

A LIZZY GARDNER NOVEL

ABDUCTED



T. R. RAGAN

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About the Author

Theresa Ragan is a member of RWA and the Sacramento Chapter of RWA and has garnered several Golden Heart nominations in Romance Writers of America's ® prestigious Golden Heart Competition for her work. She lives with her husband, Joe, and the youngest of her four children in Sacramento, California.

Chapter 1

Sacramento, California

Saturday, August 17, 1996 6:47 PM

Tall, dense oleander provided cover within the shadows of the night as he watched the front door of the Anderson's house. Behind him lay a field of tall dry grass which would be useful in keeping him hidden when it came time to get to his car parked on the other side. The dry grass was a fire hazard. In this neighborhood, it would have been taken care of already. One thing he'd learned from watching the area for the past two months was that the people who lived here were complacent. No Neighborhood Watch signs. No regular meetings. No communication.

Idiots.

Didn't they know that the best protection against crime was an informed public? Be vigilant about what's going on in your community, people. Be observant. Be alert for strangers or unfamiliar vehicles. He shook his head.

The media "experts" insisted the recent killings were about control and playing God. It wasn't about that at all. It was about patience. Not only did he have the patience of a saint, he was a saint. He wasn't a maniac or a lunatic or any of the things the reporters liked to call him. If he was a "crazy lunatic" he'd go after each and every one of those so-called "experts" and call it a day.

Retired FBI agent and now author, Gregory O'Guinn, referred to him as a loser, asserting that he was an outcast...a failure who thrived on torturing the innocent. Gregory O'Guinn gave Harvard a bad name.

But what did he care what O'Guinn thought? He knew the truth. He knew what he was doing and why. He knew the difference between right and wrong. If the author spent more time investigating the lives of the dead girls, he'd see that they were far from innocent—they were bad girls. They were disrespectful teenagers who had forced him to take action when no one else would. If O'Guinn knew the whole story, he'd be calling him a vigilante, a hero, a man obligated to ignore the due process of law and execute justice on his own terms.

He kept his gaze fixated on the Anderson's front door. Glancing at his Rolex, an Oyster Perpetual Sea-Dweller, he swallowed the irritation nipping at his insides. Despite having an aversion to all forms of water—sea, ocean, pool—he'd always wanted a Sea-Dweller. His dad used to wear one just like it. With thirty one jewel chronometer automatic movement, the watch was water resistant at 122 meters. It was solid. Not as heavy as those beefy Omegas. The watch had been milled from a solid block of ridiculously expensive 904L stainless steel. The dial was easy to read, even in the dark. A gift to himself for doing a job well done—three girls in three months—all menaces to society.

He narrowed his eyes. *Where was Jennifer?*

For the past eight weeks, like clockwork, Jennifer Anderson's parents went to dinner and a movie every Saturday night, leaving their sixteen-year-old daughter home alone. What they didn't know was that within five minutes of leaving the house their daughter crept out the front door and walked to the neighborhood park to meet her boyfriend. Shame on her.

Convinced she would sneak out eventually, he decided to wait as he thought about the other girl he'd recently disciplined. The experts had speculated that he got his kicks out of torturing the girls, which was ridiculous. He got more out of the morbid curiosity of the public than he did out of taking

the girls home and doing whatever he had to do in order to teach them a lesson.

~~Was he the only one who refused to let insolent spoiled teenage girls rule the world?~~

Saturday, August 17, 1996 7:00 PM

Lizzy Gardner crept down the stairs, hoping to escape unnoticed, but when she reached the landing her sister's lipstick dropped from her hip pocket and slid across the tiled foyer.

"Where do you think you're going, Elizabeth?" Dad asked from the kitchen.

She sighed and looked his way.

Mom stood behind Dad and waved a dismissive hand through the air, letting Lizzy know it was okay. Dad was just blowing off steam like he always did before she went out with her friends.

"It's my last night with my friends," Lizzy lied. "Emily and Brooke are leaving for San Diego tomorrow."

"It's a good thing," he said. "You need to start hanging out with people your own age. Who's driving?" He opened the front door and looked outside.

Emily waved from her convertible VW Bug. "Hi, Mr. Gardner!"

Dad grunted and shut the door. "You don't need to go out tonight. There's still a killer on the loose."

Not this again. The notorious teenage killer hadn't struck in months, but after killing one fifteen-year-old and two sixteen-year-old girls in a three month period, the maniac had managed to turn perfectly normal parents into fearful worry warts.

"Dad. Please?"

"I want you home by ten."

"Tom," her mother interrupted. "I told Lizzy she could stay out until eleven thirty. This is her last night with these girls. After the bowling alley they're all going back to Brooke's house. You've met Brooke's parents before. She'll be fine."

"I don't like it," Dad said, shaking his head.

"Go ahead," Mom said with a wave of her hand. "We'll see you later tonight."

Lizzy didn't need to be told twice. Forgetting all about the lipstick she'd dropped, she ran out the door and didn't look back.

Saturday, August 17, 1996 11:25 PM

Lizzy didn't want the night to end. As Jared drove toward her house, she looked out the front window. It was a dark and wonderful night...a perfect night.

Jared took a right on Emerald Street.

"Do you mind pulling over up there," she said, pointing to the curbside at the end of the block. "I'll walk the rest of the way. If Dad sees you dropping me off, he'll kill me."

Jared drove his dad's Ford Explorer to the side of the road and shut off the engine. Lizzy unlocked her seatbelt. She leaned into him and pressed her lips to his. When she pulled away, her eyes watered.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just hate this feeling...like I'm never going to see you again."

Jared pulled her close and kissed the tip of her nose, her cheek and chin, and finally her lips. Every kiss felt like the first. And now he was leaving for college. Life was so unfair. "I wish tonight would never end," she said.

“Me, too,” he said before kissing her again, deeper this time.

She loved everything about Jared Michael Shayne: the way he looked, the way he made her feel, the way he smelled, and the sound of his voice.

“Jared?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re not going to forget about me, are you?”

“Not a chance.”

There was a long pause before he laughed and said, “Look at us, acting as if we’re never going to see each other again. I’m going to Los Angeles, not Mars. A five or six-hour drive tops. All you have to do is call me and I’ll be there.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He kissed her again.

The clock on the console read 11:25 before he parked the car. Dad was probably already in a frenzy. “I better go.” She turned away to open the car door.

His hand stopped her. “I love you, Lizzy. This isn’t the end. It’s the beginning.”

