

PRISMATIC

**Step Out of Past Shadows and into
Your Radiant Future**

DANIELLE LOPEZ

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The following pages contain true stories of the author's life and family history. In some cases, the specific details and names have been changed or omitted to protect their privacy.

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Dedication

To my mom,

Life is our canvas, and we are the artists. We mix our experiences, beliefs, and dreams to create a unique masterpiece. Some canvases start marked by adversity, others appear untouched. But the beauty of the art lies in our courage to paint over the dark spots and blend pain and joy into something transformative.

This book is dedicated to you, the bravest artist I know. Your struggles, triumphs, and lessons have guided me toward healing and understanding. In these pages, I carry forward your legacy—not by the battles you faced but by your courage, endurance, and generous love. May this book be a testament to your spirit, guiding others from darkness to light. Your resilience fuels me, and your love continues to light my path.

With all the love in the universe,

Danielle

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Introduction

If you're holding this book, it's not by accident. This is a call to those who feel an unmistakable pull towards transformation—a sign that you are ready to unlock the fullest expression of your potential. This book is a manifesto for the extraordinary, for those who dare to transcend the status quo and actively create a life of immense possibility and fulfillment.

“Prismatic” is more than just a collection of concepts—it’s a blueprint forged from hard-won life lessons, extensive study and training, and high-level business expertise. During a childhood overshadowed by poverty, neglect, and the heavy burdens of my parents’ struggles with addiction and mental illness, I was immersed in an environment where dysfunction was routine and aspirations were regularly suppressed by generational trauma. For decades, I kept the reality of my family life secret, fearing further judgment and rejection. However, I’ve come to realize that sharing how I overcame these struggles is not only my path to healing but also my gift to others. It’s my hope that by sharing my story, I’ll inspire you to recognize and share your own gifts with the world because gifts are truly meant for sharing.

These early experiences instilled a fierce determination to chart a new course. Through these trials and tribulations, I’ve distilled not only the wisdom of overcoming adversity

but also the strategic insights necessary for holistic success and personal transformation.

“Prismatic” is my gift to you, carefully crafted from a desire to help anyone feeling even an ounce of the pain I endured. You’ll gain the lessons I learned while navigating a life where fitting in was a distant dream, where family trauma was a relentless presence, and where no mentors appeared to guide me. I’ll share the insights that enabled me to discard the limiting beliefs instilled by my parents’ victim mentality, which dictated that work had to be grueling and amassing wealth was evil, all of which clashed with the life I envisioned for myself. These life experiences taught me that it’s not about where you’re from or what you’re going through; it’s about how you handle challenges and who you choose to become on the other side. From this journey, I emerged not with a map, but with a compass pointing towards a future I knew was possible.

In this book, you’ll begin by exploring the intertwining stories of three generations of women—my grandmother, my mother, and myself—each marked by her own battle with inherited trauma. These narratives set the stage for a broader exploration of how such deep-seated issues alter perception and life choices—and how they can be confronted and transformed for success.

“Prismatic” then transitions beyond narratives into a series of powerful frameworks that you can apply to any challenge you face in your life. This is not your typical self-help book; it is a journey through the layers of imposed identities and societal expectations. It challenges you to break free, to delve deep into both your darkest corners and

your brightest lights, and to reshape them into a foundation for unbounded success and fulfillment.

As you journey through these pages, expect to be engaged, to question and be questioned, and to connect with stories that resonate with universal truths. This book is designed to be your guide, your mirror, and your blueprint for a future that resonates with the essence of who you are and who you aspire to be.

Through each chapter of “Prismatic,” you will learn to navigate your past experiences, using them as catalysts for growth rather than anchors. You will be encouraged to redefine the contours of your life, not through incremental changes, but through revolutionary shifts in your mindset and actions. The exercises within these pages will challenge your current perceptions, prompt you to dismantle restrictive boundaries, and inspire you to reconstruct a life aligned with your highest aspirations.

So, prepare to unleash your potential and explore the breadth of what you can achieve. Prepare to laugh, to cry, and above all, to grow into the person you were meant to be. The path is set, the map is drawn, and your future—a range of boundless possibilities and opportunities—is waiting.

Step out of the shadows. Step into your radiance. Your prismatic future awaits. Let’s begin!

How to Get the Most Out of *Prismatic*

- 1. Take Action with the Companion Workbook:** Before plunging into the captivating tales of this book, enhance your experience by downloading the companion workbook at www.ReadPrismatic.com/workbook. This resource is designed to complement the book, offering

practical exercises and reflections to facilitate personal growth and take action toward creating the future you desire.

2. **Connect and Share:** Remember that you're not alone on this journey! Join our vibrant Facebook group at www.facebook.com/groups/prismatic to connect with like-minded individuals and share your journey of growth.
3. **Stay Inspired and Motivated:** Subscribe to our newsletter at www.DanielleLopez.info for inspiration, motivation, exclusive content, and special offers. If you're seeking additional support, personalized coaching is available to help you navigate your path to fulfillment.
4. **Shine the Light:** Spread the transformative power of *Prismatic* by sharing this book with someone who could benefit from its empowering message. Whether it's a friend struggling with inherited trauma, a loved one seeking guidance through adversity, or anyone in need of inspiration and support, gifting them a copy of *Prismatic* could be the catalyst for their own journey of growth and resilience. Together, let's illuminate the path to a brighter future for all!

Part I

Journey Through Shadows

Chapter 1

Burden of Silence

*The weight of the unspoken
carves deep rivers in the soul
awaiting the rains of courage
to set them free.*

In the serene dawn of March 1958, Pittsburgh awoke to a tranquil beauty. The chill in the air was softened by the sun's golden rays, effortlessly beaming through the light, fluffy clouds. The streets were bathed in a soft, enchanting glow. Trees adorned with spring's first blossoms gracefully danced in the breeze, their branches reaching out as if stretching to embrace the warmth of the day. One such branch scraped Patricia's bedroom window. Startled by the sound, Patricia awoke as an inexplicable wave of nausea engulfed her. Rushing to the bathroom, she found herself vomiting, a pattern that persisted for the rest of the week.

Every morning, as the first light of dawn brushed the skyline, Patricia found a sliver of hope. At precisely 6:45 a.m., she would eagerly step out of the darkness of her home. Her journey to school was her daily pilgrimage to a sanctuary where, for a few precious hours, she could don a mask of normalcy. Surrounded by the laughter of friends,

the steady guidance of her teachers, and the realms of fantasy novels, Patricia could almost forget her own sordid tale. Amidst the vibrancy of her sophomore high school environment, she found a semblance of freedom, a brief escape from the heavy burdens she carried.

Patricia's meticulously curated quiet and reserved demeanor allowed her to fade amongst the crowds and navigate incognito through the bustling hallways and energetic classrooms. This cloak of invisibility gave her a front-row seat to the teenage experience she desperately craved and allowed her to live vicariously through the adventures and dramas of her peers. Patricia soaked in the myriad emotions and events that characterized high school life, offering a glimpse into a world that seemed both close and distant. The school's halls, alive with the constant hum of energy and possibility, became her solace. In this place, she could momentarily shed the weight of her secrets and immerse herself in the collective experience of adolescence.

As the day unfolded, Patricia navigated the corridors of her school with a practiced ease, her gestures carefully measured, her laughter a well-rehearsed melody. But beneath the surface, her heart was heavy, weighed down by a reality she could share with no one. The contrast between her public persona and the private agony she endured was a deep chasm that widened with each passing day. Patricia was harboring profound sorrows and secrets that clung to her like a perpetual ominous shadow. This hidden pain was an ever-present companion, casting a long, dark silhouette across the glow of her outward appearance, silently tormenting her soul at every turn. The bell's toll at the end of each school day loomed as a constant source of dread. With each step taking her closer to home, the facade

of the typical teenager would start to crumble, revealing the fragile, burdened soul beneath.

Inside Patricia's home lurked a sinister presence that haunted her every waking moment—her father. Once a loving and caring figure, his transformation after drinking was nothing short of terrifying. Like a switch being flipped, he morphed into a bloodthirsty creature, his eyes gleaming with a predatory hunger as he stalked his prey. Returning home meant confronting this uncertain reality in her mother's absence, as she was frequently hospitalized in mental institutions. If luck were on her side, she would find her father merely passed out on the couch amongst his empty liquor bottles, granting her a temporary reprieve. Other times, he would be filled with rage, ready to verbally and physically unleash his anger on Patricia and her younger siblings. Worst of all were the afternoons she'd arrive home to find her father waiting, gazing, and filled with lust for her.

Every evening, Patricia braced herself for the inevitable onslaught, the dread gnawing at her insides as she awaited, gripped with fear, for her father's transformation. The air crackled with tension as the first sip of alcohol touched his lips, setting off a chain reaction that plunged their home into chaos. As the night wore on, consumed by anxiety, her senses heightened to every creak of the floorboards and every ominous whisper. She tiptoed around the house, trying to remain camouflaged from her father's predatory hunt, but there was no escape from his relentless pursuit.

In those moments, Patricia felt a tangled web of emotions—fear, anger, and an overwhelming sense of betrayal. She longed for the warmth and safety of her home but found herself trapped in a living nightmare, with

her own father transformed into a demon intent on tearing her world apart.

As she somberly counted the days, Patricia couldn't ignore the realization that her menstrual cycle was late, adding to her growing fear. She couldn't escape the anxieties that crept into her mind like shadows in the night. The unknown lurked before her—the changes awaiting her body, the uncertainties of childbirth, and the responsibility of motherhood. At times, her thoughts were consumed by worries about her father's reaction to the news.

