“Mom was crying and dad was steaming when we left. His parting shot was to let me know that if I left with that degenerate, I was making my own bed and I had to lie in it. The door would be slammed in my face if I ever dared to come back. In defiance, I yelled back, telling him I would never darken his doorstep again... and I haven’t.”

Grayson finished his drink, shaking his head as he placed the glass on the table. “Sarah, people say things they don’t really mean when they feel they’re losing their grip on the situation. If you’d gone back...”

“I couldn’t eat that much crow.” She looked away. “Especially, when it turned out that he was right for the most part, but at the time I was desperate to get out of The Pas, and all I could see was a wonderful future ahead. Duncan had recently settled in Montreal. Two months before he asked me to move in with him, he’d bought a fancy condo in a well-respected part of the city. He showed me pictures. The condo was

beautifully furnished, a dream home for a country bumpkin like me. When he wasn't a biker, he cleaned up nicely and wore expensive clothes. Now I realize that I was his trophy 'wife', dressed to kill and dripping with expensive jewelry. He drove an expensive car; we went to expensive restaurants and parties and mingled with high profile people."

"Are you...were you...did you actually get married to him?"

She shook her head. "No, I just assumed he'd marry me in time. Other than the few people I met on a superficial basis when we went out, I had no idea about his life. And I knew nothing about his work, or where he went when he was out of town. When I said I wanted to become a teacher, he was agreeable and paid my tuition. When he was home, we were like a husband and wife. I was getting my education and when he was away, I had time for myself. It seemed ideal.

"I found out I was pregnant early in my second year at university. I was thrilled. It was hard to tell how Duncan felt. He wasn't as excited as I thought he'd be. When Taylor was born, he wouldn't let me record him as the father."

Grayson shook his head. "I can't imagine a man not wanting to claim his child."

"He insisted on a paternity test. I was shocked because I knew he was the only one who could be Taylor's dad. He said he didn't believe he could father a child because he had a very low sperm count."

Grayson reached out and covered her hand. "That had to be hard for you."

"It hurt that he'd doubted my fidelity. Taylor was born the first week in June and our life totally changed. Duncan stayed out overnight more often. When he was home, he lashed out at me. At first, he'd say scathing things. Then he started to slap me around. I was constantly off balance because I never knew what to expect. Would he be civil, would he simply ignore me or would he hit me?"

"One Friday night he pushed me around and in the scuffle he

dislocated my shoulder. The pain was excruciating. He wouldn't take me to the hospital because the bruises would have raised too many questions. He brought in a 'private' doctor who put my shoulder back in after he gave me a sedative.

"I think I woke up before they thought I would, and I heard them talking in the hallway. When the doctor warned Duncan to be more careful, he said that he was tired of me anyway. He should have dumped me months before.

"The doctor laughed and said there was a good market for women like me in South America. Duncan said he wished it was that easy; having the kid was an additional problem. I heard them talking about a shipment that was coming in. The doctor asked him if I had any idea about what he was doing. Duncan snorted and said I was just a country hick and I didn't question anything. The doctor warned him to be careful because if I ever found out, he'd have to make sure I couldn't talk. That scared me half to death."

"Jesus, Sarah...."

She nodded. "My world had been ripped to pieces. Duncan Talbot wanted to get rid of me and I had no doubt that he was involved in the drug trade. It was hard not to react, but I didn't dare."

"You had to be absolutely terrified."

She squeezed her eyes shut and hung her head. "If I hadn't been so naïve, I would have wondered about that possibility earlier. I never really understood what his job was. He usually dressed in a suit, so I thought he was going to 'work,' I just didn't know what kind of work. When I look back, I have to admit that I didn't want to see it. I didn't want to acknowledge that my dad had been right about him from the beginning.

"I knew I had to make a move soon. Every day, I could only hope he wouldn't come home and tell me we were going to South America...or anywhere else for that matter. Every day I considered my options and thought about what I could do. Duncan had been very generous during our

first months together, and true to my roots, I had saved a few thousand dollars. It was a start. It would help us travel and find a place to rent somewhere, but I knew we'd be desolate in no time and that frightened me.