She managed a smile. “You’re right. I love you, too. Call me in the morning before you leave, okay?”

“I will.” He looked at the street ahead of them. “Let me take you closer to your house. It’s too late for you to be walking alone.”

She liked that he worried about her but he did have a tendency to treat her like a little girl sometimes. She had spent enough Sunday night dinners with Jared and his family to know that her father could be bossy and controlling. She didn’t want Jared or anyone else telling her what to do. Besides, Dad would ground her for a month if he saw Jared dropping her off when she was supposed to be with Emily and Brooke. Lizzy planted a quick one on his mouth, then turned and climbed out of the car. “I’ll be fine,” she said before shutting the door and blowing him a kiss.

He threw an invisible kiss back at her.

Feeling better, she headed for home. Before making a right on Canyon Road, she looked over her shoulder, but Jared was already driving the other way. She waved anyhow.

Her house was at the end of the block.

She could see the silhouette of the willow tree her dad had planted in the front yard.

The clicks of her shoes against pavement sounded loud enough to wake the dead. She stopped and slipped off her shoes. Now, the only sounds were the croaks of a zillion frogs looking for a mate in some distant creek.

Zap.

A streetlight went out. She looked up at the light as she passed by. She hadn’t thought it could get any darker, but she was wrong. Even the stars had abandoned her tonight. God, she’d forgotten how much she hated the dark. The only thing she hated more than the dark was being *alone* in the dark.

Jared was right. She should have let him drive her closer to her house, or maybe she should have just let him take her home and walk her to the door like he usually did. She could have told her dad that Jared had picked her up from Brooke’s. Dad would have believed her. He always believed her. Her stubbornness was the reason she was out here now...alone...beneath an inky black sky.

A rustling noise sounded near the side gate of one of the neighbor’s houses. Chills crawled up her arms. She stopped and listened, hoping to see Fudge, the chocolate brown lab that loved to lie on everyone to death. A couple of steps later she heard it again. The *thump thump thump* of footfalls.

“Jared? Is that you? It isn’t funny, you know.”

She swiveled about on her feet. The street was empty behind her. The neighbors’ lights were off; no one was peering out their windows as far as she could tell. No dogs barking.

That was a good sign, wasn't it?

~~*You're getting yourself all worked up over nothing.*~~

She started off again, one foot in front of the other. And yet the sensation flowing through her was the oddest thing. She could feel it...sense it...somebody was watching her.

Her father always said, "Trust your instincts, Elizabeth. If something doesn't feel right, then probably isn't."

But then again she'd also been told she had an overactive imagination.

A cool breeze grazed her arms. But there was no breeze tonight, was there?

She should run. She should have started running the moment she'd felt as if she was being watched.

Thump, thump, thump. She whipped around so fast she nearly lost her balance. A man charged straight for her. Her brain shouted RUN. Too bad her legs wouldn't listen. It was as if her feet were glued to the cement.

Whack! Whack!

Something solid hit her leg and then the left side of her head. A hot searing pain shot through her skull. Her knees buckled and all she saw was black: black jacket, black mask, black sky.

Chapter 2

*Sacramento, California
Monday, August 19, 1996*

Lizzy opened her eyes. An intense pain ripped through her skull, making her wince. She was on her stomach with her hands tied behind her back. The rope was thick and coarse. Her wrists felt raw. She could hardly move. The bastard had taken the time to wrap the upper half of her body in rope, around and around; pulled so tight she could hardly move, let alone breathe. Her ankles were also tied.

Where was she?

It was difficult to see clearly. Her head, all the way to her eyebrows, was wrapped in gauze. The man had bashed her in the legs and head and then covered her head with gauze? He'd talked to her too, through some sort of weird microphone that made his voice sound like the Robinson's robot reruns of *Lost in Space*. The voice had sounded eerie, especially coming from a man wearing a mask straight out of an old Batman movie.

How long had she been here? A few hours, a day, two days?

As her eyes adjusted to the semi-dark room, the pain became more of a pounding on the top of her head and less of a sledgehammer crushing against her skull. Shapes began to take form. The room was about the size of her bedroom. Dark blinds covered a rectangular window, but light squeezed its way through tiny slits. Cobwebs, with an array of silky designs, stretched from the corners of the window to the ceiling.

Chills crept up her spine.

Fear threatened to swallow her whole, but she knew she didn't stand a chance in hell of getting out of here unless she stayed calm.

A pile of cardboard boxes was stacked high to her right. She tried to wriggle her arms. It was no use. She didn't want to die. How many girls had been reported missing? Two? Three? More? Most importantly, how many had been found alive?

A big fat zero.

A creepy crawler worked its way up her leg. She could feel it moving. She stopped breathing. Whatever was on her leg stopped moving.

Why did it stop? To take a bite of her?

A shiver shot up her spine. She wanted to cry out but that might get the maniac's attention, and then what?

The creepy crawler was on the move again. A spider with the body of a cockroach, she decided since she could feel its heavy belly against her skin as it moved along, slow and steady.

She fought with the ropes; tried hard to wriggle her arms, her legs, her hips. It was no use. Her stomach heaved and gurgled.

You are not going to be sick, Lizzy. Stay calm. Breathe. Just because the other girls couldn't find a way out that doesn't mean you can't.

Think.

Focus. She had watched Oprah recently, a show about what to do under extreme situations, like your car went under water. The number one thing to do was stay calm.

She shut her eyes, inhaled, then slowly exhaled. The stab of nausea left her. When she opened her

eyes again she saw a spider skitter across the wood floor within an inch of her face. And then another...and another.

What the hell was going on? Where were they coming from?

She turned her head as far as she could. Shit. Only a few feet away was a giant aquarium filled with insects. Not just spiders either—scorpions and centipedes, too. The insects all climbed on top of one another trying to find a way out. Just like her, they were trapped.

Whatever was on her leg had inched its way past her knee. *It's just a bug...a stupid bug. Get a grip, Lizzy. At least it's not dark.* More than anything she didn't want the maniac to come back. She didn't want to die.

Images of the other girls came to mind. She squirmed like a fly caught in a web, ignoring the white-hot pain as she tried to get a feel for where the ropes intersected behind her.

Suddenly, an eerie calmness settled over her. Her will to live was bigger and stronger than the monster who had tied her up. The maniac, now and forever dubbed Spiderman, obviously didn't know she was double-jointed. She could bend her limbs and joints in ways the sick bastard probably never imagined. The smell of her own stale blood made her stomach churn. She couldn't pass out now. She needed to get untied and get out of here before he came back.