Patricia had always been tall and slender, but as the months passed, her growing belly became increasingly difficult to hide. The shame and burden of the pregnancy became unbearable for her, leading to a heart-wrenching decision to drop out of high school, unsure of what her future held.

December 27, 1959, was the day that would shift young Patricia's life forever.

In the throes of intense labor pains and the distress of her unwanted pregnancy, her plight was further compounded by the harsh reality of racial segregation. Upon her arrival at the hospital, she was roughly escorted to the designated "Negros" section of the emergency room. In this dispirited space, amidst the agony of her escalating contractions, Patricia found herself waiting for hours, feeling forgotten and marginalized, as her distress deepened with each passing minute.

After what felt like an eternity, a small, motley team of hospital employees eventually assembled, and Patricia was finally admitted, her situation now dire. The air in the delivery room was thick with a sense of urgency as

they hurriedly assessed Patricia's precarious condition. Examination showed that the baby's head was pressed against the umbilical cord in the birthing canal, causing the baby's heart rate to drop dangerously low—an emergency cesarean section was imperative to safeguard both Patricia and her unborn child.

The criticality of the situation was palpable as the medical team scurried to prepare the operating room. The space resonated with a discordant cacophony of machinery beeps and muffled conversations, abruptly interrupted by Patricia's shrieks of pain. Anesthesia was administered, providing marginal relief from the physical torment. However, Patricia's mental anguish lingered as flashbacks of her father's sexual attacks and the atrocities he committed against her flooded her memory. Her heart pounded with an intensity that felt unsustainable, almost as if it threatened to escape her chest.

Nearing the end of the tumultuous pregnancy that tested every fiber of her being, both physically and emotionally, the moment of birth fatefully arrived.

As the first cries of her newborn echoed through the room, Patricia was immediately engulfed by deep sorrow. Although she prayed for emotions of maternal bliss and affection, she was filled with desolation and regret so profound they seemed to consume her entire existence. Her heart was heavy, burdened by an overwhelming shame and regret that anchored her to the hospital bed.

As the baby cried, tears of despair began their relentless descent down Patricia's cheeks, soaking the pillow beneath her. She sobbed inconsolably, each heave of her chest evidence of the profound pain that overshadowed what

should have been a moment of unbridled joy. Despite the flurry of medical professionals encircling her with congratulations, Patricia felt immensely isolated. Draped in her despair, she was profoundly disconnected from the celebratory air of the room. As she cried uncontrollably, she grappled with the realization that her journey into motherhood was beginning under a cloud of emotional turmoil, a turbulent start to what should have been a beautiful journey of love and connection.

* * *

After the baby was born, her father no longer sought after her (unbeknownst to Patricia, her father directed his assaults toward her younger sisters). Terry, the newborn baby girl, with smooth caramel skin, sparkling brown eyes, and a crown of dark curls, was a bundle of innocence and wonder. The cuteness of her tiny fingers and wiggly toes could fill any heart with pure joy. Instead, baby Terry served as a constant reminder of Patricia's hatred for her loathsome father and disgust for his unforgivable acts. Innocent baby Terry was a child that Patricia would grow to hate more and more as they grew up together.

Patricia's father insisted on her swift marriage to avoid any suspicions surrounding a child born out of wedlock. He introduced Patricia to his army comrade, Jerry—a man whose stern demeanor and distant nature were as unmistakable as his military bearing. Jerry, a private in the army, embodied a strictness that seemed to permeate the very air around him, leaving little room for warmth or friendship. Unlike the enchanting love stories many girls fantasize about, Patricia had no luxury of time to develop

such affection for Jerry. Given his cold demeanor, she often questioned his ability to love at all.

Nevertheless, at just 17 years old, Patricia was quickly married, and she and baby Terry relocated North Carolina to the first of many military bases where Jerry was stationed. During Terry's childhood, Patricia, consumed by shame and anger, would relentlessly subject Terry to verbal and physical abuse, punishing her for even the slightest misstep or sometimes for no discernible reason at all. Terry's heart sank as she was frequently ushered to the backyard to select her "switch," a chilling ritual where she had to pick the tree branch she'd be beaten with—whenever the belt wasn't readily available. Oftentimes, Terry found herself exiled to stand facing corners of the house, enduring endless hours of isolation and despair. Patricia's unpredictable wrath occasionally led to forgetfulness, leaving Terry stranded in the corner all night, trembling in fear of the looming threat of further punishment.

One day in elementary school, the fourth-grade girls and boys excitedly made their way to their respective locker rooms to change for gym class. Terry trailed at the back of the group, her footsteps weighed down by a hidden reluctance. The pace of her walk mirrored the heaviness in her heart as she silently grappled with the inner turmoil of changing into gym clothes. Terry cunningly veered off course, bypassing the locker room, and headed straight into the gymnasium in an attempt to avoid changing clothes. The observant gym teacher, pausing from setting up soccer obstacle course cones, gently reminded Terry to change before joining the class.

Feeling a mix of disappointment and embarrassment, Terry slowly trudged into the locker room with a solemn

expression and inner heartache. She stood facing the cold metal locker, contemplating her few choices before reluctantly changing into her short-sleeved gray T-shirt and matching track shorts.

She reappeared in the gymnasium in striking juxtaposition to the cheerful dolphin mascot screen printed on her gym shirt. Terry's self-consciousness was palpable as the wretched truth was unveiled before her entire class. Despite her efforts, the gym outfit failed miserably to hide the large bruises, welts, scrapes, and scars that marred her arms and legs, revealing her secretive home life. The gym teacher's eyes widened in shock as she let out a sharp gasp. Without hesitation, she hurriedly took Terry and led her back to the locker room, allowing her to change out of her gym clothes and pardoning her from class.

Chapter 2

Escape into Dawn

*Each dawn offers an escape into light
where shadows of the past dissolve.*

As Patricia and Jerry began to have more children, the sight of Terry became increasingly unbearable, stirring up painful memories with each glance. At age eleven, Terry was sent to live with Patricia's sister, Katherine, who looked after some of their younger siblings back in Pittsburgh. For Terry, living with Katherine proved to be a blessing, offering a respite from Patricia's relentless mistreatment and providing an escape from the cycle of abuse.

Patricia was the oldest of her ten siblings, born over two decades. Coincidentally, Terry was also the oldest of her ten siblings. With such a significant age gap between the two generations, Terry found herself falling within the age range of Katherine's younger siblings and was thus raised as one of the sisters. However, this placement subjected her to teasing and bullying from the older siblings. Over the years, she endured taunts about her scrawny frame, her kinky hair, and her crooked teeth. Sadly, much of this bullying stemmed from the jealousy of her aunts, who were

envious of Terry's lighter complexion compared to their own darker brown skin tones.

As one of the youngest in the family, Terry often received many hand-me-downs, often worn out and tattered. Nonetheless, Terry harbored a passion for design and dreamed of becoming a fashion designer one day. By the age of nineteen, she had developed a keen eye for style and an innate sense of innovation. She transformed the hand-me-downs into chic tube tops, sleek dresses, and patchwork bell bottoms, showcasing her talent for repurposing fabrics and creating unique, trendsetting pieces. In the midst of her challenging environment, Terry's flair for fashion served as a beacon of hope and inspiration, fueling her aspirations to break free from the constraints of her circumstances and pursue her dreams in the world of design.

Determined to design a brighter future for herself, Terry planned her escape. Under the veil of night, as her family slept, she quietly gathered her belongings and self-sewn outfits into a duffle bag. Slipping out silently, she made her way to the nearby Greyhound bus station. As she arrived, her gaze lifted to the expansive schedule board overhead. She weighed her choices, each destination a leap into the unknown. Her heart pounded with a mix of nerves and excitement, and her thoughts were a whirlwind of anticipation and uncertainty. Terry was embarking on a journey away from her past, propelled by the hope of finding something better, something more fulfilling than the life she was leaving behind.

As Terry contemplated the endless possibilities ahead of her, the primal growl of a rumbling engine approaching broke through her inner chatter. Turning toward the sound,

she watched as a shiny, brand-new 1977 Cadillac Deville pulled up to the curb. It was jet black with a cream top that matched its sleek leather interior. The “new car” smell wafted from the open windows. The car gleamed under the streetlights as a symbol of luxury and sophistication.

As the engine stopped, the driver’s door opened. A tall, handsome man in his early thirties stepped out, commanding attention as his snakeskin boots planted on the pavement. His presence radiated confidence and charisma. His tousled, long brown hair and long, wiry beard added an air of rugged charm. He was dressed in a tailored, three-piece powder blue suit with wide lapels and flared pants, and he exuded an aura of refinement and style. Terry was mesmerized as his mysterious emerald-green eyes met hers, and he flashed an alluring smile. She sensed an immediate connection, as if destiny had brought them together at that very moment.

He casually leaned against his car, lighting a cigarette. As he exhaled a billowing plume of smoke toward the night sky, his gaze shifted back to her. With a suave and confident demeanor, he tilted the pack of cigarettes toward Terry. “Would you like to join me for a smoke?”

Terry hesitated for a moment, a whirlwind of thoughts racing through her mind. There was something about this man, an aura of charm and mystery, that drew her in. She unconsciously nodded and walked toward him as though she was in a trance. He handed her a cigarette and asked, “Where ya headed tonight?”

