

Introduction

To our kids' friends, we're just average soccer moms.

In truth, we're the wives of identical twin brothers who are almost single-handedly responsible for the meteoric rise of narcotics in the United States over the last two decades. From 1998 to 2008, our husbands, Pedro and Margarito Flores, Jr., grew to become high-level traffickers who blazed a drug-riddled trail across the Mexican border, dramatically increasing the volume of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamines, and marijuana passing into the United States, traveling through their hub in Chicago, and then fanning out to almost a dozen major cities across the United States and Canada.

In 2008, at the height of their criminal enterprise, Peter and Junior, as we know them and will call them in this book, made the difficult and life-changing decision to cooperate with the federal government, become informants, and ultimately turn themselves in. This was a family decision, made by the four of us while sitting at the kitchen table one night, and we did it to spare our children from the horrors of the recent Mexican drug wars, with their torture, murder, and complete destruction of far too many families and communities. More than that, we needed to stop the cycle of crime that our husbands were born into; we didn't want our children to see this as their future. We were never drug users, and our husbands weren't—and never had been—proud of their day-to-day work. They did it only because it was the only life they'd ever known. In their family, drugs weren't just normal and accepted, they were the trade their father taught them. Even in America—the supposed land of opportunity—when you're poor, uneducated, and Mexican, drug dealing is often thought to be the only way up.

After Peter and Junior became informants and told the US

Attorney's office every detail of their criminal career, they spent almost all of 2008 secretly recording conversations with the highest-level cartel members in Mexico, including notorious narcocriminal Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán. Their unprecedented cooperation helped secure the indictments of sixty-nine major drug figures, from the architects of border-crossing tunnels to the bosses of several cartels, who practically ran Mexico. Additionally, they assisted in eleven superseding indictments that netted over one hundred people. Today, not all of these people are in jail, but with our husbands' testimony, they soon will be. And some of the worst of the worst are dead, killed by the mouths they once helped feed.

In 2015, Peter and Junior were sentenced for their crimes and sent to off-the-radar federal Witness Security Unit prisons, and we went into hiding. We now live in undisclosed locations with our young children, visit our husbands on weekends and holidays, and lie to our friends and neighbors about who we are. While we sit in the carpool line waiting to pick up our kids, we wonder if it's time to change our cell phone numbers for the second time that month, fret over whether our husbands' upcoming testimony against a cartel head will cause a hitman to track us down, and try as hard as possible to imagine a distant future when our families will be reunited, under the watchful eye of the Witness Protection Program.

Even if you've never touched drugs, they've changed your life. While you may not realize it, narcotics are all around you, and they're altering the very fabric of the world we live in. The innocent-looking cashier at your neighborhood convenience store may be hiding a kilo of cocaine behind the counter, or the sweet, quiet lady you sit next to on a plane may have a balloon full of heroin in her stomach. The smiling class parent who greets you at your son's junior high school dance might secretly be battling an addiction to prescription painkillers. Our husbands stashed millions of dollars' worth of cocaine and heroin in a luxury townhouse down the street from Harpo Studios, and did the same at a home in tony Calabasas, a few miles from where the Kardashians live. Yet none of the neighbors suspected a thing. Or, look at us. We tell people we're just stay-at-home moms who are separated from our husbands, but in truth,

we were once on a first-name basis with men who put bullets into the backs of people's heads. While most mothers like us are hosting the Boy Scout troop on Sunday nights, we're coming back from a day visiting our husbands in federal prison.

You can blame a lot of things for the pervasiveness of drugs in this country, but the truth is that Peter and Junior Flores, two baby-faced Mexican American identical twin brothers from the West Side of Chicago, are behind much of it. While we knew—and know—them as the gentle, loving, mild-mannered men who treated us with nothing but love and respect, the law knows them as the most significant drug informants in US history.

As kids, Peter and Junior learned the business from their father. When they were in their teens, they started off dealing drugs on the streets of Little Village, the heavily Mexican area of Chicago around where we all grew up. Over the next few years, they established a contact in Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, and they graduated to become distributors rather than dealers. They set up their business, ran it like a well-oiled machine, and soon became Chicago's most prominent traffickers.