Forget about Spiderman.

Concentrate.

A little more pressure on the left shoulder should do the trick. She had popped her shoulder many times to impress her friends at parties. The doctor called it Positional Non-traumatic dislocation. *She could do this...if she could maneuver her arm just so...and a little farther to the left... Focus, Lizzy. Crack.*

A tear dripped down the side of her face, across her cheekbone. *Thank you, God.*

The throbbing ache from dislocating her shoulders was nothing compared to the agonizing pain in her head and the burning sensation in her leg where he'd hit her with something hard and solid. She slid around on the floor to loosen the bindings, then bent her chin into her chest and used her teeth to pull on the rope. It was working. The ropes loosened. She pulled her right hand free. Yes! The rest was easy.

She flipped over, sat up, then used her right hand to untie the ropes around her ankles. With no time to waste, she used her right arm to draw her left arm close to her chest, and coaxed her shoulder back into the joint. Relief followed.

She scrambled to her feet. Adrenaline kept her moving, kept her from passing out. A spider fell off her head and landed on the floor in front of her. The eight-legged beast was big and hairy and brown. Barefoot, she used her toe to brush it aside, then frantically brushed bugs from her tangled hair. She'd been bit twice, maybe more.

Spiders were everywhere. They crept over the floor and around the pile of boxes. She held still and waited for the dizziness to pass.

Go, Lizzy. Get out of here.

Her leg nearly buckled on the first step, but she managed to cling to the wall to steady herself. She couldn't worry about injuries and pain. She needed to get away.

She peered through a slit in the blinds. Iron bars framed the outside of the window. She hobbled to the door, surprised to find it unlocked.

She listened. Somebody was talking. Voices. A television was on. Quietly, she stepped into a hallway lined with thick carpet. The house looked new: fresh paint, new carpet, nothing on the walls.

One step at a time. Quiet. Slow. Her gaze connected with the front door, an ordinary entry door with a peephole and a chain. Her heart beat triple time.

Oh, my God. Oh, my God. She wanted to run for the door but she refused to make any quiet

movements and attract unwanted attention. The chain on the door looked thick. Someone had bolted the chain with a heavy metal lock. Swallowing, she looked around the front room. A commercial for dog food was on the television. Her tongue felt thick and swollen. And then she saw him.

Holy Shit.

The maniac. The monster. Spiderman. Right there.

He was on the couch...asleep on the couch.

She would wake him if she tried to undo the lock and go through the front door. There had to be another door in the house. It didn't take her long to find one. A sliding glass door situated between the kitchen and a small informal dining area. She would escape and she would live to see another day.

She hobbled toward the door. And then she heard a child's cry...a long drawn out pitiful moan.

Boy? Girl? She had no idea. But someone else was in this house. She gnawed on her bottom lip. Outside, the sun was rising, lighting up the sky. From where she stood she could see a future. The dawn of a new day in reach...but there it was again.

"Aaaahhhhhggg."

Shit!

Limping back to where she'd just come from, her gaze fell to the man on the couch. He hadn't moved. His eyes were closed. His neatly trimmed beard failed to hide a boyish face. His hair was dark brown and cut short around a big dopey looking ear; he had no gray. He was on his side. She could only see half of his face, enough to see a high cheekbone and a healthy tan. There it was again. The cry of a child. Not as loud this time. Why couldn't she pull her gaze away from the monster? He didn't look like a maniac. He looked like a businessman, someone she might pass on the street and say hello to. He looked "normal."

She forced herself to go. She hobbled down the carpeted hallway, once again ignoring the excruciating pain in her leg and the pounding in her head. Mostly, she ignored the fact that she was a fool. And damn. She was going to throw up.

Three doors. One was the spider room. The other two doors were shut. She took hold of the knob on her right and twisted it slowly, careful not to make any noise as she peeked inside. It was a guest room. A perfectly normal guestroom with a bed half covered with a patchwork quilt. There was a bedside table with a light and a handmade frilly looking lampshade, the kind her grandmother used to do with crochet. Nothing in this house made sense. The house of horrors with fresh paint and handmade quilts. She headed for the next door and the moment she opened it she smelled something musty and moldy.

She put a hand to her mouth at the horror laid out before her. The odor was sickening: rotted eggs and dead rodents. A bed took up most of the small room. Propped on the top of two of the four bedposts were skulls...not the kind of skulls she'd seen in the doctor's office. These skulls had stumps hanging off of them. *Skin? Hair? Oh, God.* She gagged.

A movement caught her attention—the source of the noise. There was a child on the floor. Thirteen? Fourteen? The kid's arms and legs were nothing but bones, bound and tied to a bedpost. It was hard to tell whether the child was a boy or a girl, but going solely by the silver necklace around the neck, she guessed female. Her light brown hair had been cut short at weird uneven angles with a blunt knife. She was so thin. Her face was pale, her brown eyes large and round, bulging. The girl's clothes were torn and bloodied.

Lizzy was pulling off ropes with her hands and loosening knots with her teeth before she even realized she'd moved toward the child. Tears streamed down Lizzy's face as she worked. The girl couldn't stand on her own, so Lizzy picked her up and ran out of the room and down the hall, grinding her teeth to stop from screaming out in agony.

She didn't stop to look to see if the man was still on the couch. She needed to get the hell out of there. She ran toward the sliding glass door where she had no choice but to set the girl down so she

could use both hands to unlock and open the door. When she finally picked up the girl again and stepped outside, she was blinded by the bright light of the sun. The branches of a big oak reached out to her. Other than the tree branches, she couldn't see a thing.

At least not at first. It took a moment for Lizzy to see him.

He stood by the fence.

Waiting.

And the little girl in her arms must have seen him, too, because the strangest sounds were coming out of her mouth.

Chapter 3

Sacramento, California

Friday, February 12, 2010 6:06 PM

Lizzy stood front and center in the multi-purpose room at Ridgeview Elementary and pointed her finger at the young girl in the front row. “Heather, what’s the first thing you should do if you think somebody is about to abduct you?”

“Draw attention to myself.”

“Good. And what might be a good way to do that, Vicki?”

“Scream and kick.”