“One night, about a week after he'd dislocated my shoulder, Duncan hadn't come home by midnight. It had become a regular occurrence and usually meant that he'd be out all night. I wrapped Taylor in his blankets and put him in the stroller. I put the bag that I'd packed for him in it, as well as the one I had put together for myself. I filled my pockets with all the good jewelry he had given me. Then I put on my raincoat and zipped it closed, pulled the hood up over my head and slipped out the door of the condo. I knew the surveillance cameras would record my movements and the time I left, but it couldn't be helped. The opportunity had presented itself and I had to take it.”

Grayson realized he was holding his breath. He exhaled and turned his empty glass. “So, did you get away without any problem?”

Sarah looked exhausted. “Have you any idea how frightening it was to be in a big city like that and not know where I was going or what I was doing?”

“I can only imagine. It must have been terrifying.”

“I had no idea who I could trust. He undoubtedly would try to track me down. He'd check the taxi companies and find out where I went. If I took a bus or the train, even if I flew, he could trace me. If I walked down the street, I could be noticed, especially if I was pushing a stroller. If I walked down a back alley, I could get mugged. Taylor and I could both be killed.”

“What did you do?”

“I walked down the street. There were trees along the sidewalk and I stayed in the shadows. Fortunately, it was quiet and I didn't meet anyone. I went two blocks. Then I turned the corner and went two more blocks. Thank god, Taylor was sleeping. I looked around and there wasn't any

traffic moving, so I crossed the street and walked for another few blocks. I could tell by the lights in the distance that I was moving closer to a commercial area. I crossed the street again and just kept walking toward it. I'd turned off the GPS tracking on my cell phone before I'd left the condo, so he couldn't easily find out where we were. I was tempted to use it to call a taxi, but I knew he could check the records right away, so I hoped I'd find a pay phone. It was three in the morning by then, and I was emotionally and physically exhausted.

“By three-thirty, I had reached a main thoroughfare. I didn't want to walk down the brightly lit street, so I decided to go down the back alley and peek between the buildings. My heart was pounding in my throat. I saw a bus stop about a block away. There was a bench there and nearby there was a payphone, so I decided to chance it. When I'd almost reached the phone, a bus pulled in. My heart almost stopped. Then, I realized it might be the answer to my problem.

“There was only one passenger and he was sleeping, so I fished in my purse for the fare and we got on. I rode it until we got into an area that I'd never seen before. I decided to get off in front of an old hotel right next to a stop. I stood on the street and watched the bus pull away. It was almost five o'clock. I went into the hotel. It was old, but it looked clean. The man at the desk was half-asleep, but he took my money and didn't ask any questions. I took Taylor up the stairs to the room and prayed he would sleep for a few more hours. I needed to figure out where I was and decide what my next plan of action would be. If I was really lucky, I might have until noon, or even that evening before Duncan realized I was gone. Then I suspected all hell would break loose and I'd be hiding in earnest.”

She took a sip from her glass of wine.

“I found an information package in the room. It included the bus and train schedules. I decided to take the Megabus to Toronto. I put Taylor back in his stroller and left. The guy at the desk was asleep, so he didn't even see us. I called for a taxi from the payphone outside and asked the

driver to take us to the station at Rue St. Antoine. After he let us out on the street, I put Taylor back in the stroller. Then I took the battery out of my phone and dropped them both through the grid covered water drain along the curb. There was no way for Duncan to contact me then. When I bought the tickets, I paid cash and held my breath while I gave them phony names for both of us. No one asked any questions, so I tagged the stroller to be stored underneath and carried Taylor onto the bus. The bus left at eight thirty that morning and we were in Toronto by mid-afternoon.

“I found a motel in the suburbs and we stayed there for a while. It was older and quiet, a bit out of the way. I needed to rest. I had to rethink my life and come up with some idea about how I was going to protect Taylor and myself. I was scared to death because I was certain that Duncan would use his contacts to track us down. I knew that if he ever found us, we wouldn’t get away.

“Living in the city offered anonymity, but I needed to make money, and I couldn’t consider leaving Taylor with anyone. I watched the classifieds for a few weeks and one day I saw an ad for a companion that looked promising. I called the number and arranged to meet the people. They lived in a beautiful home in an older area of the city. The name of the woman who needed assistance was Julie Harahan. She’d been injured in an accident years before and was in a wheelchair. Although she managed very well, she needed a companion; a housekeeper, cook and someone to help her with the things she couldn’t do herself.

