

STOLEN
IDENTITY

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 @carmenmariamontiel

 @CarmenMaMontiel

 @carmenmontielofficial

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Carmen María Montiel

STOLEN IDENTITY

A STORY OF LOVE, VIOLENCE AND LIBERATION



DISCLAIMER

This book is a fictional memoir based on my recollections of actual events, locations and conversations. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

*To all women that are suffering
abuse in silent, those who
have already been able to free
themselves and those who did not
live to tell their stories.*

Dedication

To my family, for showing me once again what unconditional love is.

To my successful lawyers, for having had faith in me and for fighting for my children and me.

To my children, for teaching me the innate integrity that human beings have. At their young age, they gave me daily lessons that allowed me to continue. Thank you for having been able to smile despite the darkness and for giving Mommy those little glimpses of happiness in the worst moments. Thank you for being able to get ahead and for taking the positive of this experience to get your lives on track. Alexandra, Kamee and Juan Diego: you saved me. I love you more than anything in life.

Introduction

MARRIAGE CAN BE the safest relationship or the most dangerous one. Toward the end of my marriage, I knew I was living the second option, but could not dare do anything about it.

Domestic violence is a silent killer. It happens behind closed doors at home. In fact, every nine seconds a woman is the victim of domestic violence. In my case, killing me was too obvious! The next best thing was burying me alive by sending me to prison.

Like most women, I did not know I was a victim of domestic violence. The abuser starts with a combination of mental and psychological abuse to destroy the victim's self-esteem and confidence first, then progresses to physical violence.

My abuser husband was able to diminish me with years of emotional, psychological, physical and substance abuse. He thought he finally had me out of the way, so he could enjoy life as he wanted, spending our money and indulging his sex addiction.

But despite being nearly destroyed, I managed to retain my dignity even while being forced to allow him to lead a double life as a respected family man with a successful medical practice and a husband who cheated on his wife with prostitutes, often in their own home.

I loved my husband and worked hard to build a family and our business. I never imagined he could hurt me, much less try

to destroy me. Like most abuse victims, I never thought when he hurt me that it was intentional. After every assault, I recreated the incident to see what I did that caused him to react violently.

Stolen Identity goes beyond domestic violence to expose how difficult it is to recognize abusers, even for the authorities. This is the story of an abused immigrant woman who had no place to go or hide. A Catholic who believed in family and fought to save it for her children's sake. In the end, however, because of her children, she had to get out of that vicious marriage to save herself.

Fear

“**Y**OU ARE CHARGED with a single count of ‘intimidating a flight attendant.’” I am standing with my hands handcuffed and feet shackled—this is beyond humiliating. The judge continues: “The charge has a prison sentence of up to 20 years and a fine of \$250,000!”

I can hardly hold my body up. My legs are shaking. I whisper to my lawyer that I am afraid in the quietest voice I can manage to get out of my lips. I can hardly speak. My life is passing by inside my head, all the light and happiness, my three beautiful children. And now my world has come to this? How? Why?

After all the shining moments in my life, after all the hard work, always helping others and holding my head high—because “doing the right thing” was the motto my parents raised me with—I am ending my life in prison! Will I become a felon? Me? The maximum that had happened to me before this was a traffic ticket. Will Alejandro succeed in setting me up?

My feet can hardly support my now extra tiny body; though tall, I now only weigh 110 pounds. I cannot control my shaking. I am hoping no one can notice.

My lawyer whispers in my ear to be calm.

The prosecutor addresses the judge and asks for my passports to be turned in—mine and those of my children.

“Her husband says she is a flight risk, Your Honor, and she will take his children away.”

At that moment, I realized that Alejandro was trying hard to block my release. It was as if he had something to do with the charges. In time, I would understand how all of it was planned.

It has happened in the “best” of families. Sons have killed their fathers to become kings. Henry VIII executed two of his six wives. And Henry II sent his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, to prison for ten years.

My attorney protests, “Your Honor, her husband took her Venezuelan passport from the house and it cannot be found. Her family lawyers have requested it numerous times since the divorce proceedings began. These are more of his abusive tactics. She has been the victim of domestic violence for years.”

Tears started to roll down my cheeks once I realize my love story has turned little by little into this nightmare.

“I am subpoenaing the husband to produce the passports,” the judge said. “A big strong marshal will make sure he comes on Thursday.”

At the end of the hearing I am taken back to a cell. I lost track of time because it took so long that it felt like an eternity. It was so long I thought they were not going to release me that day. I was afraid I was going to be taken back to the Federal Pen, as they called it.

