

1,352 Days by Karin Volo

1,352 Days

An Inspirational Journey

From Jail to Joy

Karin Volo

Published by A Life With A Fabulous View Inc. in collaboration with Verbi. The views expressed or implied in this book are the views of the author. The events are portrayed to the best of the author's memory. The conversations come from her recollections though they are not written to represent word-for-word transcripts. Rather, the stories have been retold in a way that evokes the feeling and meaning of what was said and in all instances, the essence of the dialogue is accurate. While all the stories in this book are true, some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved. The intent of the author is only to offer information of a general nature to help you in your quest for personal well-being. The author and the publisher assume no responsibility for your actions.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any way by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author except as provided by US copyright law.

1st Edition: March 2015

ISBN: 978-0-9837960-5-3

What People Are Saying about Karin Volo and 1,352 Days:

“What a shocking ordeal Karin Volo and her family have lived through! 1,352 Days is a remarkable memoir that illustrates how it’s possible to overcome even the darkest of situations and prevail once you’ve made the choice to be happy and optimistic. Prepare to be inspired by this extraordinary story of resilience!” ~ Marci Shimoff, NY Times Bestselling Author, *Love for No Reason & Happy for No Reason*

“The work that Karin was doing, and that she gave us a chance to have a peek preview of and take a look at was very much in concert with the messages that *Conversations With God* would love to share with children everywhere. And so we were inspired, I would say deeply inspired by her work, and that’s when our office at the School of the New Spirituality made a move to get a hold of Karin to see if we could find a way to integrate our two worlds such that we would both move our messages forward.” ~ Neale Donald Walsch, NY Times Bestselling Author, *Conversations With God* series, www.NealeDonaldWalsch.com

“Karin found herself unjustly jailed for almost four years, away from her family, with no idea what to do. However, Karin made a powerful decision that SHE WAS GOING HOME, and the journey of self-discovery that got her there is one you need to read...but there’s more than just her story. After going through what she went through, Karin became PASSIONATE about helping people bounce back from desperate situations, just like she did. Very inspiring!” ~ Bob Doyle, CEO of Boundless Living, Inc., #1 Bestselling author, *Follow Your Passion - Find Your Power*

“Remarkable, captivating, gripping, spell-binding, and if there is any other synonym for these words, I’d use it! Karin Volo’s memoir is an extraordinary story of faith and unconditional love. I highly recommend it.” ~ Peggy McColl, Bestselling Author of *Your Destiny Switch*

“Karin and Sergio Volo are two incredible people who have faced the worst of times and came through the other side stronger and more courageous than any other couple I’ve ever met. Now they are turning those challenges into a wonderful, heart centered business where they are helping thousands of people go beyond surviving and learning to thrive through any tough time. If you need any inspiration in your life, read this book because not only will you be moved, your whole outlook on life will change. They set an example and show how love really does conquer all.” ~ Lisa Sasevich, *The Queen of Sales Conversion and Creator of the Invisible Close*

“When businesswoman and mother Karin Volo suddenly found herself in a frightening landscape on her life’s journey, she could have panicked. Instead, she made a conscious choice to be present and calm in her harrowing situation. Jailed thousands of miles away from her home and family, she discovered she could live with courage and faith as long as she focused on what’s important family, love, joy. Anyone who has ever felt imprisoned by life can learn from her story how to make peace with difficult circumstances while working to change them.” ~ Colette Baron-Reid, Bestselling Author of *The Map*

1,352 Days by Karin Volo

“Karin Volo and her family have survived an extraordinary ordeal that would many would find overwhelming. Her story is one of creativity, resilience, and the power to choose our attitude even when we can’t choose our circumstances. She is truly inspirational!” ~ Dr. Carmen Harra, Bestselling Author of *Wholiness* and *The Eleven Eternal Principles*

“Imagine being unjustly incarcerated for 1,352 days in a country 5,574 miles from home. How would you feel? What would you do? How would this affect your family, friends, loved ones? This inspiring book tells how an innocent young mother transformed setbacks into comebacks and breakdowns into breakthroughs by maintaining her faith in God and choosing to FIND solutions regardless of prevailing circumstances! Indeed, Karin Volo is living proof of living truth of the power of faith, love, and determination.” ~ Jacquelyn Aldana, Author of *The 15-Minute Miracle Revealed*

“Karin Volo tells an amazing story! An incredible journey both inward and outward.” ~ Cindy Powers Prosor CPCS, The Intuitive Heart Mentor, www.OpeningDoorsWithin.com

“Prepare to be totally inspired by how Karin turned true life tragedy into a cornerstone for living a truly grand life! Quite frankly, she transformed lead into gold. Rather than allowing herself to become angry or embittered, she seized the opportunity to uplift herself, expand her consciousness...and in this book she shows you how all that is possible for you, too!” ~ Kit Furey, JD, CHt, CEHP, Belief and Energy Transformation Expert. Specialist in Peak Performance and Creativity for Business Leaders Everywhere

