

CHAPTER 1

NOT YOUR AVERAGE SURVIVOR

THEY SAY THE law is blind, but I didn't realize it also had hearing loss, short-term memory issues, and a nasty habit of blaming the victim. Let's just say I didn't expect to become a cautionary tale.

I'm not your average survivor.

I'm a public interest lawyer and Latina daughter of immigrants who has faced a thousand kinds of silence. I've worked at Harvard Law School, chaired a Human Rights Commission, and spent my career fighting for people often forgotten. I know the system—hell, I believed in it. Fiercely. Naively.

I never imagined I would end up on the other side of the aisle—where clients stand—bleeding out emotionally in a custody war zone, fighting for my kid, my sanity, and my dignity. I especially didn't expect my abuser to be a fellow progressive—fluent in feminist theory, in activist lingo, and in using all of it to gaslight me and charm everyone else.

Abusers don't always wear trucker hats and rant about “traditional family values” somewhere deep in MAGA country. Sometimes, they wear business suits, drive Teslas, quote Cornel West, and quietly dismantle your life—armed with charm, social capital, and flawless legal strategy.

This isn't the story most people picture when they think of domestic violence. It doesn't fit the Lifetime movie mold. There are no bruises, broken bones, or dramatic 911 rescues. *What there is?* Years of psychological warfare, legal manipulation, financial abuse, and a system that almost swallowed me whole.

But here's the part that matters most: despite every institutional failure, I survived. I fought back. I won sole custody of my kid. I relocated out of state, away from where I once lived with my abuser. I rebuilt. I remarried. And I wrote this memoir with bags under my eyes and a heavy spoonful of truth serum.

I know I'm not the only one living this impossible script. Many others wear this same hat.

What follows isn't a neat story wrapped up in a pretty bow. It's not always tidy, pressed, and perfect. It's real—angry, raw, and sometimes darkly funny. Humor was one of the few things I refused to write off during the divorce. It became my lifeline.

This is a survivor's story told by a lawyer who knows how the game is rigged. It's a middle finger to silence, and a warning flare to anyone who still thinks justice is neutral—it's not.

So, yeah—welcome to the ride. Buckle up.

There are no clean victories here. But there is my lived truth. And sometimes, that's the most radical thing we have, especially when the system would rather you shut up and disappear.

I refuse to be erased.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

YOU'LL NOTICE I don't name my abuser. That's not an oversight—it's an editorial, legal, and psychological choice. He doesn't get a name or a face. He holds as much relevance to this story as last year's expired bar card. This isn't his story—it's about reclaiming space and evicting a walking red flag from the real estate of my mind.

Survivors have many reasons for not naming their perpetrators—legal blowback, cultural retaliation, personal safety, or simply because the fallout isn't worth it. Just ask actor Evan Rachel Wood, who exposed her ex's abuse in an HBO documentary—and then faced a defamation lawsuit.

In today's world, as more victims find the courage to speak out, the typical response feels like punishment—a tort case waiting to happen. Look at politicians, professional athletes, music moguls, and film stars—they all have defamation lawsuits plastered across the news headlines. So, it's not lost on me that if you suggest your ex-partner wasn't exactly Prince Charming, you had better lawyer up and start a GoFundMe. It's scary.

Then, there are nondisclosure agreements or NDAs. Those are like sticks of dynamite tucked into divorce settlements that say: *"You can leave him, but you can't say why to anyone."* When Pete Hegseth was floated for Secretary of Defense, his ex-wife couldn't speak about the abuse she endured; her sister had to do it for her. Nothing screams "functioning democracy" like

a survivor who is gagged while the perpetrator angles for national security clearance.

I know this all too well because my abuser insisted on an NDA. But NDAs are unconscionable, used as tools of silence and control in divorce cases involving domestic violence. They're legal documents disguised as settlements, designed to suppress the truth. And it wasn't just an NDA—I was also pressured to sign a non-disparagement agreement and a waiver of tort claims, to boot. He made sure to get the complete starter kit for gagging me and stripping me of my rights.