“Her husband, Ryan, was an engineer who worked in a mine in northern Russia. He was gone for three months at a time, and then came home for a month and left again. The three of us made an immediate connection and Julie fell in love with Taylor. They had no children of their own, and the idea of having a happy, smiling baby in the house sealed the deal. The fact that I didn’t have a driver’s license surprised them, but Julie had a handicap converted van and she drove wherever she needed to go, so it wasn’t a major obstacle.

“The job was an answer to my prayers. The pay was reasonable and it provided board and room for Taylor and me. I was able to relax for the first time since the night I’d heard Duncan and the doctor talking.

“I realized that I could attract trouble for them by being there, and it bothered me. After I’d worked there for six months, I decided to tell them everything the next time Ryan came home.” She smiled weakly. “And I did. I even admitted to being a stubborn, pig-headed teenager who wouldn’t listen to my parents.”

Grayson grinned. “You were stubborn, you still are. But in fairness to you, it sounds like your dad was out of touch with things, Sarah.”

“It was his reality, and unfortunately it bit me in the ass.”

Grayson chuckled. “So how did the Harahan’s take it when you told them what had happened?”

“I was afraid they might ask me to leave, but instead they were protective. They both thought we were pretty safe there. The neighborhood was made up of older people, so it wasn’t likely that Duncan’s kind would be cruising around and come into contact with me. Ryan had installed alarms on the house and garage and perimeters of the yard when they’d bought the place several years earlier.

“I never went out by myself anyway; not that I couldn’t have, I was just too afraid. Ryan also set up a joint bank account, for himself and me. He used his grandmother’s name to give me signing authority.”

“What?”

“I know. Crazy...but he brought the paperwork home and we filled everything out using his grandma’s name. He took me to the bank and introduced me as his sister and I signed everything as if I was her. “

Grayson shook his head. “So as far as the bank knew, you were his sister, but you were using his grandmother’s name. Wow—talk about confusing.”

She nodded. “As I said—crazy, but it made me very hard to trace. He also got a credit card and an Interact card. Most of my wages went into the

account and gradually he took all of the pieces of jewelry that Duncan had given me and pawned them in different places when he traveled. He'd put the money into the account, and it added up. Later it gave me a safety net when I needed it."

Her eyes met his and he saw the fear and tiredness in them. "I worked at their place for four years. Then one morning, when I went out to get the morning paper, there was a package sitting on the step, addressed to me. I took it inside; it wasn't until I had the brown paper wrapping half torn away, that I realized there were no stamps or postal markings so it hadn't come in the mail. Furthermore, I never got mail, as I'd completely dropped off the grid."

Tears filled her eyes. "I knew that he'd found me. I started to shake and my heart pounded so hard, I thought I was going to faint. I was crying when Julie came into the room. She finished opening the package. Julie is a real lady, but she swore like a lumberjack when she got that package open. It contained a sharp knife and a note for me. It's engraved in my mind.

"Did you really think you could give me the slip? You made a big mistake when you ran out on me. No one gets away with that. For now, we'll play the game of cat and mouse, babe. Keep looking over your shoulder, cause you'll never know when it's going to happen, but know this—IT WILL and it'll happen when you least expect it. I never wanted the kid, but he is mine. I'll probably let you raise him until he's old enough to be of use to me. But then again, I might get tired of toying with you and decide to put an end to this. If I do, rest assured, I'll do away with him first and make sure that you watch."

Sarah was sobbing. Grayson stood up and moved over to the chair beside her. He slid his arm around her and pulled against him so that her head rested against his chest, then stroked her hair gently, letting her cry. "What did you do, Sarah?"

"I wanted to take Taylor and run, but Julie convinced me not to. She

begged me to wait until Ryan came home, so we could all decide what to do. When I calmed down and thought about it, I realized she was right. The note was a taunt, meant to terrify me and send me running. I'd be much more vulnerable if I left, than I was there behind the Harahan's alarmed doors. I'd be leaving Julie there alone and I knew that I couldn't do that. I loved her as much as she loved Taylor and me. Ryan was going to be home in six weeks, so I stayed.

"Julie put the knife and the note in the safe, and we carried on with life. A month later, there was an envelope on the step for me. Inside, there was a picture of Taylor and me in the backyard and another note. It said *Keep looking over your shoulder babe. The time is near.*

"Julie was afraid too. There was no doubt that he was there, watching us. Once again, I wanted to just disappear, taking Taylor with me, but I couldn't. I wondered if we would even survive two more weeks until Ryan came home, but then what? Julie put the envelope and its contents in the safe with the first package.