“I... I don’t know,” she quietly replied with an honest shrug while mustering up a shy smile. She drew the cigarette to her mouth and leaned in for a light. The handsome stranger

introduced himself as Wild Bill as he chivalrously lit her cigarette. The casual introductions evolved into an hour long conversation, and before she knew it, she found herself settling into the plush cream leather passenger seat of the Cadillac. With nothing to lose, she decided to accompany Wild Bill to Baltimore, MD.

On their way to Baltimore, they exchanged stories about their lives and aspirations, sparking a connection Terry had never felt before. He had a remarkable way of acknowledging her and validating her dreams, instilling in her a sense of worth and purpose. Wild Bill made her feel seen and understood and made her dreams seem worth pursuing. Terry felt a sense of security and liberation she had never known, and Wild Bill was the key to unlocking a newfound adventurous nature within her.

As they drove on, the darkness of the night gradually gave way to the dawn, painting the sky in hues of pink and gold and filling Terry with a sense of renewal. With each passing mile, she shed the layers of doubt and fear that had held her back for so long and grew more certain of her decision to leave home. It was a leap of faith that had led her to someone who saw her beauty, intelligence, and worth—she was falling for Wild Bill. Amidst the vastness of the open road, Terry felt at home with the handsome stranger who rescued her from the bus station as she embarked on an unforgettable new chapter in her life.

Chapter 3

The Illusion of Glamour

*Behind the glittering facade of glamor
lies the raw truth of our deepest struggles.*

In just a few short months, Terry's life quickly transformed into a whirlwind of luxury and opulence, all compliments of her new love, Bill. She stayed in his upscale high-rise condo in the heart of the city, a true epitome of urban luxury. Their space was an oasis of elegance, decked with sophisticated furnishings, modern art, and panoramic views of the city's skyline that twinkled like stars. In quiet moments, Terry found comfort in the gentle hum of the city below, a reminder that she left behind the chaos of her past for the promise of a safe, bright future.

During the day, shopping sprees became a frequent indulgence as they leisurely wandered through luxury boutiques and designer stores, where attendants greeted them by name. Terry's wardrobe swiftly transformed into a dazzling array of designer labels, each piece more exquisite than the last. Shopping was often followed by dinner at the finest restaurants, where reservations were coveted. Each meal proved to be a culinary journey, from tantalizing appetizers to decadent desserts, all accompanied by a

selection of the world's finest wines. On weekends, they were fixtures in the city's elite social circle, attending lavish parties with champagne flowing and guest lists that read like a who's who of the affluent and influential. Their Saturday nights were often spent at the VIP tables of the city's most exclusive nightclubs, where they immersed themselves in the pulsating beats and vibrant energy and danced the night away.

Despite all the extravagance, their love remained the most precious aspect of their lives. Their bond seemed unbreakable, a deep connection that was brighter than the dazzling city lights and their opulent lifestyle. They treasured shared quiet moments amidst the hustle of the city, reminders that in the heart of all their luxury, their love was the true gem.

There was just one element of this picturesque lifestyle that constantly eluded Terry—the exact source of Bill's wealth remained a mystery, a secret he guarded with calculated precision. She harbored a quiet curiosity about how Bill amassed his fortune, yet this curiosity was tempered by her contentment with the luxurious lifestyle he provided. The extravagant comforts and privileges that came with Bill's wealth provided a stark contrast to the dismal life she'd known, and this undeniable attraction led her to refrain from probing too deeply. During their time together, Terry noticed distinctive tattoos on Bill's calves, signifying his involvement in the 101st Airborne and 82nd Airborne Army Paratrooper divisions. He shared that he'd jumped from [perfectly good] airplanes directly into the battlefields of the jungles in Vietnam. She couldn't help but wonder if his riches were wartime reparations for his unimaginable bravery. Even as questions about Bill's wealth lingered in

the back of her mind, she chose to focus on the present joys and the shared extravagance of their lifestyle, avoiding the potentially unsettling truths that might lie beneath the surface.

But little did Terry know that this lavish facade was built on a foundation of deceit and illegal activities. Behind the exterior of a refined businessman, Bill was actually a purveyor of fine and rare cocaine, selling it discreetly along the East Coast, from the bustling streets of New York City to the quiet suburbs of Baltimore, MD. The demand for his exclusive product grew, and with it came the glamor of high-profile clients. He took great pride in serving Broadway's top stars and their entourages throughout the late 1970's. As whispers of Bill's name spread within high society, so did the scrutiny of the authorities, and the FBI began to close in on his activities. The opulent world they had created was built on shaky ground, threatening to collapse at any moment.

One evening, in the calm serenity of their high-rise condo, Terry and Bill were enjoying a quiet dinner together. The setting sun cast a warm, golden glow over the city, visible through their panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows, adding a touch of magic to yet another perfect evening. The tranquility of the moment was abruptly broken when authorities appeared. Without warning, the door burst open, and a team of law enforcement agents swarmed into their once peaceful abode like angry hornets. The atmosphere quickly turned chaotic as the officers ransacked their home in a rigorous search. The officers, overturning furniture and rifling through their belongings, transformed the elegant space into disarray reminiscent of a tornado's aftermath.

Their relentless search continued until the authorities uncovered a hidden stash of cocaine nestled under a pile of men's clothing in the back of a wardrobe—a discovery that immediately shifted their focus to Bill. In a flash, they handcuffed him and read him his rights as they prepared to take him into custody. Terry stood frozen in shock and disbelief as she watched the love of her life being taken from their destroyed sanctuary. The peaceful backdrop of the fading sunset over the city was in stark contrast to the remnants of their disrupted dinner and the dramatic turn of events. Bill was arrested, leaving Terry alone for the first time in her life, bewildered and devastated. She didn't even have a chance to tell him the surprise—she was pregnant.

Pregnant, alone, and betrayed, Terry found herself facing the harsh reality of their situation. The luxurious life she had grown accustomed to was all a lie, masking the dark truth of Bill's criminal dealings. The lavish parties and high society friends quickly vanished like smoke, leaving behind only a trail of broken promises and crushed dreams. The silence of the empty apartment echoed her loneliness, and the once bright future they had planned together was now obscured by uncertainty. The weight of the truth bore down on Terry's shoulders, and she couldn't help but wonder if their love had ever been real or just a carefully crafted illusion.

As days passed without hearing from Bill, the riches that once dazzled her lost their luster, replaced by a longing for something genuine and true. Their belongings were being repossessed weekly, and Terry found herself grappling with the daunting task of fending for herself and her unborn child. His absence left a void in her heart, but it was a void she knew she needed to fill with her own strength and resilience. Lacking a high school diploma or any real work

experience, she ventured out for some fresh air to clear her mind and contemplate her next step. In an effort to find some direction, she walked a few blocks to her favorite coffee shop, a cozy, familiar place where the aroma of freshly brewed coffee always seemed to stir her thoughts and inspire new ideas.

She settled into a shiny red, patent leather bar stool at the counter near the pie display and struck up a conversation with the owner, Betty. Betty, a warm and nurturing older woman with a motherly presence and a full figure, radiated a sense of warmth and compassion. As their conversation progressed, Terry felt comfortable confiding in her, sharing the intricate details of her current predicament.

Betty listened with kindness; her years of experience as an informal coffee shop therapist gave her a deep sense of empathy. Touched by Terry's plight and need for help, Betty extended an offer for Terry to work at another business she owned, a nearby nightclub, proposing a position as a dancer. This role was something entirely outside of Terry's realm of experience and imagination—especially with her growing belly. Despite her apprehensions and the unknown aspects of this new path, the pressing truth of her situation made the choice clear. Out of necessity, Terry accepted Betty's proposition.

"Be there at 9:00 tonight and ask for Sparkle ... and dress to impress." Betty said with an encouraging wink, placing her hand reassuringly on Terry's shoulder.

* * *

Sparkle led Terry through a maze of dressing rooms and backstage areas. As Terry followed, she absorbed the sights

and sounds of her new workplace, a blend of music, chatter, and the distant click-clack of high heels on hard floors. As they moved through the backstage area, Sparkle pointed out the various facilities, from the makeup stations brimming with an array of cosmetics, to the costume racks filled with an eclectic mix of attire. Terry noted the performers' focused preparations, their expressions an odd mix of reluctance yet determination.

As the tour progressed, Terry slowly began to realize the true nature of the club. It wasn't just any dance club; it was a strip club, a significant detail that had not been disclosed to her earlier. This revelation hit her like a bolt of lightning, adding shock and disbelief to her already overwhelming experience. She began to panic. How could she bring herself to dance naked—and *pregnant* in front of strangers!?

Sparkle nonchalantly took a hit of a marijuana joint and passed it to Terry. "Here, try this. It'll relax you." Terry hesitantly followed suit and quickly felt a warmth spread over her body, calming her jittery nerves. Sparkle, with her confident smile, seemed like an anchor in this whirlwind of glitter and gyrating bodies. "You'll be great," Sparkle reassured her, reaching out and gently squeezing Terry's trembling hand.

Terry glanced around the dimly lit and smoky backstage, her eyes adjusting to the flurry of activity. Dancers in glittering thong bikinis moved with an air of confidence that Terry couldn't help but admire. The idea of dancing in such ensembles in front of an audience of ogling men was terrifying. But as she watched cascading wads of dollar bills bouncing over the g-string waistbands of dancers prancing past, the thought of the money she could earn, the money she needed, was a powerful motivator.

“Everyone’s nervous their first time,” Sparkle said, her voice a blend of reassurance and experience. “But you’ll find your rhythm. Just be yourself out there.”

