

SEVENTEEN

SECRET STORM

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The story of what brought me to prison is one of abuse. I lived with domestic violence for many years. I could see no way out as I was blinded by fear—fear of breaking up my family, fear of failing in my marriage, fear of my husband. My story is one of many behind these walls. Currently, the Wyoming Women’s Center does not offer domestic violence support groups or classes to teach the skills necessary to educate and empower women in order to prevent them from continuing this sort of relationship. It is what I call a secret storm.

Over the last 35 years women have represented the fastest growing prison population in America. For most of us this is a direct result of some form of abuse. Domestic violence is a problem in every community. It is made worse by denial and victim-shaming, which in turn shuts us down, making way for the secret storm. We should not feel ashamed. We should be understood and helped. We need the skills to understand the cycle of abuse. There are many inmates that share my story, struggles, heartaches, and pain.

My biggest fear is for my daughter. I don’t want the cycle of abuse to go on. I was never raised in an abusive home. I was raised with love and had the freedom to become whatever I wanted to be. I need help in order to understand why I allowed the abuse to happen in my life. I would also like to possess the tools and skills needed in order to be an advocate for other victims of domestic violence, both inside and outside of prison. This is a passion that burns inside of me daily. I don’t want to go back to society and not be able to help others. I don’t want to lose my life or for anyone else to lose theirs. I don’t want to become the abused woman who killed her husband. I don’t want to see another woman forsake her

safety. I don't want another woman and her children to live a life of unspoken mental, emotional and physical abuse.

I was born in Deadwood, South Dakota. My family moved to Denver, Colorado when I was a child. I would go to Spearfish, South Dakota every summer break. My brother and I loved spending time with our grandfather who worked in graveyards at Homestake Mining in Lead, South Dakota. My grandfather was a good man to my brother and I. He bought us baby pigs and calves, and we got to raise them for money at the end of the summer. One summer he bought us a horse. Her name was Gypsy. She was a dapple grey mare. I rode her all over the place. I hated to leave her when summer was over.

One summer my grandpa moved to a 25 acres farm between Belle Fourche and Spearfish. It was so beautiful. I never wanted to leave there. I've never felt as at home as I did in that place in my life. I met my first boyfriend and my best friend that summer also. Everything was so magical. My best friend then is still my best friend over 40 years later. I can still count on her.

I wish I would have asked her for help when I knew I was way over my head in both of my marriages. I just didn't want to bother her with my problems.

My first love ended up not being the man I thought he was. Something inside of him shut down. My first husband, Elwood, and I tried to make things work. But so much happened to us. We really had no support. No one wanted us together. Not even the church where our kids went. My parents did, but they didn't know the whole story. I felt so alone. I had no one to help me or guide me.

Elwood beat me so bad one night. He scared me like no other. He beat me and then got his pistol. I was shaking so bad. I had my first son, Oscar, on one side of me and my third son, J.J., on the other. Later on, I found out my youngest son was behind me and my second oldest son was hiding. Their dad was yelling and calling me names, waving his gun. He then shot it off into the floor scaring us all. My son, Oscar, got the gun by begging his dad for it.

After Oscar got the gun, Elwood grabbed me by my hair and threw me off the deck, onto my flowers.

At that moment I thought for sure he was going to kill me. By the time he came off the porch I was barely getting up. He grabbed a hold of my hair again and began kicking me with his steel-toed boots. Dragging me all over our yard in front of the kids and neighbors. Hitting me and yelling. God only knew how I wished I was dead at that moment. He always made promises not to ever drink or hit me again. I felt so lost inside of myself. This man promised to love and honor me. Instead, he turned his back on me, despite my forgiveness of the affair he had for over two years. After all the deceit and abuse I took, I was beat down to nothing but shame and embarrassment.

Maybe I need to go back to when I was 15 years old. I was living in Denver, going to Thomas Jefferson High. I ended up in the wrong crowd of people. I started ditching school with three other friends of mine, so we could go see one of my friends' boyfriends, L.B. I will never forget him. He gave me the creeps, and he was the beginning of my secret storm.

We were all were at his apartment in the Five Points neighborhood of Denver, which wasn't a very good neighborhood at the time. There was a lot of drugs and many other things going on down there. I didn't want to be there. I wanted to leave, but I never got that chance for a few days. The biggest nightmare of my life was just beginning. What happened in that apartment took what innocence I had left and so much more away from me.