“That’s right.” Eight kids had signed up for Lizzy’s class tonight, all girls under the age of eighteen but only six had actually shown up. Not bad for a Friday night. She’d been teaching kids how to protect themselves for the past ten years. She’d definitely had worse attendance, including a roomful of no-shows. It was easy to see who had been paying attention for the past hour and who had not. “How about you, Nicole? Come up to the front, please, and show us what you would do if somebody tried to take you against your will.”

Everybody waited quietly until Nicole was standing in the front of the room.

Lizzy used her chin to gesture at Bob Stuckey, the local sheriff whose daughter was in attendance tonight. He had entered the classroom ten minutes ago. He, along with a few other parents, waited patiently for the class to end so they could take their daughters home.

“Mr. Stuckey, would you mind helping me out?”

He hesitated, then shrugged and headed toward the middle of the room where Nicole stood with both arms straight and stiff at her sides.

Lizzy gestured for Bob Stuckey to go ahead and wrap his big beefy arm around Nicole. Although Sheriff Stuckey was clearly uncomfortable putting his arm around the child’s neck, and rightly so, he did as she asked.

“Okay, Nicole. What would you do if someone grabbed you, like Sheriff Stuckey is doing now, and told you to get into his car?”

Nicole swallowed. “I don’t know.” She made a feeble attempt to wriggle out of Sheriff Stuckey’s grasp, but she couldn’t get loose. “This is freaking me out,” Nicole said. “I don’t even want to think about it. I don’t know what to do.” Tears gathered in her eyes. “Please, let me go.”

Lizzy raised a brow at Bob, letting him know now would be a good time to let go of Nicole.

He quickly dropped his arm.

The girl obviously needed a few more sessions before she was used as a guinea pig. Lizzy pointed to the back of the room where one girl sat as far away from the others as she could possibly get. The girl couldn’t be much older than sixteen, maybe seventeen, but the five piercings on each ear, one on her nose, and one on each brow made her look older, tougher. Her black hair was short and spiky and despite the February chill in the air, the girl wore a dark blue spaghetti-strapped top, a mini skirt, and worn sneakers without shoelaces. A tattoo of an angel on her collarbone stood out on her fair skin. *Ouch.*

“What about you?” Lizzy asked the girl. “What would you do if someone grabbed you?”

The girl chewed her gum, blew a bubble, a great big bubble that she managed to suck back into her

mouth without leaving a trace of goo on her face. *Impressive.*

The cold and calculating look in the girl's brown eyes was supposed to cover up what Lizzy guessed to be a severe case of loneliness.

"What's your name?" Lizzy asked.

"Hayley Hansen." She pulled the wad of gum out of her mouth, stuck it to the bottom side of the desk, then stood and headed for Sheriff Stuckey, who looked more than a little worried by the girl coming toward him.

"Go ahead," Lizzy told Sheriff Stuckey when Hayley stopped in front of him and turned toward the class.

Sheriff Stuckey put his arm around the girl's neck, locking her in by grasping his other hand around his forearm.

"Okay," Lizzy said to Hayley. "You're in the park and this guy has just walked up behind you and put a stranglehold on you."

Hayley looked bored out of her mind.

"What would you do?"

"I'd bite a chunk out of the motherfucker's arm." And then she went on to demonstrate.

"Ow! Shit!" Bob Stuckey yanked his arm away and jumped back. "Jesus." His long-sleeved shirt was torn and blood began to seep through the cottony fabric.

Lizzy ran to the other side of the room and grabbed the first aid kit. She handed the plastic box to Sheriff Stuckey and ushered him toward the bathroom.

Parents murmured worriedly to one another.

Once Lizzy found her place at the front of the class again, a few random giggles erupted on one side of the room. Jane Stuckey, Sheriff Stuckey's fifteen year-old daughter, turned toward the other girls. "It's not funny."

"No," Lizzy agreed, "there's never anything funny about someone getting hurt." Lizzy looked at Hayley, who had returned to her seat at the back of the room. "Hayley, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you didn't mean to hurt Sheriff Stuckey, but I am also going to remind each and every one of you," Lizzy said, making eye contact with every girl in the room, "that this is serious business. And for that reason I'm going to use what Hayley just did to Sheriff Stuckey as an example of what you should do in this type of situation. How many of you think Hayley would have gotten away if she was attacked?"

They all raised their hands.

Lizzy nodded in agreement.

One of the teenager's mothers, who had been sitting at the far side of the room through the entire class, bolted to her feet and said, "I don't see how biting an officer of the law could ever be used as an example of the right thing to do."

Lizzy sighed. "That's because you, Mrs. Goodmanson, have never been held against your will, have you?"

Mrs. Goodmanson opened her mouth to respond, but Lizzy didn't give her a chance to say anything. "Were you ever told to do something you didn't want to do, something you knew was wrong? Were you ever touched improperly? Have you ever had a knife put to your throat, Mrs. Goodmanson, or had a gun held to your head?"

The woman shook her head and sank back into her seat.

Lizzy turned back to the kids whose eyes were now big and round and curious. For the first time since they entered the classroom, Lizzy had their full attention. "Swear, curse, bite, kick," she said loudly, sternly as she paced the front of the room. "Do anything you have to do to get away. Yell at the top of your lungs, 'HELP, I DO NOT KNOW THIS PERSON!' If you're on a bike, do not get off or let

go of the bike. If you do not have a bike, run in the opposite direction of traffic and scream as loud as you can.”

Lizzy anchored loose strands of hair behind her ear as she continued to pace the length of the room using bold gestures to make her point. “If you can’t get away and you do somehow end up in the abductor’s car, roll down the window and scream. Scream every bad word you can think of...anything that might get somebody’s attention. If you come to a stop sign or stop light, jump out of the vehicle and run! If the car is moving and you’re in the passenger seat, grab the keys from the ignition and toss them out the window or toward the backseat. While he goes to retrieve them, get out of the car and run.”

She let her gaze roam slowly about the room before she asked, “Do you understand me?”

The giggling had stopped a while ago. A severe hush floated across the room.

Every kid in the room nodded, except Hayley Hansen, who looked as if she already knew everything there was to know about bad people in the world. Bad people who did horrible things to innocent people for no reason other than to hunt and victimize, reliving their grotesque fantasies in their minds until the next time.

Sacramento, California

Monday, February 15, 2010 9:12 AM

Lizzy squeezed Old Yeller, her faded 1977 Toyota Corolla, between two cars parked on J Street, climbed out and headed down the sidewalk toward her office. Although it was past 9 a.m., a layer of thick fog still floated below the bare branches of the tree-lined street.

