

Mary Higgins Clark Award Winner

# MARCIA PRESTON

**what  
happens  
when the  
thread that  
binds mother  
and child  
breaks**

*The  
Spiderling*

Published by The RoadRunner Press  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
[www.TheRoadRunnerPress.com](http://www.TheRoadRunnerPress.com)

Copyright © 2020 Marcia Preston  
Cover photo © 2020 Tatiana Altanaka/Shutterstock.com  
Cover copyright © 2020 The RoadRunner Press

Cover Design by Jeanne Devlin

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. While the literary perceptions and insights are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. No reference to any real person is intended or should be inferred.

First edition published November 3, 2020.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019952240  
Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data on file  
(Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Names: Preston, M. K. (Marcia K.), 1944- author.  
Title: The spiderling / Marcia Preston.

Description: First edition. | Oklahoma City, Oklahoma : The RoadRunner Press, 2020.

Identifiers: ISBN 9781937054588 | ISBN 9781950871056 (ebook | mobi) ISBN 9781950871087 (ebook | epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Preteen girls--California--Fiction. | Mothers and daughters--California--Fiction. | Murder--California--Fiction. | Abusive men--California--Fiction. | Escapes--California--Fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3566.R4123 S65 2020 (print) | LCC PS3566.R4123 (ebook) | DDC 813/.54--dc23

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Chapter 1

## *Wild Horses*

**A**ROUND MIDNIGHT, Libby stopped the car on a rocky cliff and sailed the gun as far as she could out over the ocean. It disappeared into the black sea two hundred feet below. She stood on the brink with the wind at her back, listening for the splash, but heard only the rush and crash of the surf. She climbed back into the Mustang and drove on.

Fog crept in from the sea, covering the road in thick patches that blocked her headlights. The steep curves looked surreal in the dark. She strained to see the white line that marked the shoulder and tried not to picture the car crashing through the guardrail and plummeting over the edge. That might be the best idea, but she couldn't make that choice. She glanced into the back seat and then kept going until San Jose was far behind.

The next morning, coming down a staircase behind the motel, Libby paused on the landing to look out over the Big Sur River that ran along the back of the property. Twig chairs sat in the shallow stream. She inhaled the smell of forest and damp earth and imagined sitting there with the ache of icy water on her bare feet.

She zipped her hoodie and descended to a cracked sidewalk that led around to the front of the building. The motel and café shared the parking lot with a gift shop and gas station. It was a downscale tourist place, nearly deserted at this time of year. She had counted on that when she chose the coast highway instead of the interstate. The black Mustang sat alone where she had parked it in the night, dew condensing on the windshield.

On the terrace outside the café, canvas umbrellas hugged their masts. Libby pulled the door open, setting off a wind chime that chattered like glass birds. The place was empty, a lounge at the back cloaked in shadows. But the dining section was lighted, and Buddha Bar music floated in from a sound system. She took a booth by the window and found a menu behind the napkin holder.

In less than a minute, a woman bearing coffee pushed through a bead curtain from the kitchen. She was lean and ageless in a gauze skirt and no makeup, with sunspots across her cheekbones. Her name tag said *Sara*. She poured coffee into Libby's mug without asking. "Good morning. Need a minute?"

"No, I'm ready," Libby said. She kept her eyes on the menu, not wanting a conversation that the waitress might remember. "Two scrambled eggs and a short stack, please."

"Coming right up," the waitress said and disappeared behind the clacking beads.

The music's synthesized rhythm thumped like a migraine. On the wall, a row of large photographs showed the Big Sur coastline Libby had followed in the dark. She almost overlooked the naked woman in each photo, softly focused and exotic, with her back to the camera. Libby shivered and grasped the mug to warm her hands. She noticed a faint stain of someone else's lipstick on the rim. She turned the cup around and drank anyway. The coffee was scalding and strong, exactly what she needed.

Across the highway from the café, sunrise crowned the brown hills. Libby watched a silver pickup pull off the road and park on the gravel beside the Mustang. She could see the driver checking out the car even before he opened his door. She tensed as the man walked a slow circle around the Mustang before moving toward the café entrance. Police? Or worse, maybe a friend of Rocket's. Her eyes slid back to her coffee; her hands tightened on the mug, her heartbeat rabbiting.

The man came in and sat at a table across the room with his back to the wall. He wore a leather bomber jacket and faded jeans. Sara emerged from the kitchen to take his order. When the waitress turned away, the man glanced

toward Libby as if ready to speak, but she didn't look up. She sipped her coffee and watched from the corner of her eye as he took off his jacket and tossed it on a chair.

Sara returned with Libby's breakfast. "There you are, Hon," she said, setting down a pitcher of syrup. "Anything else I can get you?"

Libby's mouth watered. She hadn't eaten since yesterday morning. "A warm-up, please."

Sara refilled her cup and moved on. The music shifted to a breathy female singer with the same monotone beat. Libby felt the man's gaze as she smeared butter on the pancakes and drenched them with syrup, shoving the scrambled eggs to the rim of her plate. Stay calm. Don't look at him. Still, her hand shook as she forked a bite of eggs.