That night my friend's mom showed up and took her home. She didn't know us other girls were there because we were hiding. We didn't want to get caught and in trouble. What a big mistake that was for all of us. After my friend's mom took her, we were going to leave, but her boyfriend, L.B., wouldn't let us go. He pulled out a pistol and told us we were not going anywhere. He put me in the closet and closed the door. I was so scared. I didn't know what was going to happen to us. When I cried, he told me to shut up or he'd kill me. So many thoughts kept running through my head.

Soon after, the real terror began. He came into the closet and threatened me and told me he would kill the other two girls and my family if I ever told anyone about what he was going to do to me. He raped me over and over for days. I don't even know how many days. I tell myself three days, maybe to soften the pain I was carrying or maybe the fear I had made me forget. To this day I still don't know how long I was there.

We only got away because my friend showed up, but when he let us go, he told us that he knew who we were and where we lived. That he would kill us all and our families. Then he showed us his gun again, and I believed him. All I wanted to do was forget all of the terror I felt from him. I was lost. When all was calm, I ended up moving in with my grandfather in order to feel safe again.

L.B. took so much away from me and left me with a secret. I kept what happened to me from everyone, including my first husband. One time we went to Denver to see my family. My brother came over to my parents' house and wanted us to go to K-mart. While we were there I saw L.B. I almost lost it. I didn't know which way was out. I couldn't get out of there fast enough. No one knew why I wanted to leave. I just said I was sick, which wasn't a complete lie. I was more than sick. I was so full of terror. I didn't want to be recognized and put my kids in harm's way.

I wish I hadn't held onto this secret, but I was young and scared. My life changed again. I started feeling worthless, like I wasn't a very good person. I felt dirty, and I didn't want anyone to know how dirty I was. I would have told Elwood how I felt and what had happened to me, but I didn't trust him after he had his affair. I felt I deserved whatever happened to me, both with my friend's boyfriend and in our marriage. My husband was allowed to abuse me. I accepted it, as it was my punishment. I became angry and hateful because all of the hurt I had endured. I loved my children, but I wasn't kind to Elwood any longer. I started to blame him for all the pain I had inside me. The night he beat me in front of the kids, I had already shut down. I was confused and didn't know what to do. I just wanted to stop all the abuse I had endured.

What I didn't know was that my biggest storm was coming my way. Merrill was already in my life as a friend. I thought he was a good man raising his kids on his own. Wrong again. His ex-wife was abused by him too. She chose to stay away because of the way he treated her and what he put her through.

I tell you this, only as a warning—abusers know how to find their victims.

This man who I thought I loved more than anything was my last storm. The one I'm still healing from. My second husband.

Merril was so fun and made me laugh. I hadn't really laughed in who knows how long, and it felt good. I wasn't hurting or in pain anymore. He would take me dancing, and make me the most wonderful meals.

When I became pregnant, all was still going good. We had our troubles with each other's kids, but I loved them all and wanted what was best for them. Later I was sorry for all the pain they endured because of Merrill and me. While I with him, I worked in a small sawmill for three and a half years. I loved my job. I was a trimmer operator and helped pile wet lumber on what we called the "green chain." My boss and co-workers were really good people to work with. Even though the sawmill was physically challenging, we always joked and laughed with one another.

I was pregnant with my fifth child. My boss knew that I was going to have my baby girl any day. He would tease me about not calling him if I didn't show up for work. I worked until the day I had her. One Saturday, I woke up feeling off, but I promised my oldest son that I would be at his junior high wrestling match. I have three other sons who are also wrestlers. I always went to all their wrestling matches, so I wasn't going to let him down. I loved watching him excel and supporting him. After his match, I was pretty sure I was in labor.

I went to find him in the sea of people. When my husband and I found him, I told him I was in labor. My son was happy, not disappointed at all. He was happy he was going to be a big brother to his sister.

My husband, who wasn't happy with me for not telling him before the match that I wasn't feeling good, was a nervous wreck. I just wanted to get to the hospital in one piece, so I led him to believe it wasn't as bad as it really was. I did what I could to keep him calm, which in turn kept me calm for the next 60 miles to the hospital in South Dakota.

A week after I had my daughter, my husband and I went for a check-up with the doctor. On the way home, he back-handed me. I don't even know why, or I can't remember, I just know that was the beginning of the abuse, and it didn't stop. He was always sorry, but it got worse as time went on.