Finally, someone came for me and took me to a room where one of my criminal lawyers was on the other side of the window. While I was walking, I passed other cells with men who were talking even though they could not see each other. One of them said to the other: “*¡Esta bolilla debe ser una mula!*” meaning “This white woman must be a drug trafficker.”

“What is going on?” I asked my lawyer. “I have not done anything.”

“It is a stupid charge, Carmen, but it is a federal charge. You need to answer these questions for your release. However, I need

to tell you that the prosecution is fighting hard. They said your husband called the FBI agent several times to warn them that you are a flight risk.”

“I will not go anywhere without my children! How is it that Alejandro has the FBI agent’s direct number?”

“They are saying he is almost crying, saying you will take the children and he will never see them again. He is even saying that you have TWO Venezuelan passports.”

“He is the one with dual identity in Venezuela. He is insane, accusing me of HIS crimes. He is behind all of this—you know it’s a lie!”

“Sssshhhh! We will talk later. Just answer the questions.”

I answered all the questions, for my attorney. They were mostly financial questions.

After that, I was taken back to the little cell where I waited to be called again, hoping to be taken home.

But suddenly I thought: “Oh my God! Another night in this place?”

I had never felt so insignificant. In a place I did not know, with people I never imagined I would ever spend time with or even be close to. There I was with alleged drug traffickers, murderers, illegal immigrants, and prostitutes! Criminals, real criminals, and then me!

When they asked me what I had done and I explained, they were all incredulous. I did not look as though I belonged there. They called me “the Virgin” because they said my face was so beautiful and I wore no makeup.

“She is a Virgin,” one said. “Oh! A doll,” said another.

Before that, the only time I had seen a prostitute was from a distance while driving in Caracas by Libertador Avenue. They looked as if they came from an alternative world. I never imagined our lives would end up being so similar: Abused, drugged and taken to a criminal court. In a way I was part of today’s slavery of women.

Alejandro had brought a different set of prostitutes into our lives, Houston prostitutes. They dance in men's nightclubs.

Once while insulting me, Alejandro said: "You think you are different from the rest of the world because you have light eyes. Don't you? Well those prostitutes I am involved with that you hate also have light eyes. See, Carmen. There is no difference between you and them!"

He managed to label me like this the day of the first setup and after that, I became his prisoner, just like prostitutes become imprisoned by their pimps.

My fellow prisoners probably thought I was lying. The federal officers told me not to say who I was or where I lived. It felt like they understood an injustice had been done, and they wanted to protect me.

They said: "No one here is your friend. Be careful what you say. Be careful with every word. It is better if you limit your communication with them. Do not tell them you live in Memorial. They don't understand where you come from."

Memorial is one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Houston.

"Great! Now what?" I thought to myself. It was too late. I had already told a couple of people, including my cellmate.

How could I not say anything when I could not stop crying? Of course, these women were asking.

The officers explained that this was not a jail; it was prison, federal prison. I did not understand the difference. I had never cried so much.

I expected my lawyers to come see me in that place and explain where I was. The marshals had picked me up around noon. I thought my lawyers would show up to tell me what was going on. I spent the whole afternoon waiting for them. I was hopeful until quite late.

I had to be nice to these women. But I did not know how to act with them. How should I talk to them? I smiled but mostly stayed quiet.

The girl who was my cellmate had a weird suggestion. She said she had a sugar daddy. And she was in prison! How did she manage a sugar daddy while in prison? It is a bizarre world.

“You should get a sugar daddy, too,” she said. “You are pretty and have a nice figure!”

She asked more about what had happened. Although the officer had already told me not to talk, how could I not? I told her everything my husband had done to me, and how he kept calling the flight attendant until I was arrested.

After that, she said: “I can solve that for you!”

When I asked her how, she replied: “Better for you not to know too much.”

Then I understood what she was talking about.

“Oh my God!” I said. “No... do not! Don’t even talk about it, please!”

In time, I came to understand that this was probably a setup, that the girl was a mole. They were really trying to get me for something real—not this trumped up charge of “intimidating a flight attendant.”

Even when I had arrived earlier that day, one of the officers was puzzled and said it was not a federal charge. If anything, it was “contempt of court”—a misdemeanor state charge.

“Why are they bringing you here?” he asked in a low voice, looking angry.

I prayed to get out that day. I was worried about my children. They were home when I left. They stayed with the housekeeper and did not know anything about me after that. I am everything for them.