The first few nights were a blur for Terry. She hesitantly took to the stage, her initial movements stiff and uncertain. But as nights turned into weeks, Terry began to find her footing. The music became her guide, and her body responded with a fluidity she hadn’t known she possessed. She was surprised to find a sense of liberation in dance, a freedom that amplified the club’s shimmering lights and energetic beats. As Terry’s confidence grew, so did her popularity. Regular clients, mostly men in suits looking for an escape from their mundane lives, would flock to the club, asking specifically for Terry. They were mesmerized by her unique style, a mix of grace and boldness that set her apart. Terry could see their admiration, their eyes following her every move, and it fueled her performances. The tips they gave were generous, filling her purse with more cash than she had ever seen.

Sparkle became more than just a trainer; she was a friend and confidante. In between sets backstage, they exchanged stories and laughter, building an unbreakable bond. Sparkle taught Terry not just how to dance, but how to survive in a world that was often unforgiving for women like them. There were moments when the leering gazes felt too intrusive, the whispers too crude. But she reminded herself why she was there: Bill, who was serving time in jail, and her own need for financial independence to support herself and her unborn child.

Just like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon and spreading its brilliant new wings, dancing allowed Terry

to undergo a metamorphosis, transforming her from a timid newcomer into a dazzling star attraction at the club. However, her rising success prompted questions about her future and whether this was the life she envisioned for herself and her baby. As she saved her nightly earnings, Terry's aspirations began to extend beyond the club's neon-lit confines, fueling dreams of potentially starting her own clothing line or returning to school, once unthinkable opportunities. This period of her life, while unexpected, endowed her with more than financial security; it instilled strength, resilience, and a renewed sense of self. Dancing under the spotlight, Terry recognized that she had evolved far beyond being a scared girl running away from home—she was now a woman empowered by her dreams and ambitions and equipped with the courage to chase them.

Fueled by her love for fashion and determination to chase her dreams, Terry tailored unique dance costumes that cleverly concealed her growing pregnancy, allowing her to continue performing for as long as possible. Through dancing, she earned enough money to secure a downtown apartment at 1010 St. Paul Street, marking the first time in her life she could support her own independence.

During the day, Terry poured her energy into refining her craft as a fashion designer and nurturing her dreams of success in the industry. She channeled her creativity into every stitch and seam. At night, she mesmerized audiences with her dance performances at the club, captivating them with her agility and grace. As her pregnancy progressed and her belly became too noticeable to hide, she transitioned to work in Betty's coffee shop behind the counter. Nearly a year after his arrest in October 1983, Bill was finally

released from jail and quickly rebuilt his cocaine trade to take care of Terry and their new baby girl, Danielle.

Despite earning a steady income at the coffee shop, Terry found herself yearning for the nights when she used to rake in stacks of cash. The allure of fast money, fur coats, and dripping in jewels reminiscent of her past tugged at her, creating a sense of longing for the lifestyle she once enjoyed. Terry found herself irresistibly lured back into the grimy nightclub scene, where she once again took up exotic dancing. But this return plunged her headfirst into a murky underworld, swimming with seedy characters and illicit activities, and lines between right and wrong blurred into an abyss.

Terry frequently found herself consumed by intense guilt and distress as she reflected on the trajectory her life had taken. In an attempt to escape the overwhelming weight of shame that burdened her, she sought solace in alcohol, marijuana, and cocaine. These drugs became her temporary escape, providing a fleeting refuge from the relentless onslaught of remorse and disappointment that plagued her daily existence.

When she was high, her inhibitions were low, and the sultry music seemingly possessed her, prompting primal, seductive, and salacious routines. Her moves caught the eyes of exceedingly wealthy men who were willing to pay any price for their satisfaction, drawing her deeper into a lifestyle far removed from her initial intentions. Her entrancing demeanor became both her strength and her vulnerability in this world of desire and indulgence. One client led to another until Terry was regularly escorting high-profile clients home after her shift. This new role was

a bleak departure from anything she had ever imagined for herself, symbolic of the intricate and treacherous web of circumstances she was now entangled in.

Amid the turmoil, Bill, too, became ensnared in the world of drug and alcohol abuse. Rather than safeguarding Terry as his companion, he began to exploit her for his own financial gain. Opportunistically, he took on the role of her pimp, leveraging his vast network of wealthy cocaine clients to introduce Terry to new prospects. This sleazy shift in their dynamic intertwined her destiny even further with the dangerous underworld that was gradually engulfing them both.

After months of self-destruction, Bill, realizing their grim path, decided it was time for a change. He saw an opportunity for redemption, a chance to break away from the chaos that was destroying their lives. In hopes of turning a new leaf, Bill moved Terry and their young daughter Danielle from Baltimore, MD, to the Northern Liberties neighborhood of Philadelphia, PA, seeking a fresh start. They aimed to break free from the nightclub scene, seeking a stable and healthy environment for their family.

Despite their best efforts, the ghosts of their past continued to haunt them. Terry occasionally resorted to escorting for quick cash as they succumbed to the cycle of drug and alcohol addiction. Their battle with substance abuse intensified, transitioning from snorting cocaine to smoking crack, a more dangerous and addictive habit. This descent into darkness had detrimental financial consequences, depleting their resources at an alarming rate.

Part II
Toward the Light

Chapter 4

Shadows of Suburbia

*Shadows whisper of hidden battles
fought in the quest for light.*

As a child, I have vivid memories of accompanying my father, Bill, to his acupuncture sessions aimed at helping him quit cocaine. The treatment room was set up with chairs in a large oval, all facing inward. The acupuncturists, two young Asian women, moved around the inner circle, placing needles on specific pressure points tailored to each patient's needs. When it was my dad's turn, the acupuncturist carefully positioned about six needles in his face. I noticed he was observing a patient to his right, who had a needle between his eyes. Curious, he insisted on the same placement.

The acupuncturist declined, explaining the personalized nature of the treatment and the risks of misplacement. But my dad had always been rebellious, indifferent to authority and rules, and always was charting his own course regardless of consequences. He pressed on with his request persistently, his voice now raised in frustration, so she reluctantly placed a needle between his eyes.

The moment the needle was inserted, my dad began to convulse. I stood witnessing, petrified, as another practitioner rushed over, swiftly removed the needle, and sat across his lap. She started rapidly slapping his left cheek while fervently whispering, “Come on, Bill,” trying to bring him back to consciousness.

Faced with financial ruin and unable to sustain our life in Philadelphia, my dad was forced to make a humbling decision to move in with his mom. Growing up, my dad often shared stories about his strained relationship with his mother, Beatrice. He was admittedly a difficult child—involved in theft, fights, and frequented juvenile detention centers. This strained relationship seemed rooted, at least in part, in the absence of his father. His father left when my dad was very young and started a new family, leaving a void in my dad’s life. His father’s early death from a heart attack in his fifties only cemented this absence.

When we moved in with Beatrice, the friction was palpable. She harbored not just resentment toward my father for his troubled past, but also for bringing a Black woman and their biracial child—my mother and me—into her home. Born in 1909, Beatrice’s views were firmly entrenched, including her blatant racism, which manifested in a clear detest for my mother. The household was often filled with arguments, and as a four-year-old, I felt that Beatrice’s animosity toward my parents extended to me as well. Living under her roof, I often felt unwanted and unwelcome. In retrospect, she was a retired divorcée who had envisioned a tranquil life in her golden years. But the unexpected arrival of her drug-addicted, PTSD-afflicted son and his mixed-race family disrupted her plans for a peaceful retirement. This intrusion, against her wishes,

undoubtedly upended the quiet existence she had longed for.

Beatrice, or “Maw” as I called her in time, feared that if I started kindergarten while living at her address, she’d be stuck with us throughout my high school years. She took immense pride in her HR role at Strawbridge & Clothier, a department store she held in high regard. Each morning, she took great care and effort in dressing herself meticulously, readying herself for the day ahead. In the meantime, I would quietly slip out past the dining room’s floor-length brown floral curtains, escape through the sliding glass door, and cross the yard to catch the bus to kindergarten, inadvertently confirming Maw’s deepest worry: that our stay with her was permanent.

When we first moved in, the neighborhood wasn’t too fond of my mom, either. One night, the startling crash of a window breaking sent us rushing to investigate. There, on the foyer floor, lay a rock with a note tied around it that read, “Get out, nigger.” The hateful message shook us to the core, but it also strengthened our resolve not to be intimidated or driven away. Over time, the neighborhood came to adore my mom just as much as we did, drawn to her bubbly personality, her silly sense of humor, and her generous offerings of baked goods. While the journey was challenging, it reaffirmed our commitment to stand against prejudice and foster inclusiveness wherever we went.

My struggles extended beyond the tense atmosphere at home; I also faced opposition at school. The kids at school used to tease me for being biracial, calling me an ‘oreo’ because I’m black and white. Their taunting hurt me deeply, and for years, I avoided eating Oreos because of those painful memories. (As an adult, I’ve come to realize that Oreos are

delicious, and now they're one of my favorite treats!) Kids at school also loved making fun of my hair. The summer before fourth grade, my mom, exasperated with the difficulty of managing my long, curly hair, decided to cut it herself to save money. She placed me on a stool in the center of my bedroom, armed with a retractable ruler to measure and cut my hair evenly. However, the curls, previously weighed down by their length, sprang up into a tight, coiled "afro" once cut. Upon returning to school in the fall, I was teased and ridiculed for looking like a boy with my new haircut, further validating my inclinations of not fitting in.