I remember one night I was going to leave. I'd had enough. When I tried to leave he wasn't going to let it happen. I was holding my daughter. When it was all over, I was hurt, but she was okay. My elbow was over-extended. It hurt for a very long time, until I had surgery to help it heal right, but I stayed with him. All because I didn't want to be a failure, again, in another relationship. I wouldn't listen to anyone either. I started to defend him and make all the excuses I could think of to stand up for him. He counted on that. He counted on the fear I had and for me to keep quiet. Talk about a secret with a storm brewing. It became very crazy for us. I felt I was getting sick in the head. He would tell me I was crazy and rotten.

There will be times in our lives when we need help because we won't be able to do for ourselves what we desperately need done. I needed help. I married my second husband who was way worse than my first when it came to domestic violence. His verbal and emotional abuse beat me down further than where I already was. As the time went on, his abuse was almost welcome. I know that sounds real sick, but I already felt worthless and lost. We separated a few times during our years together, but always got back together.

The last time I thought it was really over. Well I was wrong. After hearing all of his excuses and lies I fell back in love and wanted to be a family again. He always said I never believed in him and trusted him with what was really going on. He said he

needed time to forgive us for the mess we were in. I should have hung up and ran.

Once again I fell in the trap of trusting someone I knew I should not have trusted. I should have seen the warning signs. He had a .22 pistol that he brought over and wanted me to use for my protection. When he got mad he shot a hole in my bedroom floor. We lived in separate houses, but he acted like he owned mine. I ended up selling my place for him, so we could start over fresh. He didn't like that his name wasn't on the deed. I lived in fear of him really killing me, believing that he had killed once before and would again if he had to. If it wasn't me, I feared he might kill my sons.

One night he came over around 2 am. He beat me and raped me and told me he'd tell me when it was over and that I had to do as he said from now on. I totally lost myself that night. I was never the same again. All I did was worry about the lives of my kids and when he would hurt me again.

When I did go and seek help, all Merrill did was belittle me. He was more worried about what I was saying about him and how he looked to others. There was no way was I going to heal. He wasn't going to let that happen.

I remember another night after the rape. We went out and he got drunk. On the way home he picked a fight with me. By this time in my relationship with Merrill I just agreed with him. I thought that would make things easier for me. Wrong again. He had me stop at the mailbox, and I got the beating of my life. I can still feel the punches and kicks from his cowboy boots. I tried so hard to get away and call for help, but he broke my phone in half and threw it in the field. As far as I know, it's still there. He was throwing me all over the barbed wire fence. This was worse than a nightmare. I really thought he was going to kill me. He didn't, but by the time it was over, I was in bad shape. I woke up the next day, and I was the biggest mess ever. The left side of my face was purple, and my eye was full of blood and swollen shut. I was black and purple and blue. I had bald spots from all the hair ripped out of my head.

When I woke up I didn't realize how bad I looked. My poor baby girl started crying when she saw me, and my son and step-daughter were mad. When I looked in the mirror, I didn't even recognize myself. It was so horrible. I thought, How was I going to cover that mess up?

I couldn't, so I made up another lie to cover up Merrill's abuse. I told myself this was going to be the last time. You know the Wyoming wind? Well, I told everyone that the wind blew the pick-up truck's door into my face. It sounds crazy. I really don't think anyone believed me. Even the cops saw me and wanted to know who did it, but I stuck to my story. And soon they forgot about it. That's what happens. If you don't care, they don't. They were never help to me when it came to Merrill.

The last four years of my life with Merrill, he had a girlfriend. I always knew about her, but again, I listened to his lies. I think now, that's why I was beat up as much as I was. Not that it was her fault. I never blamed her. It was just his way of keeping her off my mind. He had so many stories he couldn't remember them all, and I believe they were catching up with him, so he took everything out on me and the kids.

I wish I could have had a crystal ball and seen what my life would be with him because I sure would have told him to "take a flying leap," or maybe, "go to hell." You can only convince yourself and others that there is no problem for so long. Then reality seeps in, and people see your situation for what it is; when that happens you have to retreat.

I didn't want to be open and honest about what I was going through. I just wanted to get out, so I called my second son and asked him to find me a place in South Dakota. I started to save money and stopped making my house payments. I was going to leave when my daughter's school year ended in a couple of weeks.

I was afraid of further rejection. I couldn't trust anyone. No matter how difficult it was, I didn't make the choice to protect myself or kids from my repeat offender.