My lawyer never showed up. He later explained that he could not find me in the system, and he was not allowed in the prison because of it. I did not even exist there! Apparently, people get lost in the system all the time.

I spent the longest night in federal prison with that girl who checked me all night to see if I was sleeping.

“Why are you here?” I asked her.

“I witnessed my brother killing someone. Since I knew about it, that is why I am here. They went to my home at 6 a.m. and took me in my underwear.”

I could not help but think that every conversation with this girl was bizarre. But probably she thought the same about me.

Finally, they came for me.

I was taken to a room, where the chains were removed. Then I was passed to another room. Every room was behind locked doors, extremely secure. Finally, I got to a hall where my lawyer was waiting for me. He explained that my release was approved with the condition that I had to turn in both passports, Venezuelan and American, by Thursday. Alejandro was to appear in court with the Venezuelan passport. And my family lawyers were to appear, too, with evidence that the Venezuelan passport had been formally requested in the divorce proceedings.

My attorney walked me to an office, where my daughter Alexandra was waiting, along with one of my family lawyers. I ran and hugged her. I cried because I thought I was never going to be able to hug her again. I am thinking while hugging her: “My baby has to be a responsible adult now at only 17 years old, for her and for her siblings. This is so wrong. Why? Why? Why do my children have to be going through this experience?”

My family lawyer tells Alexandra to make sure her father does not go home, because I am going there. She texted him, “*Mami* is out.” He answered, “I know.” She showed the text to me and I could not believe it. How does he know?

He is in close contact with federal officials and I asked myself: “Do they know he has dual identity in Venezuela? Do they know about his patient that died in unusual circumstances?”

At that moment, I was informed that Alejandro was planning to move into the house. I refiled for divorce a month after the airplane incident, and divorce proceedings started officially over a month ago.

The court had granted me a “kick-out order,” meaning he had to leave the house, and a protective restraining order whereby he had to stay away from me after the last beating he gave me put him in jail. I had been living at the house with the children and the housekeeper ever since.

Alexandra told me that Alejandro went to the house once the FBI took me away. He was there in less than 15 minutes. It is obvious he knew I was going to be arrested. (He works 40 minutes away from the house.) It was a Monday around noon, and he was with his younger brother. They obviously did not work that day.

When I got back home, I hugged my other two children. I cannot cry. They cannot see me weak—I am their strength. Kamee knew where I had been, but not JD. My computer tech was at the house at the time of the arrest and he went up to JD’s computer to entertain him.

I went to my bedroom and took a shower. I felt filthy. Once in the shower, I started to cry: “Daddy, come help me please,” I cried out, screaming. I started to sing “*Muñequita linda*” (beautiful doll), just like he used to sing to me. I felt so lonely and lost. And I have three children who depend on me. Their father is an alcoholic and drug addict who is “dating” prostitutes. He cannot take care of the kids. He was never able to even take care of himself. I prayed: “God, please do not let them lose me.”

After the shower, we all sat down to have dinner. I could not eat. My daughters tried to make me. “*Mami*, eat please. You look like you lost ten pounds.” In fact, I had. I can lose weight when stressed out or sick so fast.

“I will gain it back,” I replied.

Alejandro had taken my Blackberry and more documents. The housekeeper told me he was looking for my American passport. If I did not have the passports to turn in, I would never have been freed because he said I was a flight risk. He was also looking for my jewelry. He wanted to leave me with nothing,

without any means of support. However, after he finished looking, he left, leaving the children with the housekeeper. He did not care to take them with him. And now I have to pay for a lawyer to defend me.

When I finished dinner, I went to my closet to try to figure out where my American passport was since it was not where I kept all the passports. My daughters had already taken the rest of them in. I searched my two-story closet but could not find it. I was getting desperate. I still had tomorrow, but was not going to sleep well if I did not find it now. I decided to look inside every handbag, when it occurred to me that the handbag I used the day of the flight to Colombia was the pinkish Prada. There it was along with my passport! Thank God! Thank you, Jesus. Thank you. I kissed it.

I wonder what Alejandro would think if he knew he was so close but could not find it.

That night I slept with my son, the youngest of my children. I hugged him hard. Ever since his father left, JD moved into my bedroom. Once he was sleeping, I started to cry. I was in my bed, in my house. I never wanted to ever again sleep in that place. But a thought came to me: "My God! I could end up there for years!"

I cried harder and suddenly started to call for my mom. I needed my mother.

Is there ever a moment in life when you stop needing your mother? I thanked God I still had her. My father has been gone since 1999. At that moment I decided to bring her over to stay with us.