"We counted down the days. It wasn't much of a homecoming for Ryan. The entire evening was focused on the threats, and how we should handle everything. Ryan decided to involve the police. He had a couple of close friends in the department and one of them worked undercover. He phoned them the next day and told them what had happened.

"Sergeant Maxham came over the same day. We showed him the packages that had shown up on the doorstep and I told him about my past with Duncan; including what I'd heard Duncan and the doctor say.

"After they talked a while, it was decided that the police would make a presence in the area by going house to house, asking if anyone had noticed any unusual vehicles or different people walking around on the sidewalk or in the back alley. Besides that, they would randomly patrol the streets in a ten block radius so no one would know for sure when they would be there.

"Charlie Adcock came by a day later. He was an undercover member

of the Drug Squad. He logged in on Ryan's laptop and showed me a bunch of mug shots of guys they were interested in. Half way through, I spotted Duncan Talbot. When I pointed him out, Charlie nodded and told me that I needed to be careful. They suspected he was involved in violent crimes; that he would have people killed at will, and wouldn't be above doing it himself. Charlie thought that I would be a personal score that Duncan would want to settle himself. He wasn't used to being thwarted.

"That day he and Ryan spent most of the day in the back yard, drinking beer and hunkering down like old buddies. They were very visible the next day too, and later they drove off in Charlie's Hummer. They went to Ryan's bank and then to a department store where Ryan bought a set of luggage. When they came back to the house, Ryan made a big deal about putting the Hummer in the garage.

"When they came into the house, Charlie and Ryan explained what they had been doing while they were out. Charlie had contacted another undercover agent that he'd worked with in the past. He'd asked him to meet Suzanne Cunningham and her four-year-old son, at the Halifax airport early the next morning. He explained that he was asking as a favor for a special friend of his, and we were coming in on a private jet. He gave him all the specs, assuring him he'd have clearance to meet us at the plane on the runway.

"Bert Chambers also agreed to drive us to a small resort near Peggy's Cove about thirty miles away. He said he'd help us get settled in a cabin that had been reserved for Suzanne there. Charlie and Ryan impressed upon me how important it was to maintain my identity as Suzanne Cunningham and Ryan gave me a cell phone registered in her name. He'd made arrangements for the monthly payments to automatically come out of our joint account and he assured me that, even though the Interact card was under his grandmother's name, it would work anywhere, so I would be alright. He advised me to withdraw money from a bank machine or ATM as I needed it, and pay cash for everything."

Grayson nodded. “No paper trail with cash.”

“That evening, Ryan barbecued steak in the backyard and we ate out there. Ryan surprised Julie with the luggage and announced that they were going to fly to Vancouver for a week. When she protested and asked about Taylor and me, Ryan said we would look after the house while they were gone. They put on a convincing show for the small camera the guys had detected when they studied the picture of Taylor and me and realized that it had been taken by a surveillance camera mounted near the perimeter of the yard.

“Later that evening, we put all of Taylor’s things in one of Julie’s old suitcases, along with most of his toys. I packed everything I had in another one. We went into the garage. There were a lot of tears as we hugged and said goodbye. Then Taylor and I curled up in the very back of the Hummer and covered up with blankets. Our luggage was put on the floor in the back seat. Charlie backed the vehicle out of the garage, once we were settled, and pulled up in front of the house to wait.

When Ryan stepped out of the back door, he pulled it shut, and then, as if it was an afterthought, he opened it and called me by name, reminding me to set the alarm, adding that they wouldn’t be long.”

Grayson picked up the bottle of wine and topped up her glass. “They paid meticulous attention to every detail,” he said as he set it back down.

“They did. Charlie drove us to a small airport out of town, and he put Taylor and me on a private jet that belonged to a business associate of Ryan. Everything went smoothly and by mid-morning, we were settled in our new home. It was small but cozy, and the McNeils, who owned the resort, were really friendly. They knew Charlie well, but I’m very sure he never had told them anything about Taylor and me. They loved Taylor and the two other members of the staff doted on him too. Eventually, I worked around the resort for minimum wage. We were there for three years.”

“Did he find you there?”

“I didn’t see him, but one morning, at about four-thirty, the owner

knocked on our cabin door. I was shocked when I opened it and found him there. He stepped inside without waiting for me to invite him in and shut the door quickly. Then he apologized, and said that he had to talk to me.