In Chicago, their business was strictly US-based. But when they fled to Mexico in 2003, they hit the international stage. Within a few years, they befriended the major cartel heads and became responsible for hundreds of tons of narcotics crossing the border and being distributed throughout the United States and Canada. Then they funneled \$2 billion in cash back into the hands of the Mexican cartels. In their five years living in Mexico, they weren't in any cartel, but they were the only American drug kingpins allowed to work directly with the bosses of the Sinaloa Cartel—headed by El Chapo and Ismael Zambada Garcia (aka "El Mayo")—and the Beltrán Leyva Organization (BLO), run by El Chapo's relatives and sworn enemies, Arturo and Alfredo ("Mochomo") Beltrán. They were wholesalers who bought vast volumes of narcotics from the cartels on credit and then arranged for its transport from Mexico to LA to Chicago. They took a business of tons and siphoned it into a business of kilos, then shipped the money back to their suppliers. Their operations didn't stop once the drugs reached the United States,

though; they kept men on the ground in Chicago to process the money and make sure the narcotics reached their destinations across the United States and Canada.

No one in Mexico did what they did—or as well as they did—so El Chapo Guzmán, El Mayo Zambada, and the Beltrán Leyva brothers peacefully vied for their attention. What better way to move billions of dollars in drugs into the United States than with the genius of twins who'd already built an empire there, who had intimate knowledge of US drug trafficking, and who, best of all, were American citizens living in Mexico?

In early 2008, though, everything changed. The Sinaloa Cartel went to war with the BLO, and the average number of drug-related murders per month in Mexico shot up from two hundred to five hundred. Junior and Peter were working in a culture where it became normal for heads to roll into neighborhood bars, right up to people's feet, or to hear of entire families shot to death on the streets of Guadalajara. Our husbands saw men lying in the hot sun, strapped to trees, and skinned alive. Suddenly, the drug trade in Mexico had become a grudge match on a macro scale. Sinaloa and the BLO wanted to destroy each other, and that meant killing everyone who was on the opposing side. Unfortunately for our husbands, they were the biggest assets of both cartels and, as such, caught between the two of them.

At this point—the height of their career—our husbands had warehouses, stash houses run by their many employees, and legitimate businesses—such as shipping companies—as fronts. Their financial ledgers were so sophisticated and extensive that when they turned them over to US authorities, the feds had to hire a team of forensic accountants to sort through them. An official said that they ran their business like a Fortune 500 company, and that if they hadn't been drug traffickers, they could have been CEOs of legitimate corporations. In the years 2006 to 2008, their peak, they transported between two thousand and three thousand pounds of cocaine each month. If you consider that a kilo is 2.2 pounds, that's almost \$50 million worth of cocaine a month. That's *\$600 million* a year.

But they were stuck between two warring factions, and they hated the example they were setting for their families. So they gave it all up.

When they did, they spent most of 2008 acting as informants, recording every business conversation they had and handing over massive shipments of drugs that had crossed the border on their watch. After several months, they voluntarily turned themselves in to Drug Enforcement Administration officials at the Guadalajara International Airport and were immediately flown back to Chicago. Over the next six years, they were held in protective custody. Because of their testimony, the city of Chicago named El Chapo as public enemy number 1, a title previously only given to Al Capone. On January 27, 2015, they were sentenced to fourteen years in a maximum security prison, with credit given for the six years they'd already served.

If we're lucky—and alive—we'll see them released in 2021, when our kids are practically grown up.

While they're behind bars, they can't tell the world about the horrors we all witnessed and the redemption we've sought. But we can.

We've remained silent in the eight long years since we kissed the beaches of Mexico goodbye, fleeing back to Chicago and toward our new, uncharted futures. Now, we can only trust each other, and we certainly can't tell anything to our neighbors or families. We've considered granting interviews to the press, but we wanted to hold off until we could tell our full stories, without interruption. We want you to hear what our families have gone through in our own words.