“I was truly inspired by the story—I mean, who wouldn’t be? Karin has achieved what few people could—take an experience like this and turn it into something that not only results in your growth, but adds significant value to the world through her inspired efforts.” ~ Bob Uslander MD, www.DoctorsOnPurpose.com

“Unjustly denied the fundamental freedom and comforts of life, Karin turned inward to uncover the profound richness of her spirit and connection to a far greater freedom. Her courage, discipline and commitment to a higher road is a daily source of inspiration and compassion. She openly and authentically shares her life, joy and enthusiasm with all that she does.” ~ Susan Hayward, Business Intuitive Strategist, www.LivingtheLeadingEdge.com

“Karin’s story is one that has always amazed me. When I first heard about it, I was shocked and inspired. You think that these things only happen in the movies! She had such a positive and deep perspective on problem solving life. Her story can’t help but give fresh insight into our own story.” ~ Cyndi Fine, Creative Instigator, www.cyndifine.com

“Karin is being used by a higher power in such a profound way. I’m so thankful for all of the reminders and inspiration she’s given in her book. She is indeed a messenger of joy and empowerment!” ~ Terri Britt, Award-winning Author of *The Enlightened Mom*, Inspirational Speaker and former Miss USA 1982, www.TerriBritt.com

1,352 Days by Karin Volo

Contents

Foreword by John Assaraf

Chapter 1: A Tap on the Shoulder

Chapter 2: The Middle Way

Chapter 3: Spellbound

Chapter 4: Far From Home

Chapter 5: “Today Is the Day I Go Home”

Chapter 6: Faith the Size of a Mustard Seed

Chapter 7: Friends, Bunkies, and Fellow Seekers

Chapter 8: Ring in the New Uncertainty

Chapter 9: Hoping and Coping

Chapter 10: Dreams, Home, and Hope for Change

Chapter 11: “Volo, Roll Out!”

Chapter 12: Freedom!

Afterword

FOREWORD

I remember getting the phone call that sent a shock through my entire body like a Taser. I had just finished several long days of teaching a group of business owners the keys to growing their business and living the life of their dreams and I was tired and drained. We discussed the importance of having the right unrelenting mindset, the right skills and the faith that one must have in order to succeed no matter how hard it gets.

We discussed that there is always a way over it, under it, around it or through any of our life or business challenges. Little did I know that one of my students would have other methodologies for dealing with life's unpredictable curve balls and challenges.

It was 2006 when that call came in and Karin's life partner Sergio told me that Karin was in jail here in San Diego. "Jail?" I said. "What the hell are you talking about? You just left the seminar!"

I thought that maybe they went out to celebrate and she had a few too many margaritas or something, but I was way off the mark in my quick assumption.

The day she left my seminar and went to the airport to go back to Sweden surely wasn't a normal day for her, as you will come to find in this amazing book.

Although I didn't really know Karin well at the time, I knew that she had amazing potential and applied to her business and life what I was teaching. What I didn't know is how much she would end up teaching me from jail.

They kept Karin for almost four years—1,352 days to be exact! Keep in mind that this was not a prison. This was a small jail they hold people accused of federal crimes that are in transition.

Over the next few years, Karin and I kept in touch and she kept me abreast with the case whenever I went to visit her or via her letters. The highs and lows, the trials and tribulations that went on month after month, would be enough for most people to just want to roll over and die.

Not Karin, however. Somehow, she found the courage, wisdom, and inner faith to keep strong and to trust her inner guidance and divine power. I was always amazed when she told me how many books she read and how she was teaching yoga and meditation to the other inmates. Her attitude was something to behold.

Having a positive attitude is one thing. Knowing in your heart of hearts that you are here for some higher purpose or reason even when faced with being extradited to a Mexican prison for many years is another. Karin had a faith I have never seen before.

She somehow was able to see past her circumstances and continue on her journey. The love and faith that Sergio had in Karin was remarkable. Their story is amazing and shows that love really is the most powerful force in the world.

Like many of you, I have faced many challenges in my life, but I don't know if I would have had the courage to do what Karin did. From the first day she was in prison to now, all I saw and see is a woman with dignity, calmness, and unrelenting faith in her connection to a higher power.

This book will take you on a soul searching mission to find your own core, your own inner strength and your true spirit that will guide you through whatever journey and challenges you face today or may face sometime in your life.

Karin is an amazing teacher and has so many wonderful stories, lessons and incredible insights that will touch your heart and stir your spirit and soul.

She moved my heart and soul and now through her book, she will move yours.

