I Survived a Serial Killer NEARLY 3 DECADES AFTER JENNIFER ASBENSON ESCAPED THE CLUTCHES OF A MURDEROUS MONSTER, SHE REVEALS THE NIGHTMARES THAT STILL HAUNT HER-AND THE STRENGTH SHE NEVER KNEW SHE HAD

By CHRISTINE PELISEK

Photographs by Ryan Pfluger

Facing Fear "People tell me I have changed," says Asbenson (in the Desert Hot Springs, Cali area where she escaped). "I am absolutel stronger. My life is a story that can help others, and that gives me hope."

Sometimes it hits her in unexpected moments. Being around new people fills her with a vague sense of dread. A large crowd can send her into a panic, causing her body to shake and making her feel like fingers are closing in around her throat. If a stranger especially a man–unexpectedly yells or begins speaking loudly, she wants to flee and find someplace safe to hide. "I see things differently than others do," says Jennifer Asbenson. "I feel very lucky to be alive."

It has been almost three decades since Asbenson, 45, got into a car with serial killer Andrew Urdiales-and almost didn't get out. On the outside the writer and mom of a grown daughter quietly takes delight in the normal life she has built for herself in Cathedral City, Calif., where she lives with her boyfriend of three years, Gregg Aratin, 60, a radio station sales

A Killer's Secrets Andrew Urdiales, 54 (in a mug shot), murdered eight women over 10 years without being detected. Asbenson was attacked in the middle of his killing spree.

manager, and their dogs. But on the inside the nightmare she survived can still grab hold of her, even though Urdiales, who ultimately confessed to killing eight women, hanged himself in his cell on San Quentin's death row in November. The shocking case, and Asbenson's story, is covered in the latest episode





Asbenson (center, with, from left, Matt Murphy and Tammie Erwin's father, Charles) at an October sentencing.

of People Magazine Investigates. "She is," says Orange County Senior Deputy District Attorney Matt Murphy, "the one who got away."

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Asbenson's nightmare began in 1992, when, on the evening of Sept. 27, she missed her bus to her job as an overnight caretaker at a facility for children with disabilities. Then 19, she was in a panic about being late when Urdiales pulled up in a lightcolored sedan and offered her a ride. She hesitated but accepted. "I thought to myself, 'This is a godsend," she says. "'This guy is here to help me when I need help the most."

The ex-U.S. Marine-who, unbeknownst to Asbenson, had already killed four California womendrove her to her 10 p.m. shift and invited her to have



Sentenced to death, Urdiales (in court in June) committed suicide in his cell in November.

breakfast with him the following morning. She had no interest in him, so she gave him a fake number. But when she finished her shift, Urdiales was outside in his car waiting for her. She accepted a ride home "because I didn't feel fear from him because he didn't do anything the night before," she says.

But his past behavior could never have prepared her for the terror ahead. He angrily confronted her about the fake number, slamming Asbenson's head into the dashboard before driving her to a remote spot in the Palm Springs desert. There he used a knife to cut off her shorts, stuffed her underwear in her mouth and attempted to rape her. Then he pulled a gun and demanded she perform a sex act on him. "I started running through the desert as fast as I could," Asbenson says. She wasn't fast enough.

Urdiales caught her, dragged her back to the car and shoved her into the trunk.

Beaten and bruised, her wrists bound behind her with twine, she knew if she stayed in the trunk she would be killed. "At first I just felt peace," she remembers. "And then I just got hysterical strength." She broke her hands free, unlatched the trunk and when the car stopped, she jumped out. Sprinting down the middle of the road, she looked back to see Urdiales running toward her, swinging a machete above his head. "It was surreal," she says. "It was like I was in a horror movie." She ran for her life into the road, where she flagged down a truck carrying two Marines. The men drove her to a nearby gas station, where she called police. "To save me like that," she says, "they were angels."

Even though she escaped, Asbenson's ordeal was far from over. Terrified that Urdiales would return to finish her off, she had difficulty sleeping and fell into a

deep depression. She blamed herself for trusting a stranger, sometimes doubted her memories of the attack and began cutting herself, landing in multiple mental-health facilities. She credits becoming a mom to daughter Geo in 1996 with helping her forget the horror. And when Geo's father died eight years later, "I stopped telling the story so nobody would think that I was crazy and take my daughter away," she says.

Meanwhile, Urdiales continued his rampage, murdering four more women between 1995 and '96. In wasn't until April 1997, when a woman in Wolf Lake, Ind., claimed Urdiales had attempted to bind her with duct tape, that police became suspicious of him. They ordered ballistic tests on a revolver of his that had been confiscated during an earlier traffic stop. After the gun came back matching bullets used to kill three victims, Urdiales was arrested and confessed. "He tells the police everything," says former Cook County assistant state's



Innocence Lost "When this man offered me a ride," says Asbenson (at 19), "I said no, but then I thought, 'I should trust people.' I had to forgive myself for getting into that car."





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"They were at vulnerable stages in their lives, and they got into a car with this guy without knowing how dangerous he was," says Jim McKay, the former assistant state's attorney in Cook County who prosecuted Urdiales for murders he committed in Illinois. "He was a very evil and vicious killer who hated women. Thank God police stopped him, a jury stopped him. He showed no remorse."

attorney Jim McKay. "Not just about three Illinois victims, but he then says, 'Oh, you may want to contact California authorities."

Asbenson remembers being outside her parents' Morongo Valley, Calif., home filling up her daughter's kiddie pool when a police officer pulled up and asked her to come to the station to look at photos to identify her attacker. "I said, 'That's him, right there,' " she says. "It helped me realize I wasn't crazy. And then I just felt proud."

Though she keeps a heavy flashlight and a full can of insect repellent beside her bed for protection, Asbenson says she has felt more empowered since testifying against Urdiales during the penalty phase of his trial last May. Also helping her heal: selfdefense classes, time at home with her boyfriend Gregg and her support dog Wesley. "He can no longer hurt me," she says of Urdiales. "I have a lot of strength now.... I am allowed to love myself." •