We're not writing this book to become rich. We've been wealthy beyond our wildest dreams, and the truth is, we don't miss it. If we'd wanted our lives to stay the same, we would have begged our husbands to stay in Mexico, where we drove luxury cars, lived in penthouses, vacationed on the beach in Puerto Vallarta whenever we felt like it, and had more cash than our families had ever dreamed of. But it was dirty money, with a trail of bodies behind it. Through it all, we would have done anything to have husbands with nine-to-five jobs like our fathers had. For different reasons, we fell in love with criminals, and we're not here to justify it, but we'd like to tell you how and why it happened.

Our lives are tarnished and secretive, and our pasts are shameful, but we have a story to tell. We've had greater access to the cartels than almost any other American citizen, so we can provide an unprecedented window into how they work, the damage they've caused, and why putting them out of business has proven so difficult.

As for the personal side of this story, we want to provide an unfiltered look into why people enter a life of crime. Unfortunately, for many, especially poor Mexican workers, it's the only choice they feel they have.

You're probably surprised we're still with our husbands, and trust us, we understand why. The idea of one of our kids marrying someone involved in any kind of illegal activity—let alone drug trafficking—is unthinkable. We're not asking that you like Peter and Junior, and, in fact, you may wish they could spend the rest of their lives in prison for all the harm they've caused. Neither of us is here to try to save our reputation. We just want to open up a window into our culture, show how it shaped us, and help you visualize a life we wouldn't wish on our worst enemies. Sometimes, stories don't have heroes. We just hope to illuminate how and why people are pulled into the drug trade, how it ruins them, and what it's like to live the rest of your life as a consequence of the mistakes you've made in the past.

PART ONE

THE AMERICAN
DREAM



CHAPTER 1

Olivia

I was born in 1975 in Pilsen, a predominantly Mexican-American neighborhood in Chicago's Lower West Side, about three miles southwest of the Loop.

Pilsen was about as inner city as you can get, and growing up I thought it was normal to see crowds of gangbangers on the corner near my house. I just assumed everywhere was like that. But now that I'm an adult, I get it. My husband and I had a conversation recently, and he was like, "Pilsen is a low-income neighborhood."

I said, "No, it's middle class."

"Babe, you were *not* middle class."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." I hadn't even realized it till he said something.

In my mind, we lived in a great neighborhood because my parents did everything they could to make my older sister and me feel comfortable. My grandfather came from Mexico when my dad was seven or eight, then saved enough money to bring his family over, too. The immigration process wasn't easy, and it took a few years because he chose to do it legally. But he was an honest, hardworking man, and he wouldn't have had it any other way.

Dad came to Pilsen not speaking any English, and as he grew up his mentality was the same as his dad's: work hard, buy property, and save, save, save. Dad was determined to be someone who would make his family proud, so he got his first job at fourteen, put in overtime, went back to school, and became a US citizen. Then he became a Chicago police officer and patrolled the streets all day, bravely wearing his blue uniform.

He and Mom wanted us to have the very best, so they sent my sister and me to Catholic school. We got braces in middle school when no one else had them. They saved all year, and when there was enough in the bank, they took us on family vacations to Disney World. By all accounts, we were living the American dream.

Like my dad, Mom always wanted more. She sold furs at Marshall Field's, so she got a discount on designer furniture, and she filled our house with it. Our home was small, but Mom was a great decorator, so I felt like we had money. Mom was also super smart. She was very driven, very determined, and so strong and powerful that she usually got whatever she wanted. Coming from my neighborhood, she was unique. Mom was Puerto Rican, had a gorgeous body, and held her head high; when she walked into a room, everybody knew she was there. She was always glamorous and well dressed—makeup and heels and great jewelry, even if it didn't cost much. Most importantly, though, she had a great heart to match. She always wanted something different from our neighborhood, and she dreamed of her family having a better life.