This provided him the perfect opportunity to rebrand himself without the inconvenience of a counter voice—a stage to himself for maximum believability.

Then, cultural and religious pressures also enforce silence. In some communities, preserving family honor takes precedence over protecting victims; I was never good at playing that role. From the start, I tested the waters—sharing bits and pieces of my story. Now, I'm telling it all.

Choosing not to name my ex is both strategic and healing, as naming him would be like handing over a key to a space he no longer occupies. When I filed for a domestic violence restraining order, the court turned us into the “Petitioner” and the “Respondent.” Functional? Sure. Satisfying? Not even close.

So, I rebranded him. If I had to rate him like an Uber driver, the review would be: *One star. Do not recommend. Complete asshole.*

And just like that, “Asshole” became his official title in my mind.

It's not legally binding, but it's painfully accurate.

CHAPTER 3

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

THERE WAS ME before Asshole entered the picture. I was once whole, driven, and living my dream. I earned my way to Brown

University on a full scholarship, where I concentrated in Latin American studies and political science. I didn't get to Brown because someone opened a door for me: I kicked it open with tenacity, hard work, and determination.

I'm the daughter of a restaurant server and domestic worker, and I carry their strength in my bones. My mom's calloused hands and my dad's quiet endurance taught me more than any textbook ever could. Education wasn't only a path out of poverty and injustice—it was a rebellion and a refusal to stay invisible.

Every university degree, every courtroom, and every word I write is a tribute to them and a challenge to the institutions that told us we didn't belong.

At Brown, I soaked up knowledge like oxygen. I read about revolutions, dictatorships, and liberation theology. I felt the spark of activism stirring in me and studied abroad in Mexico and Costa Rica, and those months were transformative. I learned Latin American history not just from books but by walking colonial streets, speaking Spanish, and connecting with people whose stories echoed parts of my own. I felt both rooted and expansive, grounded in identity yet wide open to the world.

After graduating from college, I continued to travel, and each journey added layers to my understanding of inequality. When I entered

Northeastern University School of Law, I wasn't an idealist without direction. I knew that I wanted to dismantle oppressive systems and fight for low-income people like my parents. Justice would be my compass.

Law school wasn't easy, but I worked hard and took classes that prepared me for a career in public interest law, all while juggling internships, legal clinics, and volunteer work. By the time I graduated, I had logged more pro bono hours than most students ever considered, gaining extensive experience.

I didn't party my way through law school; I strategized. Every break, I worked. First, I interned at the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund in Chicago, a leading civil rights organization, followed by the Center for Reproductive Law in New York, where I worked on cases to protect a woman's fundamental right to choose. I externed for U.S. District Court Chief Judge Thelton E. Henderson in San Francisco, one of the first Black federal judges appointed to the bench by President Jimmy Carter. And I clerked at a union-side labor firm in L.A. I was building an eclectic legal portfolio with these efforts.

My first job out of law school was a mission-driven one. I earned an Equal Justice Works Fellowship at the Legal Aid Society in New York, which enabled me to provide legal advice to immigrants in East Harlem and Washington Heights. I accomplished this while living on my own, paying back my student loans, and proving myself in spaces not traditionally accessible to people like me. I was doing it, and I was thriving.

I built a career out of conviction and resilience in New York and L.A., equipped with big dreams for how my life would be. My goals were to travel, have a stable home of my own, financial stability, and find a romantic partner who didn't solely tolerate my ambition but matched it. Sure, I wanted love, but not at the expense of losing my identity. I had more important things to accomplish.

Then Asshole came along. *Mr. Social Justice.*

I was already building a life before he ever showed up—proof that I had something worth destroying. That's precisely why he targeted me.

Predators aren't drawn to weakness; they're drawn to light. And back then, I wasn't just shining; I was blazing.

The best part? That fire never went out despite his abuse. It flickered, dimmed, and sometimes hid under the ashes. But it never died. The truth is that nobody can steal your light forever. Eventually, if you keep going, you'll remember who you are. You'll rise, rebuild, and blaze once again.

That fire is what led me to women like Maria—an immigration client from Central America who reminded me why the fight was always worth it.