Financial hardships at home frequently spilled over into my school life. My parents, having squandered their money on drugs, left us shopping at the Salvation Army out of necessity long before it was considered fashionable. When I was in the fifth grade, Michael Jordan was a huge inspiration, fueling my love for the Chicago Bulls, although I lived in the suburbs of Philadelphia. I remember rummaging through clothing racks and finding a black, red, and white Chicago Bulls newspaper print-designed T-shirt. It was size large and way oversized for my size small frame, but I was ecstatic to have found such a treasure and pleaded with my mom to buy it for me.

I wore it to school the next day with pride, but my excitement quickly turned to humiliation. The class basketball star—who was also the class bully—accosted me, confidently declaring, "That's my shirt!" He insisted it was a shirt his family had recently donated to the Salvation Army. Despite my attempts to brush it off and claim it was a gift from my mom, Sherman's combative proclamation—"Yeah, she got it for you from the Salvation Army!"—left me exposed and embarrassed as my peers pointed and laughed.

This incident solidified my outsider status. Despite my best efforts to blend in, my clothing evidently screamed poverty, making it clear that my household was struggling. I kept the true nature of our family's difficulties to myself, never revealing the turmoil and challenges we faced at home to anyone at school.

At school, I was part of a program that provided meal tickets to students in need. While I was grateful for the hot meals, using these tickets in front of my peers often put me in an uncomfortable spot. Kids would ask about them, and it was embarrassing to explain that I needed to use them because my parents couldn't afford to give me money for lunch. At home, my diet was far from healthy, though I didn't really understand that back then.'. Orange soda and Ramen noodles were staples that we received from local food banks. Holiday dinners were made possible thanks to donation baskets from local food drives.

Even with food stamps for groceries, making ends meet was a struggle. I remember numerous times when my dad would have me act as a lookout while he shoplifted things that food stamps didn't cover, like vitamins and personal care items. Given my dad's disregard for rules and authority, I sensed that stealing was more about the thrill for him rather than necessity. He would return to the car from the supermarket, boasting about how many steaks and lobster tails he had managed to smuggle in his jeans. My mom and I once had to pick him up from the local drugstore because he got caught shoplifting. When confronted by the security guard about stealing razors, he casually shrugged and responded nonchalantly, "Because I needed a shave."

My parents were never able to afford a reliable car. Annually, they'd scrape together a few hundred dollars

to buy a barely functional car, lovingly referred to as their “hooptie,” drive it until it broke down, and start all over again the next year. These hoopties, with their loud exhausts, dangling side mirrors, cracked windshields, and broken tail lights, inevitably drew the attention of the police. My dad had a trick to distract oncoming police cars to divert their attention from the car’s violations and expired inspection stickers—he’d start to fumble with the rearview mirror. His tactic usually worked. But when it didn’t, getting pulled over sometimes meant more than just a ticket. Once the officers discovered his revoked driver’s license (revoked for decades into the future), numerous unpaid tickets, and outstanding arrest warrants in various states, routine pullovers sometimes culminated in brief stints in the county jail.

I recall a specific incident when I was with him during one of these stops, just blocks from our house. As a child, I was overcome with fear of him being arrested again, and I impulsively jumped out of the car and ran home, leaving my dad to handle the situation alone. Arriving home, my mom immediately asked, “Where’s your father?” When he eventually returned, he recounted how the police were extra suspicious, given a young girl—me—had abruptly left the car during their investigation. He had to convince them that I was actually his daughter, which wasn’t immediately apparent as he was white and I was biracial, adding yet another layer of suspicion to the situation.

Every month, my mom had the task of delivering my dad’s monthly fine payment to the local county courthouse. Along with the payment, she always carried her famous homemade peanut butter cookies, a thoughtful gesture designed to win over the clerks, particularly on occasions when they had to overlook late or missed payments. A

missed payment would not only incur additional fines but also pose the risk of my dad being sent back to jail, a prospect that loomed over our heads like a dark cloud. The mere sound of a knock at our door would send us into a state of panic. We would freeze in place, resembling statues, dreading that it might be the constable arriving to arrest my dad again.

One fateful day, our statue routine failed—the constable made his way in and conducted a thorough search of our home for my dad. In a frantic rush, my mother directed me to help hide my dad in a portable U-Haul wardrobe in their bedroom—a room they rarely allowed me to enter. After hiding my dad, I noticed numerous small bronze graduated cylinders and a miniature seesaw lined up along their dresser. It was years later that I came to realize these as weights and a scale, essential tools for my dad’s cocaine sales. Eventually, the constable left, luckily without finding my dad.

Close behind the number of times he was arrested, my dad was frequently hospitalized. My parents regularly disappeared for hours, sometimes days, on trips downtown to get high while I waited for them to come home. During one of my parents’ many trips downtown to buy crack cocaine, my dad suffered a brutal attack and robbery, which sent him to the hospital. He was hit in the head with a glass bottle, endured broken ribs, and suffered a fractured cheekbone. I remember our classroom activity where we made Get-Well cards for him. Unforgettably, my classmate made a card that read, “I hope you get well soon. I didn’t do it!”

Regrettably, at times, they’d bring me with them to buy drugs, leaving me to wait for what felt like forever in the car.

The memory that lingers most painfully is from Halloween, when I was about nine years old. They assured me it would be a quick trip, yet as I sat confined in the car, the daylight faded to darkness. I watched for hours, my heart heavy with sadness, as children passed by in a flurry of laughter and excitement, as they joyfully trick-or-treated while I missed the entire night.

The cumulative events of my childhood left an indelible mark on me. Witnessing my parents' struggles with addiction and the turmoil it brought into our lives, from financial ruin to frequent encounters with law enforcement, shaped my understanding of the world at a young age. The animosity within our household, exacerbated by strained relationships and racial tensions, created an environment fraught with uncertainty and fear. As a result, I learned to navigate the complexities of family dysfunction, poverty, and discrimination, and from a tender age, imprinting on me a resilience born out of necessity. These early experiences instilled in me a sense of self-reliance and determination to overcome adversity, setting the stage for the challenges and triumphs that lay ahead in my journey to adolescence.

Chapter 5

Seeking Harmony in Discord

*Amidst life's discord
harmony awaits those who listen closely
turning cacophony into a symphony.*

Music served as an ideal escape from my childhood, allowing me to immerse myself in harmonious sounds and overshadow the noisy turmoil of my home life. I started my musical journey at age nine by joining the school choir, a choice influenced by my parent's inability to afford extracurricular activities. My mom, determined to broaden my musical exposure, pleaded with the music teacher to waive the violin rental fee so I could join the orchestra as well. I continued with both choir and orchestra throughout high school. My dedication and talent even led to my acceptance into exclusive county choirs and regional orchestras. However, as the years passed, the dramatic theme song to my home life crescendoed.

I was in fifth grade when we began to notice a significant shift in Maw's behavior. One distinct memory is of finding her seated in the driveway, perched on a wooden folding chair, dressed only in a long silk slip and a wool winter peacoat despite the frigid weather. A small green vintage

suitcase was stowed under her chair as if she were seated on a plane ready to take off. When we asked her why she was sitting outside, she calmly mentioned she was waiting for Delilah, my dad's sister, to pick her up. Upon calling Delilah to ask her ETA, we discovered there were no such plans. This incident was just the beginning of Maw's increasingly peculiar behavior.

On another occasion, I found her attempting to hang the wide end of a wire hanger around her foot. Baffled, I asked her what she was doing. She calmly explained that she was trying to put on her "shoe." Apart from these peculiar behaviors, her physical health was also declining; she was falling more frequently and becoming incontinent. Learning of this decline, Delilah decided to move Maw into a nursing home to address her growing needs.

During Maw's decline, a significant development occurred unbeknownst to us. Delilah, with whom my dad shared a long-standing feud, covertly assumed power of attorney over Maw. This was particularly striking since my parents and I were the ones providing daily care for Maw, not Delilah. The bad blood between Delilah and my dad dates back to their childhood. My dad often resentfully recounted how she'd thrown away his cherished collections of rare baseball cards from the 1940s and 1950s, as well as his vintage model train set, while he was serving in Vietnam—items that would surely be valuable collectibles.

Our ability to visit Maw in the nursing home was limited since we rarely had a reliable car for the long trip. So we could only go when we managed to scrape together enough money for train tickets. During these visits, we'd try to gauge her memory and would hesitantly ask if she

remembered our names and other facts, like the date and where she was. On one occasion, she pointed to my mom and confidently named her “Scratch-a-Belly Black-Flip.” There was an awkward silence before my parents and I burst into laughter. Whether this was a backhanded expression of her enduring disdain for my mom or just pure confusion, we weren’t sure, but it surely broke the tension of the somber moment.

The last time I saw Maw was amidst the chill of December. She was curled up in her bed, lying on her side, facing the wall, seemingly withdrawn from the world around her. The coldness of the season seemed to mirror her state of isolation. She appeared to be lost in the depths of her mind and engulfed in profound loneliness, symptomatic of her worsening Alzheimer’s. I had always felt that it was this disconnection that ultimately led to her passing during the frigid embrace of winter. However, decades later, a chilling truth came to light—Delilah, who held the legal authority to make healthcare decisions for her, had chosen not to initiate tube feeding when Maw could no longer feed herself.

This incident was the first in a series of events that unveiled her truly ruthless character. Her decision was not a merciful act to ease suffering, but a cold, calculated choice to let her mother starve. The admission that it was not Alzheimer’s but rather Delilah’s frigid heart that led to Maw’s death left me grappling with a profound sense of betrayal and sorrow. As I reflected on our family’s complex and painful history, this revelation added a new layer of anguish to the memory of Maw’s final, lonely winter in 1995.