At home I was so shy, and I wasn't really able to be myself. My sister was my best friend and my biggest teacher; she had started going over multiplication tables with me when I was in kindergarten and she was in second grade. She took care of me, and I followed her around like her little shadow. I was such a daddy's girl; I clung to my dad and just showed my mom what she wanted to see or told her what she wanted to hear. She was such a firecracker and so controlling that if I crossed her, I wouldn't have heard the end of it. But outside the house, I was completely the opposite. I mimicked my mom—loud, impressive, and in charge. I was the cool girl in school, and I had my shit together.

I met my first boyfriend in middle school, and even though he was sixteen, he didn't mind that I was only fourteen. I had a great body and was so confident, trying to be all mature and sophisticated like my mom. I was a virgin, but I was so infatuated with him that I wasn't all that scared when we became sexually active early on. What did I know at fourteen? I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with this guy.

After a few months of being with him, I began throwing up and

missed my period. I didn't make much of it, though; I wasn't keeping track of stuff like that. But when I found out I was pregnant, I was shocked. I remember thinking, *How could this possibly happen to me?* I came from a good family, I studied like crazy, and I'd always gotten straight As.

Even though Mom pushed for open communication with her girls, I was too scared and embarrassed to open up to her. My sister always told her everything, but I was so shy I covered my ears every time Mom tried to talk about sex. That's why it took me forever to work up the courage to tell her I was pregnant. When I finally did, she was so hurt and disappointed.

"What do you mean?" she said. "You're only fifteen! I put you through private school! I gave you everything!"

When my dad found out, he hugged me tight, tears streaming down his face.

"Olivia, your mom told me you're pregnant. I love you, and I'd do anything for you. I don't want you to be scared. Whatever you decide to do, your mom and I are here."

My sister, who was away at college, even got on a Greyhound bus to come home to be with me. Mom and Dad had always made it clear that family was everything, so all of them were going to support me, no matter what.

In the back of my mind, though, having this baby was going to make me a *woman*. I was finally going to be my own person. My mom wasn't going to be able to run my life, and I wasn't going to have any rules. I was going to have my baby, finish school, and spend the rest of my life with my boyfriend. I was in love, I was mature, and my mom couldn't tell me a damn thing.

That didn't happen. After I had Xavier, I hated how strict my parents were, making me follow the same rules and giving me the same curfew. My boyfriend would come over and see our son, and my mom would scream at me, "You can't sit on his lap in my house! You can't be in the same room together alone!" Not one fucking thing had changed.

But thank God they hadn't—thank God I still had the stability of

home—because my boyfriend started to cheat on me. When I told him I wanted to break up, he punched me in the face. This was the first time anyone had ever put their hands on me. I lied to my parents and told them I'd gotten hit in the eye with a snowball, then I stayed with him for two more years because I thought I was doing the best thing for my son. Here I was, this supposedly strong, mature, teenage woman, and I was letting this man control me.

The person who finally saved me was Xavier, who was all of two years old. I couldn't let him see me falling apart, so I broke up with his dad and never looked back. I felt nothing but animosity toward my ex, but for the sake of my son, Mom always told me never to speak badly or negatively about him.

"If you put Xavier's father down, he'll feel like a failure. As a mother, it's your responsibility to always protect him."

My mom was really wise, and I respected her wishes. I didn't want to influence Xavier's feelings in any way, so I quickly learned to contain my feelings about his father. I wanted him to be the dad Xavier needed him to be, without my influence. It was the right thing to do.

My parents were pretty much saints those first few years with Xavier. I was working at Dunkin' Donuts or some other minimum wage job and spending my whole paycheck on diapers, trying so hard to be responsible, and Mom told me she'd put my son through private school once the time came. My dad became a real father figure to him, signing him up for T-ball and hanging out with him every chance he got. "He's my little man," he'd say, and then run off and put my son in his car seat so they could go to the park together. I'd always been my dad's baby girl, and he was just as sweet with my son.