The cold nipped at every part of her. Lizzy rubbed her arms, and then shoved her hands deep into her coat pockets. She was cold. She was *always* cold. Her sister, Cathy, said it was because she didn’t have enough meat on her bones. Maybe so, but one of these days she was going to move to Arizona or Mexico, maybe Palm Springs, somewhere hot, where she wouldn’t have to wear gloves and two pairs of socks. Her hands were just getting warm when she pulled them out of the warmth of her pockets so she could open the door to her office.

She admired the newly etched sign on the door: “Elizabeth Ann Gardner—Private Investigator.” A much appreciated gift from her sister.

Lifting her elbow, she tried to wipe a smudge from the glass but the door came unexpectedly open. She wasn’t expecting any clients. She wasn’t married. No ex-husband. No boyfriend. No kids. Or vacationing intern. One fourteen year-old niece and one sister, neither of whom had a key, which meant she had been burglarized.

Poking her head inside the front room, she heard the faint rustling of papers in the back room. Change the phrase “had been” burglarized for “was being” burglarized.

She slid her hand beneath her jacket and felt her Glock .40 snug within her holster. She unsnapped the holster and brought the gun to her side. Although Lizzy had never had to use the gun before, she’d been wearing one for ten years now. It was her friend. It made her feel safe.

The door jamb showed no sign of forced entry. She opened the door wide enough to squeeze her way inside without making any noise. Despite her niece’s attempt to fatten her up by shoving Rice Krispy treats down her throat when she visited, Lizzy had lost another three pounds. She wasn’t trying to lose weight. She just wasn’t hungry. Food didn’t turn her on. Sometimes she wondered if anything turned her on, although she did have a weakness for peanut M&M’s.

She glanced at her desk. Computer was off. Papers scattered in an unorganized mess. Half chewed pencils sticking out of a weird looking jar her niece had made for her; everything was just the way

she'd left it. Not even a burglar would attempt to find anything of interest in this mess.

But little did the burglar know that her sister had forced her to start writing a daily journal all in the name of catharsis, figuring if she barfed up all her emotional baggage onto paper, then she'd be restored to a better, newer, purer self. Her sister considered writing in a journal to be an emotional cleansing. All that electrifying enlightenment was right there on her computer saved under "stuff". And to think the burglar thought the goods were back in the safe.

She took quiet steps toward the back office, which was really a large closet in disguise. The rustling noises grew louder. Somebody was definitely a busy little bee.

Lizzy's adrenaline pumped in earnest now. A little adventure, a little excitement—just what the doctor said she didn't need. Yep, her sister, Cathy, wasn't too far off when they'd argued the other day and Cathy had called her "one sick puppy." But Cathy wasn't the local girl known as the "one-who-got-away" either. Cathy hadn't spent two months of her life with a sick-minded, spider-loving maniac.

Lizzy's gaze shifted to the floor. No signs of wet or muddied footprints, only ugly beige carpet that needed a good cleaning. She had her priorities though. And cleaning the carpet was pretty much the last thing on her list—right under scrub the shower tiles, shop for groceries, and take the car in for a long overdue tune-up. If anyone was going to get a tune-up it was going to be her, not an old car with a broken tailpipe and a mind of its own.

The file drawer clamped shut with a bang, giving her a start. The door to the back office/closet was ajar. She could see a pair of boots. Somebody was leaning over the bottom drawer of the file cabinet.

"Put your hands up or I'll shoot!"

Two hands shot up. Papers flew. "It's me, Jessica. Don't shoot."

Lizzy pushed the door wide.

Jessica looked relieved to see that it was only her, but even so, she kept her gaze glued to the gun barrel while she held her arms straight up in the air.

Lizzy frowned and lowered her weapon. "What the hell are you doing here? I thought you were on a plane headed for Jersey?"

Jessica Pleiss, psychology student at Sacramento State and brand new intern that Lizzy didn't need or want, but who she'd "hired" because Jessica had a knack for talking people into things they didn't need or want, dropped her hands to her side and said, "Jersey didn't work out, so I thought I'd spend my week off from school organizing these files. Did I leave the door open again?"

Lizzy nodded, too tired and too cold to bother lecturing the girl.

Jessica bent down to gather the papers she'd scattered across the floor. The girl had only been working with Lizzy for six weeks—and only when Jessica's busy schedule permitted, which wasn't often. Mostly Jessica ran to Starbucks and got them lattes and mochas.

Now that Lizzy thought about it, the girl was costing her more money than she was worth...or could afford.

Jessica pushed herself to her feet. "That gun's not real, is it?"

Lizzy had already put the gun away. She nodded. "It's real."

"Cool. It's probably a good thing you carry one, considering all the weirdos you work for."

Lizzy didn't know which of her clients Jessica referred to, but neither did she care. She also knew she should probably ask Jessica why her trip to Jersey hadn't worked out—boyfriend problems, lack of funds perhaps—but she really didn't want this "relationship" to turn into some kind of girly-girl talky-talk social thing. Although Jessica had school and homework and family, underneath it all, she was clearly a needy, lonely young woman.

It took one to know one.

Lizzy didn't want anyone looking up to her, counting on her, confiding in her, because sooner or later that person might really need her, and then what the hell would she do? She'd feel guilty, that

what. And feeling guilty was right up there with always being cold. And afraid. It sucked.

Lizzy headed back to the front room. “So, did we get any phone calls?”

“Two. Mrs. Kirkpatrick from Granite Bay High School wanted to know if you could give a talk to three hundred students. And a guy named Victor called—wouldn’t give his last name. He asked a lot of questions about hiring somebody to follow his wife. I told him we didn’t do that sort of thing, but he’s one of those guys who can’t seem to take no for an answer.”

We? The girl hadn’t yet clocked in twenty hours and she was already using sentences with we. “Do you want to leave a number?”

“Nope. He said he’d call back later.”

Five hours later, Jessica was gone and Lizzy was typing in her journal for the day. She didn’t like writing down her feelings, but her sister had asked, make that *begged*, her to give it a try. Writing anything you want, Cathy had said. Anything at all. Let it all hang out. *Okay*, Lizzy thought, *here goes*.

Day Five: I hate writing in this journal. It’s cold and foggy today. Not misty fog but the thick kind you can’t see through. I prefer the other sort.

This wasn’t a journal—it was a damn weather report.

I really like the sign my sister had professionally etched on my door. It’s real nice.

