

CHAPTER ONE

Friday, 3 August 2012, 8:00 PM

The young woman walked alone along Taft Highway and turned north onto Wible Road. She stretched her legs and swung her arms from side to side as she took deep breaths of the early evening air. It felt good to move again after the ride from San Diego to Pumpkin Center, which was just south of Bakersfield. The temperature was cooling down and the slight breeze felt nice against her skin.

It surprised her when Stetson, the truck driver who picked her up just outside of San Diego, offered to buy her dinner when they stopped in Pumpkin Center. He parked his rig at Mikul's Truck Stop and they walked along Taft Highway to Los Arcos Restaurant.

"This is very kind of you," Gabby said. "I was so thrilled to get a ride all this way. Dinner is an unexpected treat."

"It's my pleasure, Gabby. I like this restaurant," Stetson said. "I eat here whenever I get a chance. It will be nice to have company for a change."

They entered the restaurant and the waitress placed chips and salsa on the table and then handed each of them a menu.

"All the food here is good," Stetson said. "Order whatever you want."

There was so much to choose from and the smells in the restaurant were reminiscent of Gabby's mother's kitchen, which she hadn't been in for over 13 years. Gabby could hear the pots and pans clanking in the kitchen, just like at home. It brought back bittersweet memories and made her more determined to reunite with her family.

As they ate their food, Stetson looked at her and said, "So, you like Mexican food, huh?"

She looked at him with a mouthful of shrimp taco and said, "Uh, no. I'm just hungry. I prefer Thai."

He gave her a strange look and she swallowed quickly and started to laugh. "I'm just joshing you," she said. "I love Mexican food. My mom is the best cook in the world and I miss her cooking." She looked down at the food on her plate - Shrimp tacos, Mexican rice, and refried beans. She had ordered more than she could eat, but the temptation was so great.

While she and Stetson were driving along the highway, en route to Pumpkin Center, she told him a little bit about her past life.

"I come from a big, loving Hispanic family. Unfortunately, I was seduced as a young teenager by the supposed power of the gangs. Against the pleas and wishes of my family, I became one of the 'girls' who hung out with the gang members. Eventually, I drifted to San Diego. That was 13 years ago and I've lost track of where my family is living now.

"My life in San Diego no longer holds any attraction for me. After being alienated from my family for 13 years, I made the decision to find them and try to make up for all the pain I caused when I ran away at the age of 15.

"I made many bad choices during the years I was away from my family, and paid dearly for them. Now, I hope I can make everything right and get my life in order."

Gabby sat thinking for a couple of minutes. Stetson could see it was difficult for her to talk about her past and all she missed in the intervening years.

Gabby lifted her head and continued. "A little searching on the internet turned up the profile of a woman I believe is my sister. She's married and lives in Roseville, and that's the last information I have on her. That's where I'm going to start. I saved up enough money to last for a while, but was economizing by hitch hiking.

"I was afraid to try to contact her ahead of time. I was afraid she would tell me to stay away. I'm just going to show up on her doorstep and hope for the best."

Gabby and Stetson finished their meal and stood outside Los Arcos Restaurant saying their good byes. Then, Stetson headed back to his rig to get some sleep and Gabby walked in the opposite direction. She planned to go into Bakersfield and find a room for the night so she could shower and rest for her journey the next morning. She decided to finish her travels by bus since it wasn't that much further. She wasn't familiar with Bakersfield, but the waitress at Los Arcos said Wible Road was the closest way into town, so that's where she headed.

Darkness was falling, so it pleased her when a Ford Explorer slowed down and stopped next to where she walked. This stretch of Wible Road didn't have many buildings, mainly just dusty fields that stretched to the housing developments that began further up the road. A pleasant looking man stepped out of the driver's side door and smiled as he spoke to her over the hood of the SUV.

"Hey there, could you use a ride? I'm going into town and it's getting dark out here," he said.

She paused for a moment. She was enjoying her walk, but it looked like it would take a long time to find a motel and she was getting tired.

"Okay, thanks a lot. I am getting tired and I've a busy day tomorrow. I'm heading into town to find an inexpensive motel where I can spend the night. Do you know of one that's not out of your way?" she asked.

He walked around and opened the passenger side door, from the outside, which she found a little strange, but she didn't give it much thought.

"Yes, I know just the place for you to spend the night," he said as he helped her up into the seat.

After he closed the door, she noticed that there was no way to open the door or window from the inside passenger seat. *Well, that explains why it was necessary for him to walk around,* she

thought. A little glitch of fear started in the pit of her stomach and grew when he abruptly made a U-turn and headed back towards Taft Highway.

"Hey, I need to go into town to find a motel," she said.