I wonder about the damage I endured in my early life, when L.B. assaulted me. Was I ever secure and competent enough to

take care of myself or believe in myself? I built this wall around me, where my emotions were protected and my secrets were guarded, to survive. I started to live a lie, so I wouldn't be hurt again.

I had a sense of safety and control but when it was all over, but I realized I had a false sense of safety, which was dangerous. I should have been able to feel my pains and hurts, but instead I skipped over my emotions and declared peace as Merrill wanted me to. Having no one to turn to or a safe place to share my pain only caused me to shut down. Or as I call it, survive. I sank into a deeper depression, which just gave Merrill more ammunition to ridicule me with; I was so lost. I tried to bury my emotions because Merrill told me that my feelings were my own doing. He told me to get over it and pull myself up by my bootstraps.

I now know that I never would have been perfect. He would always find fault because of how unhappy and angry he was. I dodged and ducked just to keep the peace. Some days I did okay. Other days I didn't. I ended up dragging my pain through my life, until I ended up in prison.

I could go on and on with what I allowed to happen to me. I only wish I could forget it all. Knowing that I never will forget it, I want to be able to forgive and make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else. I am saddened to know this will keep happening. I wish I had a magic wand to take back what happened that awful day.

I was at my wits end with all that was happening to my family, working all the time, trying to take care of everyone, no matter how I felt. The last four years of my marriage I played house when my husband wanted to and took the abuse when I had to. I took care of his daughters with no help from him. Then when I did start getting child support, he was angry at the money he had to spend; like a rattle snake shaking his tail and striking with his fangs. There was so much poison inside of him, and he was going to make sure I felt the poison too. God, I was scared. I needed to know where he was at all times, but he would show up at all hours,

day and night, unannounced. I didn't know what was going to happen next.

He was driving me crazy, or least I felt he was. I couldn't trust anything he said or did. I was so scared. He fooled so many people into believing he was the good guy, but he was drunk most of the time. I was so unhappy and in so much pain from my broken heart. I was tired of him breaking the promises he made to me and our daughter. I hated seeing her cry. I wanted him to feel pain too.

When he showed up one day, I was rather upset. I'd just gotten off the phone with him, telling him not to bother coming over to take our daughter for the day. I didn't tell him she wasn't even home. I didn't care about that; I just didn't want him at my house anymore.

But he came into my house anyway. Didn't knock. Nothing new. I could smell the booze on him, so he was either hung over or still drunk. I was so glad our daughter wasn't there.

We started to argue over his daughter, about me sticking up for her being a lesbian because someone had to. I went to the bathroom in my room, and when I turned around, there he was, angry. He shoved me into the shower door, which broke. I got away from him and got my gun. I told him to get out. The look on his face was evil. He told me to "fuck off" and came at me. "Oh God, I really made a mistake," I thought. The biggest mistake of my life. I knew I was going to be dead if he got the gun.

I shot him. My mind went blank. I came out of it, and he had a hold on me. We hit the dresser and fell along the wall onto the floor with him on top of me. I threw the gun behind me, away from him. I was so scared. When I looked up my 18-year-old son was standing there. I was screaming at my husband to get off me, trying to push him off. My son looked so scared. He helped me up. I told him I was sick. He took me into the kitchen where I threw up in the trash. I was so sick. I didn't know how I could do such a thing.

I gave my son almost \$6,000 in cash and told him to go get his sister, then go to his brother's house. I wanted them safe. I was so scared and not thinking straight. I thought someone in my

husband's family would hurt them. When he left, I went back into the bedroom and picked up the gun and sat there on the bed in shock. I remember talking to my kids at times, but I don't remember much at all. I know I wanted to be dead for what I had done. How could I do something so horrible?

I made it to town and turned myself in at the Sheriff's office. To me it was minutes, but in reality it was 15 hours later. I couldn't believe I even made it to town. I didn't remember most of the drive. God was guiding me to safety.

When I got there and told them what I did I was treated like a really bad person; not one of them wanted to help. They wouldn't let a domestic violence advocate in because they said that I was the aggressor, and he was the victim. I cried for help and wanted to die. What were they thinking?

In the end I was charged with first degree murder. I had shot him three times. I had a jury trial and was convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to 20-30 years in the Wyoming's Women's Center. Now I'm safe and learning to heal. I'm who I'm meant to be, but I'm very saddened for all that got me here. So many people have been hurt. I know that I will always have my good days and bad days. I go through bouts of sadness and depression; I lost my only brother and that has been the most painful thing to happen to me here. My PTSD is always going to be with me. I am a very emotional person. I cry at the drop of a hat, but I was never allowed to cry before. I always had to keep stuff inside, and this is the poison that needs to come out.