—John Assaraf

Chapter One

A Tap on the Shoulder

I am not what happened to me. I am what I choose to become. —Carl Jung

You never forget those days that irrevocably change your life. It was 6:30 A.M. on March 29, 2006, and I was standing in line at San Diego Lindbergh International Airport with my business and life partner, Sergio, waiting to board our homebound flight to Stockholm, Sweden. It was good to be going home after a week of intense business mentoring with inspirational speaker John Assaraf and Murray Smith of One Coach. Sergio and I were excited about the future of our business and where our new skills would take us. The Law of Attraction was indeed “the secret” to our burgeoning success. We had seen this extraordinary new film, *The Secret*, twice during the conference, and I was certain it would be a huge hit. There was no doubt in my mind that we attract into our lives exactly what we need, yet the mystery of how and why we draw in the unexpected continued to engage me. “Dumb” luck and coincidences, along with an inner passion to make the most of my life, had led me here to where I needed to be right now. A bad marriage was long behind me. I had a new lover who was not only devastatingly handsome but who happened to be the perfect business partner for me as well. The right books seemed to come into my hands just when I needed their guidance. Our office phone rang again and again as potential clients called to ask about our services, and they often told us that they had heard about our executive search firm in the most serendipitous way. The universe seemed to be conspiring to support my dreams.

Even so, I was a bit unsettled today. When Sergio paid the cab driver and we gathered our bags, I tried to release the nervousness that had been shooting through my body. Life was good. We just needed to get to the gate and back to Sweden where we would implement all that we’d learned in our weeklong conference.

It had been a strange day ever since the moment I opened my eyes in the morning. For some reason, we didn’t get the hotel wake-up call we’d ordered, and although we awakened in time, both of us were feeling harried. We had to be at the airport by 5:30 A.M. to ensure that we’d have time to grab a bite for breakfast before the long flight and switch our tickets for two

seats next to each other. The taxi we had ordered was due at 4:30 A.M and when it didn't arrive, we phoned and discovered they had no record of our call. They promised to send a car immediately and we stood outside the hotel checking our watches every couple of minutes. Finally, we were on our way with a driver who took all the short cuts so that we got to the airport on time, although just barely. Walking quickly, Sergio and I made our way to the check-in desk and discovered that my ticket was coded "*secondary security pass.*" Sergio's had no such notation.

"What does this mean?" I asked the clerk as I pointed to the unfamiliar words.

"They'll tell you when you go through security," she said, and with a perfunctory gesture, directed us to the security checkpoint.

Sergio and I stepped up our pace because we were concerned this new development would slow us down further. Aside from the flight out to L.A., I hadn't been on an airplane since 9/11, and I assumed there was some sort of system for giving extra attention to random passengers. *Just my luck.*

"Wow, they've really got tight security," I said to Sergio.

"Well, maybe it won't take too long," he said as we maneuvered through the crowd. Nothing strange happened and we went through the normal checks.

Sergio's prediction was right, but after we pulled our carry-on baggage off the X-ray scanner's conveyer belt, it was clear that we wouldn't have time to sit down and eat breakfast. I knew I'd feel better when we got to the gate, so we stopped just long enough to pick up a snack before boarding: a banana and espresso for Sergio, a lemon poppy seed muffin and cup of Earl Grey tea for me. I juggled the tea carefully, its cardboard sleeve barely thick enough to keep my hand from becoming uncomfortably hot.

With a little speed walking, we soon arrived at the gate. A quick glance at the sign departures board told me our flight was on time. I asked the flight attendant at the podium if she could seat us together after all, and she reassured us it was no problem. In a few minutes, she handed us new boarding passes and said, "You're good to go."

Sergio and I walked to the back of the line and I began to unwrap my muffin and bit into it carefully to avoid getting crumbs on my cashmere sweater. Sergio gingerly peeled back the plastic tab on the Earl Grey tea I'd purchased and handed it to me. After a few sips, I happened to glance up again at the departure sign.

Delayed.

Now that was odd. But then, given the crazy morning we'd just had, it seemed to be just another wrinkle in our day. I hoped we wouldn't land too late. The plan was to take a taxi straight to the office. We could catch up on some work, pick up the girls at 3:00, and go home to sleep off the jet lag a bit before starting dinner.

I folded up the muffin wrapper and stuffed it in the paper bag, and then made a quick call to our office, since it was afternoon there. Our assistant told me we had a new client waiting to give us some new business. Excellent!

And then, a tap on my shoulder.

I turned. I didn't recognize him. The man looked like an ordinary traveler but he swiftly stepped between Sergio and me as two men in dark blue windbreakers and jeans standing behind me each took one of my arms. One of them asked me, "Are you Karin Volo?"

"Yes."

I noticed some papers rolled up in his hand. He gave me his name and said, "I have a warrant for your arrest. . . ." Just seven words. My mind froze.

He was still talking, but the only other words I heard were *Mexico* and *Leo*, the name of my first husband. I blanched in shock. Then I looked over at Sergio. In his amber eyes, I saw confusion and helplessness.

One of the men took my carry-on bag and black Esprit leather backpack from me and said, "If you go with us quietly, we won't put handcuffs on you."

"Can I just kiss—"

"No!" said the man who had my right arm. He tugged at me, and quickly pulled me away. "No physical contact."