Whether you're fifteen or forty, every mom wants what's best for her kids, but we're not perfect. We all have our breaking points. Toward the middle of high school, I had mine.

Just before I had Xavier, I'd begged my mom to enroll me in public school.

"It's a great high school," I said. "It's really changing. They have all these new programs, and I'll be closer to home for the baby."

For the first time in her life, my mom just gave in and let me have my way. Maybe she actually believed me, or maybe she was just tired of fighting. Either way, I think it was the worst decision she ever made.

That school was so ghetto. It was gang infested. It was drug infested. The Chicago PD patrolled it, and so many people brought knives to school that they installed metal detectors. Nobody *ever* went to class. Instead, they all went to daytime parties.

During my freshman and sophomore years, I'd been so responsible and avoided all of that. I'd been the first girl in my high school to start freshman year with a full-on belly, and since then I'd been working my butt off to be a good mom. I'd gone straight from school to work to home so I could put my baby to bed, but after a while, I just couldn't take it anymore. I'd always put my son first, but being young and selfish, I just wanted to make myself happy.

I started hanging out with the gangbangers and drug dealers, and all of a sudden, I was around nice cars, money, and jewelry. I loved every single bit of it. But when I'd get home, all Mom and I would do was fight, fight, fight.

"I raised you better than this," she'd say. "Xavier needs you!"

I'd turn it around on her and scream about how strict she'd always been with me. "What do you expect from me? I'm young, and I need to have a life, too. Besides, I'm still making straight As!" I might have had twenty absences from cutting school and hanging out at parties all day, but I was making good grades at that shithole school.

I thought I was the bomb, and no one could tell me otherwise. I was voted "Smartest," "Best Dressed," and "Most Popular" in my class, and I graduated in three years, at the young age of seventeen. I got a full ride to the University of Illinois at Chicago, and my parents couldn't have been happier. But after my second semester, I threw it all away. There was no way I was going to wait four long years until I started making money, so I told my parents that I was enrolling in cosmetology school.

"It's my dream to open up a salon," I said, trying to sell them on the idea of me dropping out.

They were heartbroken. My sister was getting ready to graduate

college and was figuring out where to go to get her master's degree, and here I was, going to beauty school.

Before it was all said and done, my nine-month cosmetology program turned into two years. It just wasn't my priority; what I was seeing on the streets was too exciting for me to stay away. It wasn't the drugs; it was the money. Gangbangers have nice cars with rims, and diamond studs and expensive watches. They were bringing home mad cash, and it wasn't from Dunkin' Donuts. It was from the great state of California.

When I was seventeen, I started taking trips to California to smuggle weed. I'd hop on a bus and ride for two days out there, then a handful of guys and I would meet up with the connect. I'd watch them scoop up a few pounds of marijuana, put it into a potato sack, and then compress it with a machine. The weed would become a hard, square block, and they'd pass it over to me and let me put it into my suitcase. I'd get on a bus back home, and when I arrived, I'd collect around \$10,000. *I'm the hottest, richest girl in Chicago*, I thought.

I made a few trips like that and never had a problem. But on one trip back, I had to change buses in Denver. When I hopped off and tried to claim my suitcase, it wasn't there.

"It's on a different bus," the station agent said. "You'll have it in two days."

I just wanted to die. I ran out of the bus station as fast as I could, took a cab to the airport, and bought a one-way ticket back to Chicago. When I got home, I drove myself crazy trying to figure out how in the hell I was going to claim the stash I'd left behind. Then, I decided to just go for it. Two days later I showed up to the Greyhound station with my ID in hand and picked up my load, no questions asked.

I was fearless, and people started to respect me for it. Traffickers looked at me and said, "That girl knows her shit," so they decided to trust me and give me a little promotion. When one of them asked me to travel to Mexico and drive some weed back in the gas tank of my car, I didn't hesitate to say yes.

Before I'd leave town, I'd lie and tell my parents I was staying at a girlfriend's house. For all they knew I was just hanging out with my

friends, drinking and partying the day away while they were taking care of Xavier. Mom was always furious.