The next day I rested. I was exhausted. My lawyers called to make sure I had the American passport for Thursday. My brother also needed to go there to sign as a responsible person for me.

I spoke with my family lawyers and informed them of what Alejandro had taken from the house. They told me that

Alejandro now wanted the children and the right to live in the house. My lawyers wrote a letter requesting everything and advising his lawyers that Alejandro was not to be at the house ever again. However, he never respected court orders. He acted like he was above the law and maybe he was because no one ever punished him.

On Thursday, all of my lawyers (criminal and family), my brother and Alejandro went to court. I waited at my lawyer's office.

Alejandro said he did not have the Venezuelan passport. To which my lawyer said, probably he already shredded it! His lawyer insisted to the judge that I was a flight risk and should not be left free—that I should be back in prison to await trial there!

How could he? He knows I did nothing and I am the mother of his children.

The best way to defend yourself is by staying free. You find a way. You are free to talk with family and the lawyers; you are free to find ways to pay for your defense. Alejandro withdrew all the money from our bank accounts, leaving me penniless.

Ultimately, I was free to brainstorm with my lawyers. But in prison? Forget it! And prison was a card he was going to wave at the family judge every second. As he did with this charge.

And that is what Alejandro was trying to do. Trying as best as he could to lock me up. But God was on my side and the side of the truth. My lawyers turned in the American passport and that was enough for the judge. I proved I did not have the Venezuelan passport with all the motions presented by my family lawyers.

José, his brother, also was there. Funny, because they had not had a relationship ever since he got married. Now, they are best buddies. And José is missing work often to be with Alejandro. As usual, José was hitting on one of Alejandro's female criminal lawyers. The people in his family are all the same. My brother

told me everything in the afternoon, including how Alejandro and his lawyers—even after everyone left court—were working in the Federal Building trying to get me locked up.

One of his lawyers on a previous occasion told me: “Carmen, get out of this marriage. I have seen many women ruining their lives because of a man like him.”

Not only did she know whom she was defending, but also now she was helping him ruin my life and wrongfully put me in prison just as she had warned me about. Today 75% of women in jail are victims of domestic violence. Many do not live to see another day.

By Friday I met with my legal team. That is everybody: family lawyers and criminal lawyers. “My God, this divorce is becoming so expensive. Where am I going to get the money to pay for this?” I asked myself while sitting there. It was all part of Alejandro’s master plan. If I could not pay the lawyers, then I could not defend myself from prison or get what was rightfully mine in the divorce. In the end, what he wanted was to keep it all and not have to split the marital estate with me. All we have made together. He was a medical student when we met and he did not come from money. His father was a Lebanese immigrant and his mother was his father’s secretary.

Once in prison, I would lose all my rights and, while I was locked up, he would leave me with nothing, not even my credibility. I knew too much about him. Alejandro could not risk that, because he did not know where his illegal Venezuelan passport was. My own children would never see me again. And he would destroy them. My oldest daughter said Kamee would commit suicide in her father’s “care,” and she and JD would end up in juvenile prison. Alexandra saw it clearly. It broke my heart that my beautiful children had to go through this.

I prayed and prayed, asking God to help me.

My family lawyer looked at me in the meeting and said: “Well, this divorce just hit the target of half a million dollars or

more with the indictment. Carmen, do you have the funds for this or a rich boyfriend or some money stacked somewhere?”

“I will find a way,” I whispered.

Some money stacked somewhere? All he wanted was to get his hands on it and leave me with no means—as he ended up doing. He took over \$400,000 for less than three days in court and six months of work. When he got all of the money he could from me, he fired me. Could he be part of Alejandro’s master plan?

With all that happened to me, I came to realize how people lost respect for me. Not only that, they felt they could abuse me. Because they knew that if I acted out, it could prove Alejandro’s version of the story.

My lawyer talked about the case. He told the team it was a silly charge and more than likely he would be able to get it dropped. He also said that if it fell in the court of one of those older male judges, it would be dropped. However, I ended up in the court of a female judge for whom every case merited a trial—she never let a case go away. Everyone had to go to court or settle with the government. How scary!

I started to deal with my divorce and this charge at the same time. My life was so complicated.

I wondered what would have happened if I had not filed for divorce. The answer came months later when listening to recordings I made before my divorce of conversations with Alejandro to have them translated into English. In one of them he said: “You are going to prison, Carmen. You are a felon. Don’t worry—I will take the children to visit you once a year.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “I did nothing!”