My mind raced for words but drew a blank. I turned to see Sergio's face. It reflected back to me my own fear.

"It'll be okay," he called out, as much to convince himself as to convince me.

The men hurriedly escorted me away from my freedom, each holding one of my elbows as I looked straightforward. Where were we going? It seemed crazy! Why the grip on my arms? I was no criminal!

"Who are you?" I managed to ask.

“U.S. Federal Marshals.” No more explanation was offered and as I passed curious onlookers, I was too stunned to formulate any other questions. The marshals led me into a room that appeared to be a kitchenette and conference room, furnished with the bare necessities. They seated me at the table and I looked out the window into the open sky and focused on the sight of a jet as it silently rose into the air.

I was still speechless and sinking deeper into shock. It was as if a deep freeze had settled in and thoughts were barely able to move through the rapidly solidifying ice that had become my mind. My eyes looked around and I took in details both familiar and unfamiliar—the marshal’s badge, a coffee ring on the table, the flickering of a fluorescent light under one of the cabinets. Papers were placed in front of me. They appeared to be legal documents. The men were saying something but none of it made sense. My mind struggled to push through the frozen sludge. I saw my name and my ex-husband’s name and then the bold words that would be seared into my memory for the rest of my life: *Warrant for Arrest*.

“We need to handcuff you now and take you into custody.”

I moved with dreamlike slowness. Between themselves, the men talked about my luggage and wanting to retrieve it from the plane. They discussed whether they should continue to delay the flight and decided against it. The marshals, still talking to each other, said Sergio’s name wasn’t anywhere in the arrest document—they weren’t interested in him. I felt a momentary sense of relief. He would go home and take care of my girls until all this was cleared up and they let me go. Sergio was a family man, with kids of his own. My daughters adored him. They would be safe. Everything would be okay just as soon as this madness ended and I was on a plane going home.

One of the marshals asked me to come with him, and I began to follow him awkwardly, my shoulders stretched back to relieve the discomfort of my hands straining against the handcuffs. As he and another marshal each held one of my elbows, I walked with them through the airport again. I knew the plane I was supposed to be on would depart any second, taking my beloved Sergio home to Alexa and Megan without me. When would I see him again? How would he explain to the girls why I wasn’t with him? What would happen? I couldn’t think about that. At that moment, home felt much, much farther away than the 5,400 miles between San Diego and Stockholm.

As I walked between the marshals, I felt confused and completely mortified. I passed men and women in business attire, and thought, “What if someone I met at the conference sees me?” We walked outside to a car and one of the marshals settled me into the back seat. Then the other marshal got behind the wheel and put my bags in the front. Just as we were getting ready to pull away from the curb to wherever they were taking me, another marshal ran up to the car. He explained, “The man she’s traveling with doesn’t have his tickets. He says they’re in her handbag. He needs his ticket.”

That jolted my mind back into action and I began to beg. “You *have* to get the ticket to him! He *needs* to go home and take care of my daughters!” They searched my handbag and found our tickets. As the third marshal took them and began to jog back to the terminal, I wondered how Sergio was coping. I prayed that he would have the strength to do whatever needed to be done to handle things at home and keep our business going. God only knows what he would say to my girls.

“Where are you taking her?” Sergio asked.

“She’s being arrested,” said the third marshal, “You should take your flight and get out of the country.”

“Please,” he said as the marshal began walking away, “ask Karin whether I need to stay or go home and take care of the children.”

The man nodded.

Sergio lingered helplessly, unable to take in what had just happened. The flight attendant began checking boarding passes as the line of passengers began to enter the walkway to the aircraft. Leaving was unthinkable, yet an eight-year-old and a six-year-old in Sweden needed him home that night. In a daze, he waited, and then the marshal returned with the tickets—Sergio had completely forgotten about them—and said, “She’d like you to get on the flight.”

It was the hardest decision Sergio had ever made, but he knew he had to put the girls’ needs first and leave Karin behind. He had no idea where they were taking her or what sort of danger she’d encounter. Loyalty and guilt intermixed, but he pushed aside his emotions to do what made sense.

The first leg of the journey home would last six hours. As he settled into the long flight to Chicago’s O’Hare Airport, Sergio realized he hadn’t asked the security official for his card or

even his name. All he knew was that as soon he could, he had to start making some phone calls to track down where Karin was. His mind began to race. Who were these people? Were they the police? The F.B.I. or C.I.A.? He was irritated with himself for not getting more information, but it had all happened so quickly. For a fleeting moment, he thought maybe Karin had been kidnapped. Then he brushed the idea aside. The men had certainly looked and acted official. He wondered when he would be allowed to speak to Karin again. Where would they take her? When would they allow her to make a phone call? Would they let her call his cell phone with its unfamiliar area code? Would he have touched down by then?