“When the hell are you coming back?” she’d yell.

“In a few days.”

There was no “I’ll miss you,” or “Thank you for taking care of my son while I’m away.” Soon, she stopped talking to me altogether, and my only communication with Xavier was through my dad. It broke his heart, and deep down, it broke mine, too.

I told myself I was making money to take care of my son, but really, it was for me. All I cared about was having my freedom and earning a better, faster, shinier life, which came from getting rich. On the streets I’d been hanging out on, money came from one place: drugs.

I went to Mexico a handful of times for the next year or so. Most of the time things went well, but I did run into a few problems along the way. On one trip, my friend Maria and I were interrogated for hours while border patrol put my car on a lift and tried to remove the gas tank. Maria tried to blame it on me, saying, “It’s not my car, it’s hers.” I don’t know if it was sheer determination or if I could just talk myself out of anything, but they let us go. I was so furious at Maria I made her get out on the side of the highway next to the road kill so she could hitchhike home. After about fifteen minutes, I started to feel bad, but more than that, I was worried about her snitching. Even though I turned around and picked her up, I sent her a clear message: *Don’t mess with me.*

I was making real money, so I bought a black SUV with gold rims and a gold Rolex to match. I started walking around in those Versace gold coin silk shirts. All those nice things and all that power got to my head, and I began demanding more control. I wanted in. I recruited my own drivers and got my own crew. On weekdays I’d put together my trips, call up my drivers, and fly down to Mexico. I’d pay them \$10,000 and keep all the profit. If I wasn’t below the border, my weekends were all about going to clubs, popping bottles, and networking. It was validation that I was big time.

Before one trip, my driver stood me up. *I could do this in my sleep*, I said to myself, and I decided to do the job on my own.

Sure enough, I got caught. I was pulled over at a roadblock—I don't know if it was random, if I looked suspicious, or if someone had tipped them off—but it was clear I wasn't getting off this time.

"I don't have anything," I said.

"Step to the side." There weren't just police officers there, there were federal agents, too, and they looked serious.

I watched one of the *federales* drive my car to the side of the road, just like they had that time with Maria. He put my car on the lift and spent the next hour or so trying to pull the tank down.

"I told you, I don't have anything." I was starting to get nervous, but I tried to play it cool.

I heard some rattling and clanking around, and the *federale* pulled down the tank.

Shit, this is it, I thought. Game over.

He pulled a brick of weed out of my gas tank, held it above his head, then tossed it toward another agent. Then he peeled off his gloves, came toward me, pulled my arms behind me, and cuffed me.

I don't think I knew what scared was till that moment. All that pride, all that defiance against my mom, all the hours and hours I'd spent at clubs rather than home with Xavier, all the diamonds and bottles of champagne I'd bought over the last year. It had all come to this. What the fuck had I been thinking?

The agent shoved me into the car and walked away. Looking through the window, I watched him enter a little glassed-in booth nearby, where there were a few other *federales*. But instead of working, these dudes had their faces planted on the table, doing lines of coke. After a few minutes, two of them left the booth. One got behind the wheel of the car I was in and another slid into the backseat next to me. As we were driving, he reached over and touched my chest.

"Please don't hurt me," I said in English because my Spanish was terrible. All I could think was, *Oh my God, they're going to rape me.*

He placed his palm on my heart, leaned over, and looked me in the eyes.

"Your heart isn't even racing. You must not be scared. But you should

be; I'm not going to hurt you, but someone else will. You're going to prison for a very long time."

I was too ashamed to call my parents, so I reached out to my sister. She hopped on a plane immediately and made it just in time for sentencing, which happened within seventy-two hours of my arrest. When the judge sentenced me, she was right by my side.

I got ten years in a maximum security prison.