“A man on a Harley had come cruising into the resort the evening before and asked a lot of questions. Mr. McNeil didn’t like the guy, so he brushed him off: afterward, the more he’d thought about it, he wondered if the biker had been fishing for information about the baby and me. Following his gut instinct, he’d phoned Charlie in the middle of the night and told him what had happened. Charlie was alarmed. He told him to take us to his cabin near the lighthouse, and hide us there until he could talk to Ryan and make other arrangements.

“One look at my face was all it took to convince him that I was terrified. I quickly packed a light bag for us. He took it, and I carried Taylor to the pickup. He told me to crouch down, so no one could see us when he drove through town and turned toward Halifax. After he had traveled several kilometers, he took a side road and backtracked, snaking through back trails, until we came to a broken down cabin nestled in the trees. I looked at it curiously, until he shut off the motor and calmly said, ‘This is it.’

“I was confused. I asked *what* it was.

“He said we were at Charlie’s cabin. When I asked if he was serious, he grinned and told me that was the old cabin. The new place was behind it, through the trees by a lake. It had running water, solar power for the lights, propane for cooking, and a fridge. He assured me I’d be safe there until other arrangements were made for us. He carried our suitcases through the trees to the cabin. His wife had boxed up some food for us so we wouldn’t go hungry. Then he left, cautioning me not to let anyone see me if they came around. He said he’d be back as soon as he heard from Charlie.”

She was crying again. “I felt so helpless and vulnerable.”

He held her against his chest, feeling every bit as helpless as she must

have felt then. He couldn't imagine the anxiety she had experienced.

She sat up and looked at him, shaking her head. "Charlie called Ryan's friend and reminded him of the trip he'd made to Halifax three years earlier when he'd used his jet to fly Taylor and me there. The guy had remembered, because even though he was Ryan's friend and he trusted him, he said the whole thing felt off. Charlie gave him a very brief explanation and told him we were in trouble again. He asked if he would fly him to Halifax. The guy welcomed the chance to get out, so they were in the air in a couple of hours.

"Charlie rented a truck and arrived at the cabin mid-afternoon. When I heard the vehicle, I freaked out and we ran deep into the bush. He put two and two together and realized what had happened. He stood on the deck and called me, telling me who he was and that he owned the cabin. I was so relieved to see him; I threw myself into his arms and hugged him."

"How could Duncan have found you?"

"Charlie and I went over and over that. The only thing we could come up with was that when I registered Taylor in the home schooling program I had to provide his birth information. I'd stayed off the grid until then, but I ordered the DVD courses so he'd have the lessons, even if we found ourselves in a place where we didn't have the internet."

She shook her head in frustration and looked at him imploringly. "But Grayson, he has to have an education. I want him to graduate in a recognized program, so he can go on and have a decent future. That poor child has lived his whole life under such deplorable circumstances. We live in a free country, but because of his father, I have taught him to live in fear. We never make any deep friendships, I'm forever looking over my shoulder, alert and suspicious of almost everyone and ready to pack up and move at a moment's notice. It's not right to do that to a child, but I don't know how else to protect him.

"If it weren't for Julie and Ryan, I'm certain I'd have collapsed years ago. Their love and support have kept me going. I never get to talk to

them, but every once in a while I find an unexpected extra amount in my account. It's their way of assuring me that they still are watching out for us. I appreciate it so much, but there are times when I get so tired of being on the run and feeling afraid. Sometimes I just need a hug, and I need to be able to talk about how I feel."

He pulled her against him as they sat side by side. "Sarah, I'm here any time."

She nodded. "I can't believe I'm telling you all this. I'm putting you in danger too, just by being here, by letting you know all this. He will find us again, and he won't care who he hurts as long as he punishes me and eventually gets rid of me."

"He is not God, Sarah. He'll make a mistake one day and get caught. Where did you go after you left the resort?"

"Charlie took us back to Ryan and Julie's place. We flew back on Air Canada. He booked the flights; when I insisted that I'd pay for them, he told me he traveled a lot and he had air miles to burn, so he used them. Julie was excited to see us. Of course, she had another companion by then, and it felt strange for me to just visit.

"I tried to keep Taylor on track with his lessons, but that was really difficult. He was distracted by the sudden move from the resort, and the weirdness of the two of us staying in Charlie's cabin. Children sense things we often don't realize; things they don't know how to express. He was seven by then and he started voicing his concerns and asking questions. While we were at Charlie's cabin, I gave him a sanitized version of what was happening."