Chatter from the many passengers became an undistinguishable murmur. With no answers, no information that might help him understand what had just happened, Sergio found himself experiencing a vacuum of sound as he withdrew into his thoughts. A survival instinct kicked in and he grasped at the security of logic. He pulled out his notepad and pen and began to list the calls he needed to make. Strategy was key.

He had to create security for the children somehow. Although he and Karin were only committed partners, with no plans of marriage, and they had lived together only part of the time, he was the only father Alexa and Megan had ever known and he loved them dearly. He would tell Karin's two daughters that their mother hadn't been sick; there had been no accident; that it wasn't their fault she hadn't come home; and, most importantly, that she hadn't abandoned them. He'd say she'd been detained on business and he wasn't quite sure when she would come home.

How long would this nightmare last? A few days? Weeks? He decided he would call his ex-wife and tell her that he wouldn't be able to spend as much time taking care of his own two children from his previous marriage, at least until Karin was home. He hoped she would agree to take their children more often although they shared custody.

There were dozens of practical matters to address. He would have to work with Karin's mother to coordinate taking the children to and from school and their various activities. He'd have to take care of expenses both at home and in the business, look at all the contracts that needed to be completed; figure out how he might cover living expenses temporarily if Karin couldn't return quickly and get back to generating income. Was he getting ahead of himself? Maybe, but he felt the need to plan as much as possible. It was the only thing he could do right now.

One thing at a time. Locating and working with the attorneys—he made notes of who might help him with that. His first call would be to John Assaraf. Surely he would know a lawyer in San Diego. Sergio checked his watch again. It would be hours before he landed in Chicago.

The more he thought about the situation and the possibility that it might not end quickly, the more the fear that was churning at the base of his spine began to spread through his body. His skills in project management took over as he wrote his lists. Sergio had only three years' experience in his and Karin's executive search business, and an uncomfortable thought arose in his mind: Could he handle the workload all on his own? It was Karin who drove the sales and marketing and hired and managed personnel. How would he fit that in while she was gone? And how long would she be gone?

"Slow down," he told himself. "Think. Just think. Who else do I need to call?"

Sergio knew the situation was serious but had no idea just how serious it was.

A bitter metallic taste rose in his mouth but he chose to ignore it. Focus—that was what he needed to do. Focus and plan.

The bitter taste would remain with him for almost four years.

It wasn't a long drive from the airport to the courthouse where I was formally placed under arrest. I sat in the back seat of the car with the U.S. Marshal, waiting to be told what would happen next. I looked out the window and thought "how ironic"—I was finally seeing some of San Diego after spending an entire week in hotel rooms in Del Mar, where I'd eagerly soaked in all the information and inspiration John and his team offered at the seminar.

I tried to remember what the marshals had said to me as I sat at the table in that little room at the airport, but everything was surreal. It's as if I forgot how to read, or to process spoken language. I had no idea what had gone so horribly wrong. I was sure there must be some type of mistake. The frozen sludge in my mind was of no help to me, and I made no attempt to think through what was happening. A primitive part of myself told me to stay alert and observe, like a wary animal being stalked.

When we arrived at the courthouse, they escorted me into the building through a back entrance. It was dirty, dark, and hideous. Ancient grease stains and scuff marks dotted the shiny, sickly yellow walls. The smell of sweat and fear permeated the stale air. I sensed complete

desperation emanating not only from me but from the cages that held so many people. I looked straight ahead and allowed my peripheral vision to blur the images. I didn't want to look into anyone's eyes. It reminded me of visiting the humane society and seeing all the anguish and despair, only this was a hundred times worse. Who were these people? What crimes had they committed? I couldn't bear to imagine the possibilities.

A clanking sound told me the bars behind me had been locked. The sound of metal on metal reverberated and faded away as I heard shouting begin far down the hall. Around me was a quiet buzz of conversation, mostly in Spanish. More metal clanked as doors opened and inmates were escorted back and forth to the hidden courtrooms. The blueish-white fluorescent lights illuminated the empty holding room they'd locked me in, and I sat down on a metal bench that was ice-cold from the air-conditioning. My eyes hurt from the harsh lighting so I put my head on my knees and hugged them. Then, I tried to calm myself by closing my eyes, focusing on my breathing, and pretending I was anywhere else but here.

I'd arrived just before 7:00 a.m. and sat there for hours, rarely raising my head or listening to what was happening around me. For long stretches, I simply waited and wondered when I would wake up from this horrible nightmare. They were required to itemize my belongings so they lead me into another room to fingerprint me, take my photograph, and empty my small leather backpack so they could make a list of the contents. To my surprise, they didn't open my carry-on, but asked me to tell them what was in it. They confiscated all my jewelry and the scarf I'd been wearing, and explained that they had to remove anything I might be able to use to strangle myself.

I had enough presence of mind to surreptitiously remove two photographs of my girls from my wallet and sneak them into my pocket. I wasn't sure I would be allowed to keep them, but I needed my girls to be near me, if only in the form of wallet-sized school photos.