"That your Mustang outside?" he said.

Here we go. Libby didn't hurry to answer him, steeling her voice to sound matter-of-fact. "You see anybody else in here?"

The guy grinned, trying too hard to be friendly. His teeth were straight and white. "I collect old cars. Always wanted a Mustang."

She noted the black motorcycle boots, expensive, and a complicated watch below his rolled-up sleeve. Too well dressed for any cop she'd ever known. The tag on his truck wasn't from Santa Clara County either. Aging rich kid, she diagnosed, with more money than he deserved. Definitely not one of Rocket's friends.

She relaxed a bit and concentrated on breakfast. The pancakes were perfectly browned.

"That's a sixty-four-and-a-half, isn't it? A classic," the man said.

"Ummm."

"Not many of those left. Looks like it's in great shape. How's it run?"

She glanced at him. "Like a Mustang."

Before he could respond, his breakfast arrived, and then Sara swung by Libby's booth again.

"I'll need a breakfast burrito and an orange juice to go," Libby said.

“Sure thing, Hon.”

The man called to the waitress. “Ma’am? I asked for sunny-side up, and these eggs are hard.” He sounded disappointed.

Sara walked over and glanced at his food. “They sure are. Sorry about that.” She swooped up the plate; the crystal beads clacked behind her as she disappeared into the kitchen. Libby heard her talking to the cook, louder than before.

For a few minutes, Libby ate in peace while the other customer drank his coffee. Then he turned toward her again, long legs set apart on the wooden floor. “Don’t suppose you’d be interested in selling your car?”

Was he kidding? She stabbed the last bite of pancake. “Then I’d be on foot with no way to get out of here.”

“I could drop you somewhere.”

She gave him a look, and he laughed. “Okay. How about I trade you, then? My truck for your old Mustang.”

Libby glanced out the window at his Silverado pickup. Chrome running boards and fancy hubcaps. A gas hog in ecocountry. This guy was no local. She felt him watching her. She was thinking fast but kept her face blank.

“Straight up?” she finally said.

“Straight up.”

He was serious. The Mustang must be worth a lot of money. And there could be an APB on it right now. If he was a collector, maybe he’d take it off the street. Not even tag it.

She waited a few beats and then shook her head. “I’d have to have some cash.”

He perked up, having fun. “Really? Do you know what pickups cost these days?”

“Nope, and I don’t care.”

The perfect teeth flashed again. “Fair enough. How much cash?”

“How much you got?”

He looked at her as if she was crazy, his smile pulling to one side. Already thinking about how he'd tell the story to his friends, Libby bet. He stood up and dug into his jeans pocket. His wallet was tooled leather. He began to count hundred-dollar bills onto the table. "Three, four, five, six, seven. You gotta leave me something to get home on."

The waitress came out with Libby's to-go box and a small carton of orange juice; she put them in a sack and brought the sack with the check to Libby's table.

"Breakfast's on me," the guy said.

The waitress looked at the stack of hundreds in front of him. She glanced from the man to Libby and back at the money. "That my tip?" she said dryly on her way back to the kitchen.

So much for Sara not remembering me, Libby thought. She needed to get out of there fast.

The man brought the bills over and laid them on her table. He was taller than she had first thought. He put his truck keys on top of the money and picked up her breakfast check.

"Title's in the glove compartment and the gas tank's full. We got a deal?" He stood beside the booth, waiting.

This was all too easy. They should be signing over titles. But if he didn't care, why should she? Guys like him could pay to take care of such things, and she had bigger worries.

Sara reappeared and set a plate on his table. "Here you go, mister, sunny-side up. You could drink 'em with a straw."

Libby pulled a car key from her jacket. She held it for a few seconds, running her thumb over the wild horse emblem on the ring, waiting until the waitress disappeared again. Then she dropped the key on the table and slid out of the booth. She pocketed the truck keys and shoved the cash into the sack with the burrito. "Title's in the glove compartment," she said, "and the gas tank's empty."



Outdoors, the air was fresh and cool. She crossed the parking lot quickly, glancing inside the Mustang to be sure she'd left nothing behind. Then she aimed the gizmo attached to the man's keys and pushed a button. The truck's door locks clicked open.

Libby jogged around the building and up the wooden stairs of the motel. She turned left and continued down the outdoor walkway to Number Nine, unlocked the door, and pushed her way inside.

"Kiwi, wake up. We have to go."

In the rumpled bed, a small tween body twisted beneath the covers. Libby pulled off the sheet, revealing a little girl with hair tangled around her head like brown Silly String. "I gotta pee," she said.

"Bathroom's in there. Brush your teeth quick, and I'll get your clothes. I brought you some breakfast for the road."

Kiwi slid out of bed and trudged toward the bathroom. Her bedraggled stuffed dog remained among the covers.

Libby found her daughter's jeans from the day before and a clean T-shirt. She tossed the few things they had taken out of the suitcase back inside and zipped it shut. Kiwi came out of the bathroom, and Libby went in, giving orders over her shoulder. "Stick your toothbrush in the side pocket and grab your pillow—don't forget Moxie."