Mexican prison is about as bad as you'd imagine it to be, especially if you're a scared little girl like I was. The living conditions were unimaginably filthy and disgusting, and being American in a third world prison was torture every single day. I slept on a cement bed surrounded by cement walls. There was no glass on the windows, only bars, so roaches, mice, spiders, and sometimes even cats crept in at night. I ate black beans with my hands because they wouldn't give us spoons, and the water they made us drink from the faucets was contaminated, dirty, and brown. I vomited or had diarrhea pretty much every single day. On Thanksgiving, we got a real feast, which was five animal crackers and tea, and I thought it was the best thing in the whole fucking world.

Three months passed slowly, and I missed Xavier so much it burned. I was given one phone call a month, and I mustered up the courage to call my parents.

"I'm sorry. I'm so ashamed. I'm just so sorry."

"It's okay, baby, we love you. You have to stay strong."

After my sister got back from Mexico, she felt guilty leaving me. Knowing I was suffering laid so heavy on her heart that she slept on the cold tile floor, so she could understand my pain. But all of my family's love and support made me feel unworthy. I regretted everything I'd put them through, and I hated myself for covering my ears instead of listening to my mom.

Every night, I got on my knees and prayed to the Virgin Mary. "Please, get me out of here," I'd cry and plead. I made all kinds of promises to her. "I'll change my life. I'll be a good mother." On the concrete floor, my knees turned raw and bled, but I just kept praying, every single night.

Before I'd gone to prison I'd met a guy named Leo who owned a

body shop. I had a nice car, with rims on it, really nice and shiny. When I took it to get painted, I met Leo, and he was into me right away. I was very independent. I had my own money. I had this nice car and was living the life. For a girl in our neighborhood, that was rare. Leo didn't talk down to me; he was respectful and totally impressive. Pretty soon, we were dating.

I knew he was a drug dealer because I'd gone to his condo and had seen a triple-beam scale and money counter, but I didn't care. I liked his nice car and his nice house, and he had a business that my parents actually believed was real. He was polite and well mannered, and he dressed well, not super flashy like the gangbangers I used to hang out with when I was younger.

A few months into my prison sentence, Leo came to visit, unannounced.

"Oh my God, Leo, what are you doing here?" I said when I saw him. I'd thought a little bit about him, but I hadn't used my one call a month on him, much less asked him to come down. We'd *just* started dating. But here was this real, live person from home, not a coked up *federale* or a perverted prison guard. He was like a vision of the Holy Mother herself.

Leo stayed for a month and visited me every weekend. He had the warden on payroll, so he even managed to pull off conjugal visits once a week. I was in the federal side of the prison, which was better than the state side, where all the killers and thieves were. In my section there were a bunch of older boss ladies who were in for drugs, and Leo really took to them. He'd bring us lobster and steak and matching sneakers, and we'd hang out together like a big family. It almost felt like a scene from *Goodfellas*. I knew he was paying off the prison guards to make every visit as long as possible, but if that's the way things worked, that's the way it would be. In the position I was in, Leo was in charge.

One weekend, he made an announcement. "I paid your judge \$250,000, and he's letting you go."

Just like that, I was gonna get the hell out of there.

No one had ever done anything like that for me, so I was shocked. I'd spent six months in that shithole, and I practically sprinted out of there

the day they let me go. Leo had saved me, giving me that second chance to become a better person.

I married him after he whisked me away from Mexican prison, not because I loved him, but because I loved what he'd done for me. I felt obligated. What had I done to deserve this? What hadn't I done, really? Maybe I'd spent my life reacting to a mom who I thought was too strict, or maybe there was too much of her brashness in me. But all I know is that it all came down to wanting a bigger, better life, one that was far away from a single family home off the Blue Line in Pilsen. I wanted to open a hair salon one day, but that didn't guarantee me a life outside the ghetto. Like way too many people I knew, I'd turned to drugs. They were just how people got money in our neighborhood. You had to stick bricks of weed in your gas tank, deal it on the street, or hook up with a guy like Leo to be able to afford more than what a paycheck from Dunkin' Donuts got you.