The guards moved me to a different room and frisked me. Somehow, they missed the photos. I was so relieved, but I didn't dare take out the pictures to look at them the whole time because I was afraid they might take them away. Then I was returned to the ice-cold holding room, where I sat for what seemed like an eternity. My stomach was in knots. My back hurt terribly. I just sat there with my eyes closed, rocking myself back and forth, pretending this wasn't happening and feeling so afraid of what was coming. I didn't want to see that filthy,

disgusting room, which had by now filled up with other women. Unlike me, most of these women were in standard jail attire, which reminded me of hospital scrubs.

I remember asking some man in a suit who stood outside the cell for a minute, “What’s going to happen?” The blunt answer came back: “You’re going to be arraigned.” I had no idea what that meant.

It seemed an eternity that I sat there. Finally, someone came and took me to the courtroom. Once again, I was handcuffed while they walked me through long corridors that snaked under the building. I picked up on the strong scent of body odor mixed with urine and blew air through my nostrils to clear them, but the close smell simply filled them again.

It was a very dark journey in every way. Maybe it was because I was dressed nicely in slacks and a sweater rather than a uniform, but when I walked by cells full of men it was as if someone had turned on a switch and all of them began shouting catcalls. “Mamacita, looking good!”, “Ooo, pretty lady!”, and exaggerated kissing sounds that accomplished exactly what they intended; by the time that long walk was over, I felt violated and naked. I had no idea how much worse I would soon feel.

A suited male marshal led me to a service elevator where I joined some other prisoners and we rode up to the main floor to the courtroom. There, I was placed in another smaller holding cell to wait. When it was my turn, the marshal escorted me through a set of doors, into a plain vestibule with lush carpeting and one lonely wooden chair that seemed out of place. The next set of doors we went through brought us into the courtroom. The cherry wood walls and railings and the majestic judge’s bench provided a jarring contrast to the space I’d just left. I looked over at the American flag placed near the front of the courtroom and, for a brief moment, felt a glimpse of hope. This was a hall of justice, in the United States of America. Although I’d been born in Mexico to American parents, and currently lived in Sweden, the homeland of my mother, I’d grown up in Arizona and Connecticut. I had recited the pledge of allegiance as a child. *With liberty and justice for all.*

The arraignment lasted about two minutes. I finally learned why I was there: Mexico wanted me and I was being extradited. That was all I knew. Somehow, I had the clarity and courage to announce, “I need an attorney.” A representative from the Federal Defender’s Office gave me a business card and promised that someone from their office would be assigned to my case and would come to visit me. Someone did come for a few minutes, asked basic questions,

and wrote down my information. I still didn't understand why I had been arrested or what crime I had been accused of committing. I thought I would have a chance to defend myself or make a plea, or something. Nothing could have been further from the truth as I was moved around from room to cell to hallway as if I were on a conveyor belt, with no one showing any more interest in me than they did the other inmates despite the fact that I was dressed in street clothes. We were simply bodies to be escorted from here to there in some bizarre ritual.

At noon, a guard came into the holding room and handed me a sack lunch consisting of two dry slices of bread with an unidentifiable slab of meat between, a piece of crumbling cake, and a slightly mealy apple. I managed to eat the apple. Time lingered in the air like a plume of smoke as I watched the hand on the industrial wall clock slowly move. I spent the entire day there as women wearing prison garb were led in and out although I was too scared to ask anyone what had brought them to the cell. I had no idea if they'd been tried and were awaiting sentencing, for what crime they'd been arrested, or from what institution they had come. All I could see was that there were three different uniform colors: evergreen, light brown, and khaki, but I didn't know exactly what the different colors meant.

Not knowing what to expect, unsure of whom these women are, whether any were violent or might want to intimidate me, I remained silent. I tried to keep my head down and not look scared. I spent a lot of time examining my hands, as if there were something fascinating to be learned from them. It kept me from taking in the unsettling sights all around me.

When I did look up, I could see that nearly all the women were of Mexican descent and ranged from young to middle aged, thin to heavy, and pretty to plain. None seemed to be all that interested in me after I softly replied in response to their questions, "I don't know what's going on. I don't know what I'm being charged with." They sat around, most of them talking, half in Spanish and half in English. They asked each other, "What did they get you on?" Some had a swagger in their voice as they told the others about their lives and the trouble they'd seen. At last, a pleasant girl in green asked me, what was going on? I told her I didn't know, that I'd only arrived a few hours before. "Maybe you'll end up at GEO," she said.

I had no idea what GEO was but didn't dare ask, although it seemed to be a place she was familiar with. She seemed nice and stayed close by me, but we didn't speak much. Between my shock and fear, I couldn't bring myself to ask her to answer my questions.