When Libby returned, Kiwi was dressed and holding her pillow under one arm, a Moxie-sized lump inside the pillowcase. Her nose was stuck inside the paper bag. "What's all this money?"

"I'll explain later. Let's go." Before the guy finishes his runny eggs and changes his mind, Libby prayed.

Kiwi trailed her mom across the parking lot. "We've traded cars," Libby said. "We're taking this truck."

Kiwi didn't even register surprise. Libby unlocked the cab and tossed her blanket inside. Kiwi stepped onto the chrome running board and climbed in. The suitcase would be fine in the bed of the truck as long as it didn't rain.

The pickup had bucket seats and lots of leg room. Libby adjusted the seat and mirrors and studied the dashboard controls.

“This thing is a battleship,” Kiwi said, still holding the pillow and sack, her briar-patch hair catching the sun through the windshield. “Are we stealing it?”

“Of course not,” Libby said. “Buckle up.” The gas gauge showed full. She turned the ignition and the engine rumbled. “Put that money in my purse and eat your breakfast.”

She backed up slowly and steered the truck onto the highway, adjusting the seat forward again. After the Mustang, the truck was like driving a house.

In the rearview mirror, Libby watched the black Mustang shrink into the distance and disappear. It felt as if she and Kiwi were doing the same thing. She wondered if the Mustang’s title really was in the glove compartment. She hoped not; it would have Rocket’s name on it, his legal name. He’d go ballistic if he knew she’d traded off his car.

But he never would.



“There’s a brush in my purse,” Libby said, driving south again. “You need to work on that hair.”

“After I eat,” Kiwi said with her mouth full. She had made a nest on the wide seat and sat cross-legged with a napkin over her lap, finishing breakfast. Except for the comment about the truck, she hadn’t asked one question since they’d left San Jose. This was not normal for a girl who could ask twenty questions in the course of a trip to the grocery store, and it worried Libby.

For two hours, they drove the winding highway along the ocean. It was foggy and slow going at first, but the marine layer gradually receded, and the sea turned brilliant blue. Boulders jutted from the water like icebergs, their tops whitened by generations of bird dung. Then the coastline flattened. They passed a place where elephant seals covered the beach, stinking of fish. The fence was lined with tourists. Kiwi wanted to stop and look at the seals, but Libby said no. They needed to keep moving.

They lost almost an hour midday clawing their way through L.A. traffic. Libby wrapped both hands around the wheel, her neck tense. After that, the towns ran together. They got lunch at McDonald’s and kept driving until a

road sign showed fifty miles to the Mexican border. Libby knew nothing about Mexico and didn't speak Spanish.

Near Oceanside, Libby turned inland. Not going somewhere, just going. Kiwi was reading a book she'd retrieved from the suitcase. The child was obsessed with books the way some kids were with video games, a healthier escape from reality than the methods Libby had chosen as a kid. Miles later, Kiwi closed her book. Watching her stare out the window, Libby wondered if Kiwi was reliving those last hours in the apartment and whether she always would. She didn't ask. Maybe, if they didn't keep the images alive with words, the memory would fade. Like so many things Libby wanted to forget.

They were driving through open country when Kiwi sat up straight and pointed out the window.

"Look, Mom. Wild horses!"

A dozen animals, all different colors, were galloping across the hills between patches of forest. Something must have spooked them. Or maybe they just liked to run.

"I doubt there are wild horses anymore," Libby said. "They must belong to someone."

"No, we read about them in school," Kiwi insisted. "People protect them so they can stay wild. See, no fences."

The ponies ran parallel to the road at a distance, their manes and tails streaming.

"You couldn't ride one, though," said Kiwi. "They're too skittish."

*Skittish*, Libby thought. How many kids her age used the word *skittish*? She'd known since Kiwi was five years old that her only child was smarter than she was. And Libby was proud of Kiwi's intelligence, although sometimes it stood like an invisible wall between them, leaving Libby feeling overmatched.

When the horses were out of sight, Kiwi got out the notebook she called her journal and began to write. Libby wondered what she was putting down this time. Kiwi had insisted that a journal was private and Libby must not ever peek. Touched by how much it had seemed to mean to Kiwi, Libby had agreed. And she had not broken that promise.

They drove on in silence. Soon, however, Kiwi propped her pillow against the armrest and curled into a tight ball on the seat. Car rides always made her sleepy. Libby glanced over at her in the fading light: pink-and-green striped socks, baggy at the toes, the ragged Moxie, a refugee from an Army garage sale, crushed to her chest.

This child was all she had left of Deacon, the soldier husband who'd saved her from herself. In sleep, Kiwi's face looked smooth and innocent, like any other little girl's. But Kiwi wasn't any little girl. And Libby had no clue how to be her mother.

What will become of her? My daughter, the murderer.

**You've Just Finished your Free Sample**

**Enjoyed the preview?**

**Buy: <http://www.ebooks2go.com>**