“Tell that to the judge,” Alejandro replied laughing.

This happened right after the airplane incident, when my lawyers thought there was never going to be a charge. It was a discussion between Alejandro and me. My lawyers said it was a domestic dispute and the maximum the airline could do was

fine us. But that was even before everybody knew the airplane returned due to weather. They were never going to fine me. I then understood that Alejandro was already talking with someone at the FBI. That is why two months before the indictment he already knew I would be indicted. Had he planned this?

Later, I read his interview with the FBI, full of lies. He even said I had mental problems. How could he? He was my husband. Was not he supposed to protect me?

I was lonely and weak. I was full of fear. I was even afraid of my shadow. I had lost all confidence and hope for living. I was afraid to drive. I could not afford to get pulled over. One day, I got pulled over for changing lanes. Oh, my God, no! I was on my way to meet my lawyer with my daughter Kamee. I almost had a panic attack. Kamee was trying to calm me down while the officer took my driver's license. "This is it," I thought to myself. He is going to see in the computer I am on bond. The officer came back to the car and told me a long story of his sacrifices as an officer and gave me a warning.

I arrived at my lawyer's office devastated. When I showed him the warning, he said, "This is nothing. Calm down. You are a cry-baby."

"Calm down? Do you know what I am risking here?"

"But this is nothing, Carmen."

Well, it was something to me while it was happening.

I had lost so much weight that I looked sick. But I had to be strong for my children. My mother came, and finally I had a shoulder to cry on. She did not know anything about the abuse because I had never told her. Just as I had never told anybody. How could I? My mother and friends would hate him. Victims always stay silent.

I was trying to fix my marriage for my family's sake. I could not reveal such a thing because I was expecting this to go away.

I just told my mother once that I was having problems with Alejandro. We were both in Venezuela. I told her about the

cheating—that, I could tell her! I wanted her advice on what to do. My mother told me to fix it.

“Carmen María, this is probably a phase. It will pass. Are you going to destroy your family for that? Fix it!”

It was the common consensus for cheating... fix it! Even my friends told me that. But they did not know about the abuse.

In fact, the cheating and abuse went hand in hand. The more he cheated, the worse the abuse got. The more I told him his behavior was going to end in divorce, the worse his abuse got.

As soon as my mother was in Houston, I sat down and started explaining everything that had happened: the abuse, the plane incident, even the first and second setups.

My mother, who knows her children and how she raised us, started to cry.

“I cannot believe this has happened. What happened to him? Why does he want to hurt you so badly? You are the mother of his children. You two were so in love when you got married!”

Finally, she said: “Honey, God is good and knows the truth. He will help you, and you are going to be free, and a testament for many other women.”

My mother always expected me to be this bigger-than-life person. Every time she said something to cheer me up, it was a prophecy. Just like when I lost the Miss Universe pageant but came so close. When I encountered her after the event, she hugged me and said: “You were the winner, but our country needs you more!”

My days passed slowly and were very boring. I have worked since I was a kid right up until I filed for divorce. Alejandro fired me two days after the court ordered him to get out of the house.

All I did during the day was meet with lawyers. They were preparing for the first hearing in family court. Alejandro now wanted to take the children away from me. As soon as I recovered from the shock, and with my mother making sure I was well fed, I started going to the gym again. I had exercised all of my life

doing spinning, yoga, weight lifting and playing tennis. I always kept in shape, which helped me to maintain my body as it was the day after the Miss Universe pageant, even after having three children. Exercising made me feel good physically and mentally.

I lost most of my friends in Houston during the divorce. They just stopped talking to me! The people who embraced me were the ones I least expected. Friends who were not close to me before became my most loyal ones. And people I did not know at all embraced me when they learned what was going on. They reached out to me. I discovered what true friendship is all about at this point in my life. I realized that I wasted years in Houston with these “friends” who ran away at the time I needed them the most. Friendship should be just like marriage: “for better or for worse.”

I met wonderful, loving people during this time. Real people! I also discovered in this difficult time the value of family more than ever. My family surrounded me and covered me with love. My two sisters put their lives on hold to travel and be with me. My brothers were very protective. My children became closer to me than ever. I began to enjoy time with them that I was not able to before, when my time was dedicated to their father. And they liked it that now I was 120% with them. I did not have to sit on that black sofa with Alejandro from the time he came home until we went to bed. That sofa was my punishment! Not even my own children could talk to me during that time. I was his prisoner in my own home.

I learned many life lessons during that dark period. This proved to be the worst time of my life but also the most beautiful one!