At one point in the late afternoon, the guards brought in a woman in a micro miniskirt, garish purple rouge and lipstick, and a low-cut tank top. She cursed loudly in English and peppered her angry rant with Spanish. I saw her go behind the short wall that barely obscured the toilet and heard odd noises I tried to block out mentally. “Hey, get this bitch out of here! She’s crazy!” shouted one of the women to no one in particular as she strained to look through the bars and down the hall. Some of the other women snickered and gossiped in low voices as the loud woman in the bathroom grumbled to herself. Never having seen anyone who was high on street drugs before, I had no idea what she was doing. I only knew that as soon as a guard did appear, she brusquely escorted the woman out and into another cell.

Toward the end of that eternal and grueling day, I came to the realization that I would be wearing one of those uniforms. That was okay, I decided, because until I was out of this place, I wanted to blend in. The nice girl in green had left, and now I didn’t want anyone to notice me or try to talk to me. After what had happened today, I’d had enough of that to last a lifetime. I gazed at my hands again. They were shaking. I folded them underneath my armpits so no one would see. I looked up and a male marshal with a thick mustache walked by. I remembered another man in an unfamiliar uniform, many years ago in Mexico. He had insisted that he would need to search my house. Alexa had squirmed as I balanced her on my hip, a task made more difficult by my ever-growing belly. Pregnant at the time, feeling vulnerable, I’d been unsure what was happening and was too scared to ask. Faces suddenly appeared in the dark windows of the first floor. My friend showed up at the door in response to my frantic phone call and told me not to panic.

That was all so long ago. I squeezed my eyes shut to block out the memory. *Sergio will get a hold of a lawyer and all this will end.* I pictured the girls running to hug me at the airport and Sergio walking toward me, a huge smile on his face. *Make it real,* I told myself. I held on to my vision, drawing comfort from it.

Around 5:00 P.M., they moved me by van to a different holding cell—at GEO, which I would later learn was the nickname for the jail, a company called GEO that was under contract with the Office of Federal Detention and the U.S. Marshal’s Service. GEO provided high security for adult male and female detainees. I was being taken to the Western Region Detention Facility in San Diego, which housed 784 temporary inmates.

I moved clumsily because of my handcuffs and shackles with a short chain between my ankles. Then I entered the van and took a seat. It had very dark windows with reinforced steel grills, so while the seats were normal, I felt as if I were in a moving prison. A grille between the driver and guard and the detainees' section reminded me that some of my fellow travelers might be violent, and I felt my muscles tense at the thought. The only other passengers were a couple of male detainees who were seated behind me. Like me, they were handcuffed.

My mind was a blank and I can't remember how long it was before I arrived at GEO and was escorted through several metal doors to another holding cell. It was dinnertime, so I was handed a tray with a meal that consisted of some inedible food. It had an unsettling plastic sheen to it. I tried to eat a bit, but I had no appetite for the congealed and rubbery mess. A female guard in a beige GEO uniform that showed every roll and bulge took away my nearly full dinner tray without a comment and said something about starting the intake process.

She led me to an empty room and told me to remove all my clothes. I removed my shoes and trouser socks and tried not to make eye contact as I got down to my bra and panties and then removed those as well.

It was mortifying to stand completely naked in front of a total stranger. "Bend over and spread your buttocks with your hands, then cough." She spoke with no emotion, as if she were simply relating the instructions to locate the nearest exits on the aircraft.

I bent over and tried to distract my mind with the patterns on the stone floor as she checked for anything hidden in my body's orifices. Apparently, that's a good place to smuggle in makeup or drugs, so the strip search is a standard part of jail life.

My feelings of degradation and violation began to overtake me, and I felt every muscle fiber in my body tighten further. My throat was tense and my skin seemed to grasp my forehead in a painful grip, and my head began to throb.

The guard suddenly told me to stand up. She pulled some clothing from a nearby cart as I tried to compose myself. Then I quickly put on what I would later realize was the standard green scrubs uniform of GEO: a sports bra and granny panties, a white t-shirt and white tube socks, dull green pants and top (they looked like hospital scrubs), and cheap navy sneakers. As foreign as the clothes felt, at least my humiliation began to fade and I was feeling slightly less dehumanized.

The guard led me over to another guard who was standing at a table, getting ready to fingerprint me.

As the guard prepared the form and the ink pad, I looked closely at her. Unlike most of the women I had seen today, she was rather pretty: Long eyelashes, beautiful high cheekbones, skin the color of a smooth river pebble, her sleek black hair thick with shiny curls and pinned up in a bun. Her lipstick was slightly glossy and perfectly applied. She was young, maybe 25. I couldn't understand it: Why was she working in a prison? She looked more like a receptionist in a modern office building, the type of woman who can handle four incoming calls and a visitor without missing a beat. Why would she want a job like this? None of it made any sense. The sludge in my mind had barely budged.

I could see she was having a little trouble positioning my pinky finger above the form and moved my wrist slightly to accommodate her.

“DON'T MOVE!” she barked. I nearly jumped and felt a rush of tears fill my eyes as my throat tightened. Her grasp on my wrist tightened and I meekly submitted to her maneuverings. Any semblance of normalcy had been erased. Like everyone here, she was all business. Who I was, what I was thinking—none of it mattered here. I could tell my guilt or innocence was irrelevant to everyone here. I was an inmate to be processed, nothing more.