In the months that passed after Maw’s death, my parents and I were shrouded by a complex mix of emotions,

combining relief, unresolved tension, and sorrow over the loss. Her death marked an end to the daily confrontation but also to any chance of reconciliation. We mourned not just her passing but the family life that never was. The household atmosphere shifted from constant tension to a reflective, somber state, pondering the troubled past and the lost opportunities for understanding.

* * *

Soon, it was June, and the hot and humid air was a harbinger of summer's approach and the end of the school year. The oppressive heat suddenly gave way to an unexpected torrential downpour. At first, the rain brought a sense of relief, cooling the sizzling streets and invigorating the neighborhood. However, this respite was short-lived, as the rain persisted, both day and night, relentlessly pouring down. By the next morning, the downpour had transformed our street into a shallow yet fast-flowing river.

The rain's impact was widespread, causing power outages and leaving the city scrambling to clear debris from the roads. Cars stalled in the flooded streets and fallen trees added to the chaos. School was canceled, but my parents were still obligated to go to work, leaving me at home alone to face the escalating situation. As the day wore on, the floodwaters continued to rise alarmingly. The water, which had initially rushed past the curb, now began to inch its way up our lawn. In my youthful naivety, I was confident it wouldn't rise further. But within hours, to my astonishment, the water level elevated, creeping past the sidewalk and reaching halfway up our lawn. The reality of the situation began to dawn on me as I watched the water steadily encroach upon our home.

I remained rooted at my bedroom window, transfixed as though watching a horror movie unfold, surveying the water levels rise with a desperate hope that it wouldn't actually invade my home. Yet, before I knew it, the rainwater began seeping under the walls of my bedroom. I was just twelve at the time, and a sense of uncertainty and helplessness washed over me, but I knew I had to act fast. In a frantic attempt to save our belongings, I grabbed Maw's prized floor-length brown floral curtains, climbed onto her hand-carved cherry wood dining chair, and hoisted the curtains over the curtain rod, mindful of her past admonitions not to tamper with those expensive drapes or mess with her furniture.

As I rushed around the house, trying to safeguard what furniture and belongings I could, Carina, our neighbor, bravely navigated the torrential river of our street to come to my rescue. Bursting through the front door, she called out urgently, "Come on, Danielle, you have to get out of here!" Grasping my hand tightly, she guided me through the raging flood waters that had engulfed our neighborhood. We fought our way through the muddy, sewage-filled currents, finally reaching the safety of her house at higher ground, just a few doors down and across the street. Her timely intervention was a lifesaver amidst the chaos of the rising floodwaters.

Being rescued from the flood by Carina was an immense relief; her home had always been a haven for me. As a nurse, her caring and compassionate nature always shined through, and she became a close friend to my mom. Her husband, Dolan, a hardworking laborer like my dad, ran his own pool company. On occasions when Dolan needed an extra hand, and my dad was out of work, he would hire my dad, continuing a bond that extended back to their youth.

My dad and Dolan, along with Dolan's brothers, had known each other since they were boys, their fathers being close friends.

Carina's kitchen was very different from ours; it was always stocked with the best snacks, while I was accustomed to canned produce and boxed meal kits from food banks. Their house boasted an actual pinball machine, the latest Nintendo systems with all the accessories and latest games, and even a swimming pool. Winnie, Carina's middle child, was my best friend; we grew up like sisters. That night, I stayed at their house, and I remember wearing one of Winnie's outfits to school the next day—Zoobas pants with a matching boxy crop top, both with a cartoon Muscle Beach themed pattern of muscle men lifting huge weights and chest-pressing massive barbells.

The devastation in our neighborhood was so severe that it was declared a federal disaster area, prompting FEMA to step in with financial aid. The local news read, "*A string of powerful thunderstorms dumped as much as eight inches of rain on the northern Philadelphia suburbs late Wednesday, causing flash floods that killed two people and knocked out power to about 100,000 homes.*"

Our house suffered extensive damage. Watermarks showed that the flood had reached three and a half feet, forcing us to tear out the lower halves of drywall and insulation soaked by the creek's floodwaters. The carpets and their padding were also unsalvageable, leaving us with cold, bare, dusty concrete floors. All our furniture and belongings on the lower level were ruined and had to be discarded. Adding insult to injury, Delilah had cunningly

transferred the property into her name, reducing us to mere tenants. Consequently, all the financial assistance for repairs went to her, but she had no intention of restoring a house where her estranged brother lived, even though I, just a child, was also a victim of their bitter feud. Consequently, I endured living in the flood-ravaged, cold, dusty house, a silent casualty of their long-standing grudge.

The situation was grim, often without heat and hot water because we couldn't afford to have the oil tank filled. We stayed layered up in extra clothing from October through April. During harsher cold spells, we resorted to using little Sterno heating cans and kerosene heaters to create warm spots around the house. For hot water, we boiled water on the stove and bathed from a pot. The conditions were shameful and depressing, a constant reminder of Delilah's callous nature and the battle within our family. We endured those abominable living conditions for seven long years until Delilah could legally evict us. During that time, my childhood was far from normal. The state of our home was so dismal that I was too embarrassed to have friends over, effectively precluding me from having typical childhood experiences like playdates and sleepovers.

Chapter 6

Grit and Growth

*Through the soil of hardship
seeds of grit sprout
proving that true growth often blooms
in the most unexpected places.*

From an early age, I understood the importance of self-sufficiency and realized that relying on my parents for support wasn't a viable option. At fourteen, I landed my first job at a local strip mall pizza shop, embarking on a thirty-minute walk to earn cash under the table since I wasn't legally old enough to work. The thrill of earning my own money and the sense of empowerment it brought was liberating. Before this job, my first work experience was during school fundraisers. I'd use my charm to sell loads of cookies and candies in the neighborhood, only to have my parents "borrow" the money with unfulfilled promises of repayment. This left me humiliated and unable to deliver the orders that my neighbors entrusted to me.

Once I started working, I juggled multiple jobs simultaneously to maximize my earnings. Alongside waitressing at the pizza shop, I secured a position at McDonald's, where I was a cook, cashier, and everything

in between. I'd trek nearly an hour through the woods following the creek and emerge near the restaurant, just across from the I-95 highway.

Despite the demands of full-time work and extracurricular commitments of orchestra and choir, I maintained a respectable academic standing in high school, driven by a fervent passion for learning. While I recognized that juggling multiple jobs meant sacrificing some academic excellence, I remained steadfast in my belief that excelling in school and getting into a reputable college would pave the way to a brighter future. It was my ticket out of the perpetual cycle of menial jobs and, most importantly, offered a means of escape from the tumultuous environment of my home life.

With average grades and limited finances, college options were limited: either Temple University in Philadelphia or the local community college. Temple held a unique significance in my family history; my father had been expelled from Temple during his freshman year for his involvement in anti-war protests following his tours in Vietnam.

Admission to Temple University unveiled a world of diversity and inclusivity that I had always yearned for. Amidst its eclectic student body, representing various cultures and backgrounds, I discovered a newfound sense of belonging. It was a place where I felt accepted and embraced, allowing me to shed my insecurities and grow more comfortable in my own skin.

To pay my way through college, I joined ROTC, perhaps subconsciously following in my father's footsteps. Little did I know the journey ahead would test me both mentally and physically in ways I never imagined. Early morning drills became routine, awakening before dawn to face the

grueling physical fitness tests that awaited. From relentless runs to intense strength training sessions, every day presented a new trial. Enduring long hours of training while balancing military science studies with my college classes required a level of resilience and fortitude I hadn't known before.

As I continued to balance school and ROTC, my days were a relentless cycle of hustle and determination. Mornings were spent behind the counter of a hometown bagel shop, serving up breakfast to early risers. Then, I'd take the train one hour into the city, where a full day of classes awaited me. After classes, I'd make the journey back home for an evening shift at a hotel steakhouse, where I'd wait tables until closing time. The long hours and demanding workload were tough, but I was determined to make ends meet and pursue my dreams.

Initially, I had set my sights on a career in healthcare, following a pre-med track. I envisioned myself making a difference in people's lives as a healthcare practitioner. However, despite my best efforts, organic chemistry proved to be a formidable challenge. Failing the course twice due to the demands of my full-time work and commuting schedules forced me to reassess my path. I shifted my focus to a dual major in marketing and international business, with minors in Spanish and economics. It was a strategic move, aligning my academic pursuits with my interests and strengths while still offering promising career prospects in the business world.

The demanding juggling act of ROTC, work schedules, and school during college not only left me exhausted but also triggered feelings of anxiety and depression. While these

emotions lingered in the background during high school, it wasn't until college that I fully grasped their presence. One particular memory remains vivid: I watched as two students greeted each other with exuberant hugs, their laughter and lively banter permeating the atmosphere around them. The girls exchanged stories with sparkling enthusiasm; their faces lit up with genuine warmth and affection for each other. Each hug and shared giggle seemed to weave them closer together, a vivid display of friendship that was both beautiful and enviable. As I watched their effortless connection, a deep sense of loneliness washed over me. Their bond highlighted the stark emptiness in my own life, igniting a deep yearning for such friendships. This moment not only magnified my isolation but also intensified my desire for my own circle of close, trusted friends. Despite the diverse student body that made me feel less conspicuous, I still struggled to let others in. I feared that if they delved too deep, they would uncover my harsh realities of poverty and turmoil at home, the consequences of my parents' ongoing struggles with drugs and alcohol. This fear reinforced my sense of isolation despite the inclusive environment surrounding me.