Lizzy chewed on her pencil as she thought about what to type next, and then dropped her fingers on the keyboard.

There’s this girl taking my defense class. Her name is Hayley Hansen. She’s tough. I like her. She reminds me of me. What’s not to like?

She stared at the screen and tapped her fingers on her desk. She was getting really good at making a galloping noise with her fingertips. She sighed, and forced her fingers to the keyboard.

Writing in a journal sucks big wampums. How is typing “this sucks” over and over every single day going to help me become whole again? *Was I ever whole? Who knows. Until next time, Liz.*

Lizzy hit the Save button, shut off the computer, and breathed a sigh of relief. Writing in a journal came just under sitting alone in the dark when it came to the list of things she didn’t like to do.

The screen turned black.

Cathy was right. Lizzy felt better already. Not because of anything she’d written, but because she was finished writing in her journal for the day.

Lizzy snorted and tossed the pencil into the jar. The phone rang. She picked up the receiver and listened to a man ask for her by name. “Yes, this is her. What can I do for you?”

Hmmm. It was Victor, the caller Jessica had mentioned earlier. Lizzy propped her feet on her desk. “Yes,” she answered, “Jessica told me you called. I’m afraid I’m not going to be able—three hundred dollars a day?” She raised her legs and plopped her feet to the ground, listening to Victor rattle on about his wife and his daughter. Lizzy didn’t do domestic cases. Mostly because they made her feel anxious, bad, and depressed. She did car accident investigations and product liability cases. Slip and falls were her favorite—helping companies deal with people who went around the country pouring oil on the floor, then slipping and falling and pretending to be hurt so they could sue large companies for even larger sums of money.

But a girl had to eat. And she’d have to be pretty stupid to turn down three hundred dollars a day. She sat in her car all day and watch a woman betray her husband. Lizzy grabbed a half-chewed pencil from the jar and took notes while he talked. When he was finished she said, “Why don’t you give me a cell phone number where I can reach you. I’ll sleep on it and call you in the morning.”

“I’ll call back in a few days,” Victor said. *A click* and a proceeding dial tone followed.

“Okay, never mind, Victor. Don’t give me your number. And maybe I won’t sleep on it.” She hung up the phone.

She read over her notes. Victor said he was an attorney. He talked like an attorney—fast and full of

himself.

Lizzy shrugged. ~~Something told her he wouldn't be calling back. She crumpled the note and tossed it in the wastebasket under her desk, then leaned back in her chair. Her gaze connected with her desk drawer. The same drawer where she kept all her private files...all of her secrets.~~

The phone rang again. She let it ring for a moment, and then picked it up on the fifth ring. "Listen, Victor, I don't appreciate your hanging up on me."

"I've missed you, Lizzy."

It definitely wasn't Victor. "Who's this?"

"You promised you'd never leave me."

A cold chill swept over her. "Who is this?" she asked again.

"Because of you, nobody's safe, Lizzy."

She kept the phone to her ear, but didn't say a word. Instinctively, she reached for her Glock and looked out the window. Her gaze swept over the gray building across the street, and then over the cars parked at the curb—all empty. About a block away, a woman exited a hair salon, pulled keys from her purse, climbed into her BMW and drove away. Whoever was on the other end of the wire was still there. She could hear his faint breathing.

She held the mouth piece away and took a deep breath, regained control of herself. "Is this you, Spiderman?"

A short caustic laugh sounded on the other end of the line before he said, "You shouldn't have gotten away, Lizzy, and you never should have taken something that didn't belong to you. Too bad your mother didn't teach you any manners before she moved so far away. If I'd known you were a liar and a thief, I would have taken care of you long ago."

The line went dead.

"Shit."

She yanked open her bottom drawer and retrieved a file. She opened it and skimmed page after page of notes. Why couldn't she remember details of her time with that crazy man? What did he look like? All she had to do was close her eyes to remember waking up in the room with an aquarium full of spiders and then finding that poor little girl...and almost escaping. Almost. Close, but no cigar. Why hadn't she looked at the couch before she ran out the sliding glass door with that girl? If she had noticed he was no longer sleeping, she could have thrown a chair through the front window or maybe found a telephone to call for help.

She clamped her eyes shut. She could have locked him out of his own damn house. But she hadn't done any of those things. And now all of those days spent with him...all that time...the two months following her attempt at escape were as thick and hazy in Lizzy's mind as the fog outside her window. Two months of hell, and yet the only time she saw glimpses of the horror she experienced was that night, after she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer.

Chapter 4

Monday, February 15, 2010 4:00 PM

Back at her apartment, Lizzy opened the door and looked inside. She readied her gun as she listened and waited.

The only sounds were the padded footfalls of her cat, Maggie.

“Meow.”

Her sister Cathy did not like Lizzy living alone, so she'd given Lizzy a cat as a birthday present two years ago. Lizzy hadn't wanted a cat, and she had done everything in her power to keep her distance from Maggie, refusing to let the animal anywhere near her bedroom for the first six months. But Maggie was a determined feline, and she had persevered, making a permanent home for herself on a wide cushiony chair in the corner of Lizzy's bedroom. It was Maggie's chair now. Maggie was her alarm clock, too, waking Lizzy up every morning at six o'clock, give or take a few minutes.

It irked her to know Cathy had been right. Again. Because the truth was, Lizzy didn't know what she would do without Maggie. Maggie had become her friend, her family, her life...yet one more reason why she still needed therapy.

Maggie circled her ankles, wrapping her tail around Lizzy's leg as she meowed. She was hungry.

“Any visitors today, Maggie?”

“Meow.”

Lizzy stepped inside and flicked on the light. “Okay, if you say so.” She locked the door, latched the chain and slid one of the deadbolts into place.

The phone rang.

She jerked about and aimed her gun at the phone on the kitchen counter. Swallowing the knot lodged in her throat, Lizzy moved slowly toward the phone. For a moment, she just watched it ring. Finally, she decided to ignore the incessant ringing of the phone and feed Maggie instead.

She laid the gun on the counter and opened the refrigerator door, determined not to worry about who might be calling. Let it go, she told herself, afraid of what would happen if she allowed herself to believe Spiderman was back.

Retrieving an open can of cat food from the second shelf, she used a fork to scoop out the rest of the can onto a glass dish. She even hummed a little tune while she worked. The ringing finally stopped.

Thank God.

“There you go, sweetie.” She stroked Maggie's soft fur.