The shock of this woman's rudeness was still reverberating when I was again directed to walk with other guards to yet another unfamiliar room, this one in the medical unit. I sat silently, alone, for perhaps fifteen minutes, in what looked to be a small infirmary with six metal beds fastened to the floor. Then, they brought in a woman who wore the same cheap, ugly clothes I had just donned. The guard left, and the woman turned to me and introduced herself as Ellen. She was very jittery, and kept getting up and pacing, sitting down again, then popping up to repeat the ritual. She was very tall and stout, with wild wiry hair reaching out in all directions, but despite her manic appearance, she didn't seem intimidating or threatening in any way. Maybe it was because she was so obviously fearful herself. “I can't believe this. I have to get a hold of my boyfriend. He's got no idea what happened,” she kept saying.

Ellen looked disheveled and in need of a shower, and I suspected she had been shuttled from holding room to holding room for a few days. She said something about how hurt and disappointed her children were going to be. “I tested dirty. And I'm on probation. This is bad,” she told me. I murmured a sympathetic sound, but it didn't seem to have any effect on her nervousness.

Only much later would I realize that her anxious pacing and darting eyes were the result of being high on crystal meth. Like so many women in the jails and prisons in the U.S., Ellen had a long-standing drug problem and certainly needed to be in treatment but, the system being what it was, she was locked up and shunted about instead. Whatever petty dealing she had done to support her habit, whatever she had done to cover her drug use, she had not been sufficiently discreet and now she was scared and remorseful. All I knew at this point is that she, like me, was more concerned with her children than anything else. “I don’t know what I’m going to tell them,” she said.

It was my dilemma, too. What would I tell my mother and my girls? I felt certain that Sergio wasn’t going to stick around. My predicament was crazy. Why would he put up with it? Ellen listened sympathetically as I told her my girls were thousands of miles away, surely confused about why I hadn’t returned.

Soon, a guard walked in to tell us that since all the medical staff had gone home for the evening, there was no way to do the required physical examination and we would have to stay there overnight before being moved elsewhere. With nothing else to distract us, Ellen and I simply talked for a few hours. Our conversation turned to the everyday details of what our kids were up to, how many siblings we had, and where we had lived. Ellen’s face brightened when I told her I had been born in Mexico and lived there for a few years as a child and later, as an adult. That made me a sister of sorts because she’d lived there too, even if the thread of our connection was as thin as the blankets they’d issued us. It gave each of us some comfort to reveal a little about who we were and to find that we had something in common.

At some point, a guard handed us a small toiletries kit and Ellen laughed as I stared at the toothbrush I’d just received, clearly puzzled by it. “Bet you never saw a toothbrush that short,” she said.

I looked at her in amused confusion. “No, I can’t say that I have!”

“They make it stubby so you don’t carve it into a knife.” She grabbed hers by the tiny, fat handle and brushed her teeth with an exaggerated scrubbing motion. “Oh, can’t kill anyone today, I guess I’d better just brush my teeth instead.”

I laughed. It was all so absurd. Ellen told me, “They always give you toothpaste, even if you still have some. Some of the ladies wash their clothes with it. It makes a pretty good laundry whitener. You’d be surprised.”

“They have to wash their own clothes?” I asked.

“Well, only because they want to. There’s a laundry but no one uses it. The clothes here are pretty nasty even when they’re clean. But soooo pretty, aren’t they?”

I shook my head and smiled. I hoped I wouldn’t be here long enough to discover what she meant exactly. For now, I was just going to concentrate on not letting myself panic. Talking helped. Time ticked away as we carried on, tentatively establishing a bond of sorts between us. Then, sometime around midnight, they dimmed the lights. Ellen quickly fell into a quiet slumber but sleep refused to overtake me. I lay down on the bed and ignored the distant metal doors clanging shut. I began to direct a movie in my mind: I wrapped my arms around my girls and hugged them. Next scene: sitting down to dinner with Megan, Alexa, and Sergio. Then another scene: lying next to Sergio in bed, his toned chest and strong arms wrapped around me. I willed myself to pretend he was there with me. I knew that I was not only calming my agitated body and soothing my frayed nerves, but training my mind to trust that these wonderful scenes I was creating in my mind would become real. I couldn’t think about “when” or “how.” There was so little information to help me understand my predicament and at this moment, I didn’t want to understand, or think. I simply wanted to escape the horror.

Then I closed my eyes and simply waited for my mind to immerse itself in the river of a dreamless sleep.

Thank you for reading the first chapter in my new book “1,352 Days: A Journey from Jail to Joy”. I hope you have enjoyed the beginning of my story. If you’d like to purchase the book and continue reading you can do so by visiting my site at <http://karinvolo.com/buy-the-book/>

*Make it a joyful day
Karin*