I took on the role of director of external communication for our American Marketing Association student chapter, determined to press forward despite my inner struggles. Every Friday, we hosted business professionals who shared valuable insights into various career paths. It was during one of these events that I crossed paths with a recruiter from Johnson & Johnson, which ultimately led to a golden opportunity: a coveted position as a pharmaceutical sales representative. Remarkably, I secured the position two months before even graduating, a testament to my

resilience and determination to carve out a brighter future for myself.

* * *

The month after graduation was spent following an intense “home study” schedule, diligently working through online modules and medical textbooks provided by my new employer. My focus was on anatomy, pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, multiple disease states, our products, and those of our competitors. This rigorous preparation was in anticipation of an even more grueling phase: a three-week training where 250 new hires from across the country convened for intensive training by day and exhaustive study sessions by night. This was even more demanding than college! The in-depth daily training was followed by testing—passing meant progressing to the next day, but failing meant immediate termination and being sent home.

Despite the need to concentrate on my new job, this was my first time living away from home, and I was eager to seize the opportunity—especially since I hadn’t experienced living on a college campus. I happily joined some fellow trainees for dinner at a local restaurant during our first week of training. During dinner, everyone seemed to be opening up about their lives, so I thought it was the right time to share my background. As I delved into my upbringing, I could sense a shift in the atmosphere. While my colleagues tried to maintain a polite facade, it was evident they were taken aback and gradually withdrew from conversation with me.

I ordered a drink to ease my discomfort and shift my focus. A few drinks and one literal misstep later, I found

myself falling from the table I was drunkenly dancing on, fortunately breaking my fall with a banquette. I don't remember the rest of our time at the restaurant, but later that night, I found myself suddenly awakened by bathtub water creeping up to my nose. From that night on, I decided to keep a low profile outside of training and focus solely on my studies to stay out of trouble. Despite isolating myself and logging extensive study hours, adhering to the demanding training schedule was extremely challenging, and my exam scores were suffering.

My difficulties (and my drunken fall) didn't go unnoticed, and a fellow trainee, Eric, kindly offered to tutor me. I'll never forget the way Eric looked when he showed up at my room that night to study. Naively, I was confused and taken aback as to why he looked so sexy for a study session. Dressed in a snug, sleeveless white tee, his bronzed biceps gleamed, emanating an irresistible fragrance of just-showered allure. Meanwhile, there I was, hair in a ponytail, braless under my tattered college sweatshirt, too exhausted and desperate for help to bother about my looks. I plopped down on the hotel bed, ready to dive into studying. Eric sat down oddly close to me, our arms and thighs brushing against each other, invading my personal space. But I disregarded it, focused on learning, thankful for his help. His tutoring proved invaluable, and I aced the exam the next day.

Passing the test was a huge relief, and I couldn't wait to thank Eric for his help. Unbeknownst to me, Eric had more in mind than just being study buddies, something I hadn't picked up on despite the tight sleeveless T-shirt hint. He seemed convinced that tutoring me would be his ticket out of the friend zone, but I made it clear that I had already been seeing someone else.

Despite being older than me, my beau still lived at home with his parents, worked a menial admin job at the local community college, and raced his dirt bike on the weekends. With his low pay, he couldn't even afford a decent haircut and would resort to buzzing his own hair with his dog clippers. Our "date nights" consisted of Chinese takeout while watching movies on his bedroom floor. Even after nine months, he refused to label us as "boyfriend and girlfriend," but I stayed because he was hot, and I didn't believe I deserved better.

Through Eric's charm and persuasive sales skills he'd sharpened during our training, I finally recognized the qualities I should demand of a partner—intelligence, ambition, consideration, kindness—and in turn, I recognized my own worth and knew it was time to move on from my stagnant relationship. By the end of our three-week training, Eric and I were a couple, and he was proud to call me his girlfriend. Despite the distance between Brooklyn, where Eric lived, and my home near Philadelphia, we became inseparable. We spent every weekend together for months following the training.

Adjusting to my new job was a massive challenge, but learning the ropes with my new love, Eric, was a huge comfort. Although I enjoyed the benefits of my job—a prestigious title, a company car, an expense account, and earning more money than ever before—I was secretly battling intense fear and discomfort every day. I recall sitting in my car outside my first solo office visit, just staring at the entrance and crying, overwhelmed with nervousness as my anxiety surfaced fiercely. Despite the fear, I knew confronting this challenge was essential for my growth and success. As I grew accustomed to office visits, I honed

my ability to adapt. Like a social chameleon, I eventually excelled at integrating into diverse environments and mastering the unique cultures of each doctor's office.

Despite the strain of social anxiety, I pushed myself to engage with doctors and their staff, leveraging their support for my products. Doctors were initially dismissive of me due to my obvious young age, with some having practiced longer than I had been alive. Determined to prove myself, I studied our products and competitors' clinical trials endlessly. Armed with this knowledge, I easily engaged in discussions with doctors, earning their trust with my clinical expertise and persuading them to prescribe my products.

* * *

Six months into my new job, I took a significant step toward independence and moved into my own apartment in a new sales territory, Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. However, as I ventured into this next chapter of my life, my parents' relationship took a turn for the worse. My departure seemed to intensify my mom's drinking, leading to more frequent and heated arguments between my parents.

While most children hope for their parents to stay together, I found myself wishing for the opposite. It became painfully clear that my parents had a toxic dependency on each other, evident in their love-hate dynamic. Despite their conflicts, they remained bound by their mutual needs; my mom, an uneducated alcoholic, relied on my dad's financial support while he depended on her for household tasks.

When alcohol fueled my mom's resentment toward my dad and their situation, their arguments would escalate into explosive confrontations. The police became regular visitors

to their home, either to mediate their fights or to arrest my mom for intoxication. These incidents only exacerbated her legal troubles, resulting in more court dates, additional charges, and mounting fines, further straining our family's already fragile dynamics.

Conversely, I was achieving considerable success by any standards. I'd adapted to corporate America by concealing my family life and adopting a new persona to blend in. I exerted extra effort to adhere to rules, complete tasks, arrive punctually, and engage formally in interactions—behaviors I hadn't been exposed to at home. But feeling perpetually out of place had become exhausting. Growing up, my biracial identity in a predominantly white town, coupled with an ambiguous last name and androgynous appearance, initiated my sense of alienation. Keeping my troubled family life a secret—hiding our poverty, my parents' addiction, and our flood-ravaged house—quickly deepened my loneliness.

Now, in the professional world, I had to change my identity to conform to the corporate culture. I was baffled by the social dynamics—the nuanced way colleagues spoke when saying one thing yet meaning another, the expectation to schmooze for hours during and after corporate events, the slow and bureaucratic unattainable career progression, and the endless red tape for simple solutions all felt foreign and frustrating to me. In response to these challenges, I strategized that climbing the corporate ladder could provide an escape. I reasoned that attaining a leadership position would exempt me from the relentless effort to conform to an alien corporate culture. Over the next five years, this conviction propelled me forward, and I was determined to work my way up and craft my ideal future.

During this period, Eric and I were tired of the East Coast's unpredictable and often harsh weather, with its biting cold, oppressive humidity, and relentless rain. We longed for the consistent warmth and sunshine of the West Coast.

But we didn't know how, given our careers and growing family in New York. I was working remotely in the CBD industry, and at that time, cannabis and CBD were more widely accepted in California. With the majority of my clients in California, Eric made a bold move and requested a job transfer to Los Angeles, and remarkably, he got it. However, his company needed him to start in his new territory across the country in just three weeks. This decision meant selling our house, finding a new place to live, a flash yard selling all of our belongings, and securing new schools for our young daughters, who were just three and six at the time. Despite the short notice, we managed to pull it all off, and, looking back, I see that it was undeniably the best choice we ever made.

Shortly after moving to Los Angeles, the executive leadership team of the company I was working for decided to part ways after a disagreement, causing a significant divide within the company. Following this split, I chose to follow the director of marketing, driven by our shared goal of starting a new, bigger, and better CBD manufacturing company. I consistently outperformed in sales and was quickly promoted to vice president of sales, achieving my ultimate career goal.

Although my career was skyrocketing, my mental health was gradually deteriorating. As vice president of sales, I faced immense challenges managing a dispersed sales team spanning across the country and extending into Colombia while serving international clients with

round-the-clock attention. Over time, my responsibilities expanded to include overseeing the social media and sales support teams. Operationally, CBD was the Wild West compared to my corporate, highly regulated pharmaceutical industry experience and required frequent intervention to secure raw materials, manage the production schedule, and ensure compliance.

My passion for the industry was fueled by my desire to heal chronic illness, just as plant medicine had helped me with my migraines. However, I was shocked to discover that many CBD businessmen were merely outlawed black-market drug dealers looking to get rich quick with a new legal product. Despite changing their product, they retained their illicit mindset, often leading to trouble with clients. Compounding the chaos, financial mismanagement by ownership frequently resulted in extremely delayed orders, causing customers to become irate and regularly threaten me, both legally and personally.

The position became increasingly stressful, and I honestly feared for my personal safety. Coupled with distressing calls from my parents, panic attacks became a regular occurrence. These episodes became so debilitating that I was assigned twice-weekly therapy. Additionally, I was prescribed multiple medications to manage my mood and mitigate the severity of my panic attacks. This time in my life marked a profound realization of the balance required between professional success and personal health and the complexity of building my career while trying to stay true to myself. It became clear that I needed to plan my escape from this drama to regain my peace of mind and prioritize my well-being above all else.