The memories of the abuse I endured will always haunt me, but I know that I won't ever have to put myself through that again. I didn't deserve to live like that and neither did my children. I have become stronger and more passionate about abuse of any kind. I want to see all of the abuse end and everyone be safe. But nothing will end if laws are not changed. People get in more trouble for assaulting a stranger than for domestic violence. Something is wrong here: tell me what the difference is? Abuse is abuse. How many more have to die or defend themselves to the point of killing before they see justice?

I've lost my brother. I've become a grandma. I won't be able to see my daughter graduate from high school. On top of that, I haven't seen my parents since I've been here. None of my children are married yet, so I won't see them get married either. I'm writing this because I want people to know how much abuse has impacted my life, and what it cost me and my family.

When I came to prison in 2010 after spending 14 months in county jail I was shaken over how my life turned out. After being stripped, finger printed and photographed, I was sent to a cell for 24 hours. After that I was let out to mingle with the other women. I had to stay in RA (Risk and Assessment) for 30 days. After my 30 days, I went up to housing to my permanent home. Then I got to meet my caseworker Ms. C. She was the beginning of my healing process at WWC. She let me know that I was safe and that this was my chance to learn how to take care of myself instead of focusing on the outside.

That was really hard hitting because I was a mother who was always there for her children. Now I wasn't. I still had a 10-year-old daughter who needed her mother. I was so worried for her. It was time to take care of myself, but I didn't know how. After a couple of years with Ms. C she left for sick leave and was gone for a while, so I ended up with another caseworker by the name of Mr. D. In my mind, I was thinking that this place had lost its mind. I still wasn't comfortable with men, and now I had to talk to one who was going to be in control. YIKES!

As it turns out, I put myself through a lot of anxiety for nothing. Mr. D ended up being one of the best things to happen to me at WWC. He taught me how safe I really was, that I could trust men and that all men weren't bad. He helped me to heal and feel stronger, as well as build up my self-confidence.. Domestic violence has had such an impact on so many of the women here, and Mr. D showed me that I wasn't alone. He got us to start a program where we crochet for families who have experienced domestic violence to help them heal and know that they are not alone. We don't want secrets to destroy any more. Mr. D helped

me to know that I wasn't helping my healing by keeping the abuse a secret.

Mr. D gave me the courage to do new things. One, the biggest in here in prison is the sweat lodge, a Native American healing area. I am the fire starter. It is a very spiritual place. I also work a good job and have a supportive boss who cares and gives me good advice. I have also been approached by the Associate Warden to write about my time here. She has always been fair and encouraging to me, as has the Warden. I do feel that they do want us to do well here, as well as succeed on the outside.

Since I have been here, I have tried to get involved in whatever I could. I am in the dog program, which is a total joy. We train dogs, and this really is so rewarding. I feel lucky to have this position. I am also on the warden's committee. There are a few women on this board. We are a voice for the women here, trying to make a difference along with the warden. I have a real passion to advocate for and uplift women. I was trapped by living each day hoping that the future would be better; in doing so I missed so much of my life.

I don't want to be rooted in my past, but I won't forget what happened to get me here. In many ways, this event will impact me forever. It was not easy to accept that nothing I could do would undo the damage or bring back what I lost. My life might seem like a fragmented jangle of broken pieces. You may find it difficult to make sense of it, but I have lived through the difficulties that others have caused me, and I have caused for myself. I am discovering how to emerge from fear and to find courage. Never again will I listen to the lies or live the abuse that robbed me of my life. I know the reality is that this is a tough world. Some crummy things are going to happen, but as they say, it is through the tough times that we come to know ourselves. I will not let anything derail my path to healing. .

Now my passion is to help other women. I know that God wants me to empower others who have been through what I have. This is my reason for being alive. My father, mother, daughter and sons are all thankful I'm here. At least they can see me, instead of

going to the graveyard to visit me. The power of family and God has made me want to be me again. I'm an emotional woman, but now, I'm an emotionally strong one.

I have learned to forgive and be forgiven because my past is my past. I know that I can have a better future, and that only I can make it that way. I want to show everyone the new me, the one who will be the advocate to help other women do their best.