He didn't answer her.

She began to get scared and couldn't get her door open, no matter how hard she tried. She was trapped.

"Let me out, just let me out, and I won't say anything," she said. She could feel the panic rising in her throat, as he turned left when they got back to Taft Highway. Maybe if she screamed someone at the Sonic Drive Inn would hear her. She opened her mouth to yell, but he reached over and punched her against the side of her head. She was momentarily stunned when her head hit the window with a loud thump.

"Shut up, bitch," he said.

She pounded on the door again and scream, hoping someone would hear her. He pulled a gun out of the pocket in his door. "If you don't shut up, I'll kill you here and now."

She shut up.

"Where are you taking me?" she said, tears streaming down her face.

"You'll find out soon enough," he said. "Now, just keep your dirty fuckin' mouth closed or I will shut it for you."

She kept quiet. Wherever they were going, and whatever he had in mind, she hoped there would be an opportunity to escape. That's all she could do for the moment - hope.

* * *

Two Days Later

Gabby tried to open her eyes. Her whole body screamed with pain and she could barely move. She realized her wrists and ankles were bound and some type of tape covered her mouth.

Through the haze of her pain, she tried to remember what happened, but she couldn't think straight. She finally forced her swollen eyes open. All she could see was pitch black, no light whatsoever. She closed her eyes and sank back into unconsciousness.

* * *

Three Days Later

The next time Gabby opened her eyes there was light and more pain. She turned her head to the side slowly and saw the man who gave her the ride sitting at a table writing in a notebook.

"Ah, our guest has decided to join us once again," he said, as he approached the cot where she lay.

"I'm going to remove the tape from your mouth, but if you make a sound, I'll hurt you bad. Do you understand?"

She could barely nod yes.

When he reached over and pulled off the tape, she gasped.

"Shhh," he said. "You have to drink some water. I read somewhere that a person can only live three days without water. I don't know if that's true or not, but we certainly don't want to take any chances, do we?"

Gabby looked down at her body and realized she was nude. "Why," she whispered.

He smiled as he lifted her head and put a bottle of water to her mouth, forcing her to swallow.

"Didn't someone once say, 'Ours is not to wonder why, ours is but to do or die'? Hmmm? Are you familiar with Alfred Lord Tennyson? Probably not."

He let go of her head and it fell back onto the cot. Nasty odors assaulted her nose. Pee and poop? Was that from her? How long had she been here?

"Tell me, on a scale of one to ten, how bad is the pain? It has only been 48 hours since the first treatment, and 24 hours since the second, so it shouldn't be much more than a five. What do you say?"

"Yes, five," she muttered. She could tell that arguing with him wasn't an option. *What treatment was he talking about?* She couldn't remember a thing.

He taped her mouth with some fresh duct tape.

"Can't take any chances of someone wandering by and hearing you complain. Now, are you ready for the next step? My pets are ready."

He got up and walked over to a shelf along the wall. She turned her head and followed him with her eyes. She could see that the shelves held row after row of pint-size canning jars.

He seemed to contemplate the contents of the jars.

"Ahh, this one looks perfect. A little bigger than the other two," he said, as he walked back over to her cot carrying a jar.

Her eyes opened wide in terror. Inside the jar she saw a huge black widow spider.

"This really won't hurt much tonight."

He opened the jar and dumped the spider on her lower stomach.

"Quit squirming and thrashing around or I'll have to tie you more firmly to the cot. You'll only make her mad."

He picked up a long stick and started toying with the spider. He kept up his agitation until the spider bit Gabby. Then, he knocked it to the floor and squished it.

"Three down, hundreds to go. That's number three, my dear. The pain should be much more exquisite by tomorrow.

"I'll leave you now. I have to get some sleep as tomorrow is a workday. A man has to make a living, you know?"

Gabby could only lay there and moan. She saw no way out of her prison - no way to escape. She wanted her mama.

* * *

Slowly, the venom entered her system. The man found the third day interesting but, by the fourth day, her pain became intense. Even when he spoke to her now, she didn't respond. Therefore, he started letting the spiders bite her one or two at a time.

By the seventh day, she was in terrible pain and her breathing was labored. She would sweat and shiver at the same time.

On the afternoon of the ninth day, he introduced the 13th ("lucky thirteen") spider and, when he went to wake her up a couple of hours later to force some more water down her throat, he found her dead. At first, he thought she was just unconscious again, but that wasn't the case.

"Well," he said to no one in particular, "I don't know why she died, but that's the ultimate goal, I guess."

He wanted the Hispanic bitch to suffer and experience extreme fear from the spiders as he did as a child. Now, it was time to move on. He would get rid of Gabby's body and find a new playmate for his pets.