The phone rang again.

Damn.

“Okay, Spiderman,” she said aloud. “Let's have it out once and for all.” She picked up the receiver. “What do you want!”

“Lizzy, is that you? It's Jared.”

She couldn't think. She was a jumble of nerves. “Jared Shayne?”

“That's the one. Lizzy, how are you?”

A wave of emotion swept over her. She hadn't seen Jared in a very long time. Maybe a dozen times since Spiderman bashed her over the head and took her to his lair fourteen years ago. She'd gotten away from him, too. After spending two months in hell, she'd gotten away by using her brain. Most

she'd used words, lots of words. All bullshit. She'd made the killer think she honestly cared about him, the oldest trick in the book, and then she'd gotten away.

And now, only weeks after her therapist said she was seeing progress, Spiderman called. And now Jared was calling her, too. *Coincidence? Or just bad timing?* Maybe if she could get more than two hours sleep at night she might be able to function like a regular human being.

She rubbed her temples. Night after night she heard nothing but endless moaning, crying, sawing and drilling. There was nothing she could do about it then, and there was nothing she could do about it now.

"Lizzy, are you there?"

Every single day she asked herself the same bullshit question: what would it take for her to be able to lead a so-called normal life? And every day she came up with the same answer: she wasn't going to get any sleep until she knew for sure that Spiderman was dead.

"Lizzy?"

"I'm sorry, Jared. Is it really you?"

"It's me, Lizzy. I'm sorry I haven't called before now. How are you?"

After returning from the bowels of hell, she'd told Jared to leave her alone. For the first six months he'd ignored her request and stayed at her side, day and night. But in the end, he'd given up and did what she asked. "I'm great," she lied.

There was a pause before he said, "I'm glad. It's good to hear your voice. Unfortunately, I'm calling because we've got a situation here in Auburn. A missing girl. Is there any chance you can head out there today?"

She inwardly laughed. She couldn't help it. She'd heard from her sister that Jared Shayne had graduated from USC with a degree in psychology. Instead of becoming the best damn psychologist in the country though, he'd surprised everybody by applying and being accepted into the FBI Academy. Nothing could have shocked her more. Although Jared believed in truth and justice and everything his father believed in, he'd made it clear back when she was dating him that hell would have to free him over before he'd follow in his father's footsteps. His father had been a police officer, an FBI agent, and a judge. Who would have guessed Jared would swim up the same stream?

"Are you there?" he asked.

"I'm still here. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I quit my position as a board member of the Missing and Exploited Children's organization two years ago. I knew if I had to hear the details of one more kidnapping, had to watch one more family fall apart, I'd lose it for good."

She heard his exhale through the telephone line. Jared was having a hard time spitting it out. That wasn't like him. At least it didn't used to be like him. Why now after all this time? It didn't make sense. "I'm sorry," she said again because she didn't know what else to say. "Why don't you tell me what's going on?" *And then I'll apologize again and turn your offer down.*

"We've got a missing fifteen-year-old girl. Her name's Sophie Madison. The perpetrator came in through Sophie's bedroom window, took the girl, and left a note."

"Well that's promising. They don't usually leave notes. Maybe that's a good sign and he'll be calling for a ransom."

"I wish it were that easy, but the note is addressed to you, Lizzy."

Monday, February 15, 2010 4:15 PM

Cathy Warner stepped out of the car and instantly got a feel for what the local weatherman had been

talking about. The air was chilly, the kind of cold that seeped into her bones. On the news she saw warning for wind chills in the Sacramento area, a combination of cold air and strong winds that would have the potential of causing hypothermia for those who stayed outside too long.

Cathy followed the other parents into the Aquatic Center, past the front desk and through double doors leading to the indoor pool area. Steam hovered over the water. The scent of chlorine was overwhelming. Most of the girls on the swim team stood on the pool's edge, wrapped in towels. A few girls lingered in the water.

Her daughter, Brittany, stood at the back of the group. Brittany's towel was wrapped tightly over her hunched shoulders, her gaze directed at the ground while she sucked on the corner of her towel. Cathy wondered if her daughter was nervous about something.

Coach Sullivan stood a good foot and a half over the girls. He was powerfully built, in good shape for a man in his mid-fifties.

Although Brittany had been swimming competitively since she was five, the coach was relatively new. After finishing his spiel, Coach Sullivan shared a few words with each girl individually before they left for home. By the time Cathy reached Brittany's side, it was her daughter's turn to talk with the coach.

Cathy listened as Coach Sullivan talked to her daughter about what she needed to work on in the coming months. The first time Cathy met Coach Sullivan was two months ago. He had been personable and friendly and especially great with the kids. Brittany tended to be shy, an introvert who had a difficult time making friends in school. Lately, she'd been spending too much time on the computer. Her daughter needed the kind of camaraderie that a team sport provided.

"Brittany is way ahead of the pack," Coach Sullivan said directly to Cathy, yanking her from her thoughts. "Today she broke the record in the 50-meter freestyle and in the 50-meter backstroke."

"Wow," Cathy said, embarrassed by Brittany's apparent disinterest.

He smiled. "Now for the bad news. Unfortunately, as I told the other parents, I need to collect another hundred dollars from each swimmer due to increased rent at the Aquatic Center."

Cathy turned toward Brittany. "Dad's not going to be happy about that."

Brittany shrugged. "Dad's never happy."

Despite the chill in the air, heat spread over Cathy's face. "Not a problem," she assured the coach. "We'll bring a check to the next practice."

Once they were out of earshot, Cathy gave her daughter a stern look. "What's wrong with you?"

"I'm tired and these braces are killing me."

Cathy sighed. She'd forgotten about the braces. Of course Brittany would be in pain. As she waited outside the locker room for Brittany to change out of her bathing suit, she thought about what her daughter had said about Dad not being happy. Part of the problem stemmed from Richard's long hours. It didn't help that the economy was spiraling downward. She and Richard had been arguing a lot—usually about her sister Lizzy. Richard didn't like Lizzy spending time with Brittany. He thought her sister was crazy, which wasn't fair. Poor Lizzy. She'd been to hell and back.

Brittany was right. Dad wasn't happy. Lizzy wasn't happy. She wasn't even sure if she was happy any longer. And the worst part was that Cathy didn't know what the hell to do about it.