We had a big, beautiful wedding and went to Hawaii for our honeymoon. I'd wanted to protect my parents from the truth about why I'd gotten out of prison early, so I'd told them that Leo had hired an attorney in Mexico, who'd successfully appealed my case. In reality, it was Leo's money that actually got me out. My parents thought he was the best thing to ever happen to me. They thought Leo was legitimate. But his body shop? It was just a front.

Our problems started almost immediately. Leo became so controlling, refusing to let me go out with my cousins or girlfriends. He put a recording device under the driver's seat of my brand new Lexus and installed a tracking device in it. One night he followed me to a salsa club with my girlfriends and threw a drink at me when I refused to leave with him. My face, my hair, my white dress and jewelry were all soaked, and I told myself I wouldn't go home with him, but I did. After all, I had everything I thought I'd always wanted. Leo was going to help me get ahead in the world. With him, I could go back to school and open my salon. With him, I was wearing Versace and Chanel, and going to Bulls championship games, with courtside seats. I'd seen Michael Jordan get

his fifth and sixth rings! For a girl from Pilsen who had a kid at fifteen, that's a dream come true.

Yet my husband was turning into a monster right before my eyes.

Then there was Xavier. He'd just enrolled at a great school, and I was finally acting like the mom I should have been all along. Yet he had to see me with some asshole.

My parents had just celebrated their silver wedding anniversary. Twenty-five years, and they still had an incredible relationship that they worked at every day. I believed marriage was supposed to last forever, and I wanted to make it work. But the more I tried, the more controlling Leo became. We kept up appearances, hired an architect, and started to build this big, beautiful house in the suburbs. It was my dream. I thought, *If I can have that, I can deal with his bullshit, right?* Sure. We moved into my parents' lower level while it was under construction, and one morning, while Leo was walking out the door to take Xavier to school, the feds appeared. They were there for him. Right in front of my poor son, they cuffed Leo and dragged him to the squad car. Xavier started to scream, which made my mom run downstairs.

"Oh my God, they're taking Leo!" I heard her say. She was frantic. "What are you doing in my house? Why are you taking my son-in-law?" Of course, she had no idea he was a dealer.

I was still downstairs, and I was like, *Oh, shit*. I spent the next ten minutes running around the basement like a chicken with its head cut off, ripping up every scrap of paper and receipt I could find. I didn't want the feds to find out anything more than they knew already.

Of course, it wasn't enough because they had everything they needed. Leo was charged with conspiracy to distribute drugs and money laundering, and the feds seized our house, a million dollars in jewelry, our Navigator and Lexus, and a bunch of our assets. The case against Leo was rock solid. He was going to go away for a long time.

I tried to be supportive, to be a good wife, and I visited him in prison every chance I got. He could call as much as he wanted, too—there was no three-hundred-minute limit at that time. He rang me nonstop and was just as controlling as he'd been when he wasn't locked away.

I wasn't just embarrassed; I was crushed. I'd never wanted to hurt my parents, yet I'd broken their hearts again. My dad had trusted me, and I'd disrespected and betrayed him by letting a drug dealer come into his home, his sanctuary. For the first time in her life, my mom was at a loss for words, but her silence said enough.

Leo sat in prison with no house and a wife he couldn't really control from behind bars, and he felt like he had nothing else to lose. He realized that if he didn't work with the authorities he might spend even more time in jail, so he decided to cooperate with them.

I screamed at him when I found out. "You what? How dare you!" In my world, being a snitch was the worst possible thing you could be. It was the ultimate betrayal of everything you stood for and made you less than a person.

"I had to," he said. "Things are only going to get worse for me if I don't."

"You fucking rat," I said. "I just cannot be with you. I don't respect you. You knew exactly what you were involved in. You're not a man. I have more balls than you."

I left him that day and never went back. I wanted nothing more to do with him, and I decided to file for divorce. Stalking me had been bad, and tossing a drink on me had been worse. But being a snitch was just too much. Was it an excuse for me to leave him? Probably. But it was just the last fucking straw for me.

And apparently, it was soon going to be the last straw for him, too.

Luckily, at that point, I'd already moved on.