"How did he react?"

She frowned. "He didn't really know how to act. He wanted to protect me. But that's one of the things that is so wrong about the way I've raised him."

"Sarah; you've done the best you could. How could you fight something like that, all by yourself?"

“I’ve kept the two of us in a protective bubble. Truthfully, until we came here to the ranch, Taylor had no idea about what a family was; a mother, a father, other children or friendships. I don’t know if you remember, but the first weekend after we arrived, it was Christina and Tim’s wedding. Do you realize he’d never been in such a big group of people before, and certainly not without being glued to my side? They were all strangers. I asked him later how he felt about it.”

“I remember he was pretty quiet and kept to himself most of the time. What did he say to you?”

“He didn’t know how to act. He felt out of place, almost afraid. I was busy helping and although I was constantly checking on him mentally, I wasn’t afraid so I wasn’t seeking him out. He must have felt like I’d abandoned him.”

“How did you end up coming here?”

“When Ryan came home, he and Charlie met with Charlie’s boss. After I’d first identified Duncan’s mug shot, Charlie had told Ryan that the drug squad had been watching him. They knew he was involved with the trade, but he was careful. He’d built a wide network among the *respectable* elite in major cities across Canada. He’s a chameleon and when he was a high roller he associated with the top end of society, but he also was known to get on his Harley and explore the rural areas, looking for any small niche to get a hold in. That was what he was doing when he met me at the corner store.

“Truthfully, if they hadn’t been watching him, Charlie probably wouldn’t have gotten involved, despite how strong his friendship with Ryan was. Anyway, while we’re not in the witness protection program, they gave us new identities; that included a new SIN and birth certificate. We became Sara and Taylor Brite. Ryan closed our joint account and put the money in a new account that they’d set up under my new identity in Regina. They gave me a new Interact card and a credit card. Ryan, bless his heart, provided me with a new cell phone and this time he paid the

contract in full.

“Julie and Ryan had friends in Swan River, Manitoba. It’s a smaller, out of the way town and I felt it could be a good place for Taylor and me to start over. We brought Taylor in on the conversation, and later he and I talked when we were alone. Taylor would like to have stayed at Julie and Ryan’s; he liked them and he felt safe there. But, when I explained that we had to start over and it would be different this time, he just shrugged and said OK.

“We rented an apartment and lived there for almost a year. I met Julie Regeer and we became friends. Taylor hung out with her kids, but he was never really free with them. The economy was tight and I could only find part-time work at the restaurant. When Christina phoned Julie and told her about the job with Colt and Frank, I felt good about it.

“When we drove out here, Taylor was more excited than I’d ever seen him about anything. Things clicked between all of us, and suddenly my son found himself living in a healthy family environment. He’s home schooled by Ellie, and I know enough about her to be confident that she does a great job. It’s the best thing that’s ever happened to us, but...”

“But?”

“Grayson, you’re not blind or insensitive, you have to know that Taylor is bonding with you. He sees you as a father figure. And god only knows he deserves one; he needs one. But it will kill him if...”

“Sarah, don’t do this.”

“I can’t just sit back and let him get hurt again. When Duncan finds us, we’re going to have to run again.”

He stood up, pulled her to her feet, then placed a hand on each shoulder and looked deep into her eyes. “Sarah, Taylor is ten years old. I hate to tell you this, but he’s going to start resenting you if you keep trying to push him back into that protective bubble you’ve created. Every year his personal feelings are going to get stronger and just as you resented your dad, he will come to resent you.”

Tears started to run down her cheeks. “I know that, but what can I do?”

Grayson’s arms enfolded her as he pulled her against him and rested his chin on her head. “Sarah, let’s talk to Colt and Frank when they come home. This scumbag has controlled you with fear for far too long. He’s not invincible. It’s time somebody stood up to him.” He took her hand. “You’re as wound up as a ten-day clock. Let’s sit down. Maybe if we watch something mindless, you’ll relax a bit.”

He led her to the couch in the living room and turned on the TV. Sarah rested her head against his shoulder and stared aimlessly at the old western he’d selected.

In the early morning hours, Taylor came to the living room to see why the TV was on. His eyes widened in surprise when he saw his mom on the couch, snuggled in the curve of his best friend’s arm, with her head nestled against Grayson’s chest as they slept. He giggled as he headed back to bed. *He’s going to be my dad.*

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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”.