Monday, February 15, 2010 9:00 PM

Brittany Warner signed onto her computer and saw that i2Hotti was logged on. Her insides did flip-flops. She instantly messaged the boy known as i2Hotti, boldly asking him where he'd been for the past two days.

i2Hotti: Why? Did you miss me?

Brit35: no

i2Hotti: admit it...you missed me

Brit35: ok I missed u

i2Hotti: Have u bought a webcam yet?

Brit35: mom said she'd think about it

i2Hotti: Don't u have \$\$ of your own?

Brit35: i have a b-day soon

i2Hotti: i know

Brit35: how dyk?

i2Hotti: dyk?

Brit35: LOL acronym for "do you know"

i2Hotti: i know a lot of things about u

Brit35: Facebook?

i2Hotti: ya

Brit35: ROTFL

i2Hotti: swim practice today?

Brit35: yeah lame

i2Hotti: Why?

Brit35: new coach is a creeper

i2Hotti: what does he do?

Brit35: he stares

i2Hotti: because u r so pretty

Silence

i2Hotti: r u there?

Brit35: yes

i2Hotti: u should get a webcam

Brit35: why?

i2Hotti: cuz I want to see u at when we chat

i2Hotti: then i can dream about u

Silence

i2Hotti: still there?

Brit35: i'm here

i2Hotti: anything wrong?

Brit35: i have braces now

Brit35: i look like a freak

Brit35: i don't want u to see me

i2Hotti: i like girls with braces

Brit35: liar

Brit35: hold on

Brit35: i have to shut my door

Brit35: brb

i2Hotti: brb?

Brit35: LOL

Brit35: "be right back"

Brit35: see, already back

i2Hotti: that was quick. parents r fighting again?

Brit35: yes

i2Hotti: about?

Brit35: lizzy

i2Hotti: lizzy?

Brit35: my aunt

i2Hotti: why?

Brit35: dad thinks she's a loony bird

i2Hotti: what does mom think?

Brit35: mom wants to help her

i2Hotti: what do you think?

Brit35: i like her

Brit35: she's hecka fun to be with

i2Hotti: i want to be with u

Brit35: my parents wouldn't like it

i2Hotti: they don't have to know.

Silence

I2Hotti: think about it?

Brit35: i better go now

i2Hotti: tomorrow night, same time?

Brit35: i'll be here

i2Hotti: sweet dreams

Brittany logged off and walked to her window. She hadn't wanted to end her conversation with i2Hotti but she could hear Mom walking around upstairs. Mom liked to randomly pop in to see what she was doing. She didn't allow Brittany to lock her door. If Mom knew she was talking to an old boy she'd go ballistic.

Brittany met i2Hotti on the Internet about a month ago. She'd never met him in person, but he sent her a picture after asking her to friend him on Facebook. If she ever did get in trouble for talking to him, it would be worth it. He was hot with a capital H.

She didn't know why he liked her. She wasn't beautiful. Certainly not the sort of girl who stood out in a crowded room, although Mom told her she was a natural beauty and could easily be a model—something all moms said.

Outside, the wind was blowing so hard Brittany thought the oak tree in the front yard might fall and crash right through the house at any moment. She peered into the dark, scanning the street below to see if the SUV was there tonight. For the past three nights she'd seen a man sitting in a blue SUV parked across the street. She rubbed her arms, glad to see he wasn't there. She couldn't help but wonder if it was Coach Sullivan. Next time she saw the car she planned to figure out exactly what kind of car it was so she could compare it to Coach Sullivan's car. Creeper.

Monday, February 15, 2010 9:32 PM

He looked at his watch. Time to get back to Sophie. Just one last look before he left. The light was on. He knew she was in there. *Come on, show yourself.* Too bad she was on the second floor. It would be quite challenging when it came time to take her home. He could use a challenge. Taking Sophie had been anticlimactic, but she would be waking soon and he wanted to be there when she opened her eyes.

Excitement rippled through him as he recalled the first time he realized he could make a difference. ~~It was twenty-one years ago when everything had become so clear, and he'd discovered his life purpose.~~ He was a senior in high school—a young man trying hard to put his past behind him—when fate stepped in and made him watch Shannon die. That was the day he'd seen the light.

Shannon Winters, a sophomore in high school and the girl of his dreams, had consumed his every thought back then. Wanting to impress her, he had taken his time finding out things about her: her favorite food, preferred music, what she liked to do in her free time, etcetera. Once he knew her well enough, he waited for her after school. She always took the shortcut behind the school building, cutting through the baseball field and then taking an alley to get home. He waited for her in the alley, surprising her with flowers and her favorite candy. Her brows had furrowed upon seeing him and that had confused him. Once she stopped frowning, she brusquely told him to keep the flowers since she didn't want to carry them home. Then she took the jawbreaker from him, her absolute favorite candy, and popped it into her mouth.

He told her he had something important he wanted to ask her, but she wouldn't stay still. She was already headed home, and she wouldn't slow her pace. He followed close on her heels. He was nervous, his palms sweaty. But he had prepared for too long to give up, so he spit it all out and told her how he felt about her. Then he asked her if she would go to a movie with him.

That did the trick. She finally stopped, spun on her heels, and gave him a you-must-be-joking look. It didn't take long for her annoying giggles to turn to full-out laughter.

She was laughing at him. She laughed so hard, she began to choke on the jawbreaker. He couldn't believe it. He'd bought her the big round jawbreaker because he loved her and now she was choking on it. At first he figured the jawbreaker would pop out of her mouth, the mouth he'd fantasized for so long about kissing and sticking his tongue down. Assuming the candy would pop out eventually, he watched her face turn red. He knew she might yell at him for not doing anything to help her. *Whatever.*

Instead of feeling angry or scared, the whole crazy situation fascinated him. He especially enjoyed the way her big brown eyes bulged from their sockets as panic set in. He couldn't believe it when she pointed at her throat. The bitch wanted him to do something about her problem. She actually wanted him to help her after she'd laughed at him, humiliated him. That's when the whole wild scene began to make his insides tingle, especially his balls. He'd gotten hard quick. The redder her face got, the harder he became until he could hardly stand it. Then she turned blue and three shades of purple. She made some crazy garbled noises that made him want to pop the candy out and put something else in her mouth instead. He was hot. Nothing had ever affected him like that before. Not porn on the Internet, not Dad's *Playboy* magazines, nothing. By the time her fingers grasped onto his shirt, and his eyes nearly popped out of their sockets, he was as hard as granite. She died right there in front of him.

He'd never forgotten Shannon.

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