Chapter 7

Sunlight and Shadows

*Life dances between sunlight and shadows
each moment a delicate balance between the light we seek
and the darkness we navigate.*

On a sunny Sunday morning, August 15th, 2021, my life changed forever. Eric, our daughters, and I were staying in San Diego for the weekend. Sunlight poured into our hotel suite windows and spilled across the living room floor to the dining room, where the girls were having breakfast. They were in the thick of their beloved waffle phase. Ellie, age five, a wild and silly aspiring YouTuber, always managed to smear the syrup across her lips and cheeks to form a sticky joker smile. Eden, age eight, a poised and polished gymnast, meticulously filled each waffle square with equal volumes of syrup before carefully cutting along the lines. I showered and joyfully wrapped myself in a plush white towel, then covered it with an ankle-length plush terry-cloth robe. We were tuned into our spiritual center, waiting to livestream the Sunday Service. Eric sat contently in the living room, scrolling social media and checking his stocks while waiting for the service

to begin. He knew that my estimated “*I’ll be ready in thirty minutes*” was a long shot, as usual.

I pulled my hair up into a slick, high ponytail to stay cool for the day. I neatly arranged my makeup and brushes atop a washcloth on the bathroom counter. I giggled to myself—this preparation always made me feel like a surgeon preparing scalpels and forceps before an operation. As I began to apply my foundation, I could hear the service begin. I was eager for the day’s topic, “*Your destiny awaits you—let go of the weights and wait no longer.*” The message was suddenly juxtaposed by Tiesto’s “It’s the motto ... pop a few pills and pop a few champagne bottles” as my ringtone blared.

It was Nora, my parents’ next-door neighbor. Nora married my childhood friend, and they moved in next door after I moved out. Initially, I felt uneasy about the possibility of them learning about my mom’s struggles with alcoholism and overhearing my parent’s frequent, loud arguments. However, Nora turned out to be an indispensable ally, keeping tabs on my parents and informing me of their situation as needed.

“Hey, girl! Good morning. How are you?” I answered Nora’s call with enthusiasm, momentarily forgetting the time difference that made it lunchtime on the East Coast.

Her response, laced with concern, caught me off guard. “Hey, Danielle ... did your dad call you?”

“No, what’s going on?” I asked, puzzled.

“You should call your dad,” Nora insisted, her voice unusually serious.

A sense of unease immediately settled in my stomach. I quickly ended the call to dial my dad. But he didn’t answer.

This wasn't out of the ordinary, given his hearing difficulties. Normally, he'd manage to answer by my second or third attempt, but today was different. I called Nora back, "Hey, my dad's not answering. What's going on?"

There was a heavy pause before she spoke, her voice quivering, barely concealing her emotions. "I hate to be the one to tell you this..." Her words trailed off, heavy with sorrow. "Your mom ... she passed away."

"NOOOO!!!" I cried out, the word tearing through the room. "NO! NO! NO!" I screamed as tears flooded my eyes. Overwhelmed, I dropped the phone, collapsing onto my knees and curling into a tight ball as if to shield myself from the sky falling. "What did she do!? WHAT DID SHE DO!?" I screamed, my mind instinctively casting blame on my mom for her own demise, convinced she had somehow been the architect of this tragedy.

Eric, hearing my distress, rushed to my side, fear etched across his face. "What happened!?" he asked urgently. I couldn't speak; all I could do was point to the phone lying abandoned on the floor.

Nora's voice, filled with concern, echoed from the receiver. "Hello? Danielle? Hello?"

Eric quickly picked up the phone, trying to piece together the situation. Their conversation was a blur of murmurs to me, drowned out by the repetition of Nora's harrowing words in my mind: "Your mom... she passed away."

Consumed by anguish and confusion, I lay crumpled on the hotel bathroom floor, gasping for air amidst sobs and tears. The shock was too much; I began to vomit, overwhelmed by the surge of emotions. I remained there, lost in grief, while Eric closed the door and assured our girls

that Mommy would be okay. In the background, the Sunday service played on the living room TV, words echoing faintly, "Let go of the weights and wait no longer!" But at that moment, the weight of my world was crushing me.

* * *

The rest of that morning is a hazy memory. I received calls from the police directing me to contact the county coroner. "Hello, this is Danielle Lopez. I was informed that my mom passed away, and she's in your care," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. It was surreal to hear myself acknowledge her death aloud for the first time.

Harvey, the county coroner, confirmed that my mother's body was at his office. He described the scene where he found her surrounded by empty alcohol bottles, leading him to suspect alcohol poisoning was the cause of death. In my mind, I pictured Harvey as a middle-aged, balding man with a husky build, yet possessing a kind and empathetic demeanor. His voice, unexpectedly soothing, offered comfort in that chaotic moment. He mentioned there were no signs of foul play and suggested that an autopsy would not be necessary. Numbly, I agreed, a decision that would later haunt me with regret.

Ending the call, I was engulfed in confusion and grief, unsure of my next steps. Should I cry more? Contact family? Fly home immediately? This situation was uncharted territory for me, shockingly sudden, yet, in hindsight, perhaps not entirely unexpected. Guilt and self-doubt began to consume me. Could I have been more supportive? Did I do enough to help her? What if we had spent more time together? Was this somehow my fault for being a terrible

daughter? Overwhelmed by these tormenting thoughts, all I could do was succumb to my grief, crying uncontrollably.

After regaining some composure, I tried calling my dad once more, feeling a wave of relief when he finally answered. I hoped he could shed some light on what had happened. "Dad, I've been trying to reach you!" I exclaimed, with a mix of frustration from previous missed calls and relief at finally hearing his voice.

"I was at Redner's," he replied casually.

I was taken aback; his wife, my mother, had just *died*, and he had gone grocery shopping at Redner's? I quickly realized it wasn't fair to judge him. I couldn't fathom what he was going through, especially with his PTSD and dementia complicating his emotions.

"Dad, what happened?" I asked, my voice softening, a part of me still struggling to accept the reality as he recounted the moment he found her.

"I saw her on the living room floor by the couch, and I just knew," he said. There was a heavy pause. "I kneeled beside her, closed her eyes, kissed her forehead, and said goodbye. The fucked up part is, we were watching a movie and laughing together just last night." His words hung in the air, leaving me to wonder how things had changed so drastically in mere hours. His composure was unexpected, though I realized that his experiences in Vietnam might have steeled him against the shock of death.

* * *

As I processed the morning's staggering events, I couldn't help but feel that her death was intentional, a final escape from her unbearable struggles. She had been burdened

with the relentless, thankless task of caring for my dad, coupled with her own chronic pain from neglecting self-care. Financial pressures were always looming, legal troubles mounting, and her mental health issues—deep-seated depression and bipolar disorder—were intensifying. The last time we spoke, she was distraught over misplacing her driver’s license. “I have no ID, no job, no life. I’m nobody. It’s like I don’t even exist,” she had said despairingly. It was heartbreaking to hear her feel so insignificant when she meant so much to me. Every problem seemed to beget another, like a perpetual dark cloud hanging over her. Her increasing alcohol consumption was her way of coping with her ever-mounting troubles, ultimately leading to her tragic end.

Admitting it brought a sense of guilt, but I couldn’t deny also feeling a certain relief at my mother’s passing. It meant releasing the heavy burdens that had been weighing on me for so long. My interactions with her had always triggered my anxiety, never knowing which version of her I’d get. My ringtone for my parents’ calling was a robotic voice blaring “WARNING! WARNING!” over a flood siren so I could brace myself for the impending turmoil. Whenever it rang, I’d tense up, feeling a surge of nerves spike through my skin like a porcupine bristling at an approaching threat. The calls were invariably distressing:

“Your father can’t remember where he parked the car last week...”

“Your mom keeps punching me in the head...”

“Your father called the cops on me again...”

“I’m sleeping in the parking lot tonight because your mom’s out of control again...”

“Your father is in the hospital...”

“Your mother’s been arrested...”

“I think your mom’s having a seizure—what should I do?”

These were not the kind of calls one expects from their parents, especially in their sixties and seventies. And how could I offer meaningful help or guidance from across the country, anyhow?

At times, my mother’s calls would arrive in waves, each one tinged with varying degrees of drunkenness. In her initial phase, her speech would be slurred, infused with warmth, and a repetition of tales as if no time had passed between calls within the same hour. With gentle persuasion, I’d suggest she sounded tired, hinting it might be time for her to take a nap. Occasionally, this advice was heeded, only for the cycle to recommence upon the next ring. My singular request of her was not to call under the influence, a boundary I’d hoped she’d someday honor. Hearing her being so lost to alcohol pained me deeply. Despite two unsuccessful attempts at rehab and deceiving her parole officer with an appearance of innocence, her issue with alcohol remained unchecked.

When confronted with my plea, she’d angrily hang up, at least she thought she did, while muttering insults at me under her breath. This escalation marked the second phase. I found myself wrestling with the urge to answer the following barrage of missed calls, each message more furious than the last. Her voicemails were a torrent of anger, a clear sign she was far gone. “Answer the phone, you bitch! ANSWER THE FUCKING PHONE! Fuck you, I don’t need you, anyway!” A sharp disconnect click would follow. Though it was hard to accept, I knew this venom wasn’t

truly from my mom but from the depths of her despair in stage three, and it was that transformation that gutted me the most.

In her later years, my mom's struggles with anger management issues and manic depression finally received diagnoses, shedding light on the root cause of her extreme mood swings. At her worst, she was a terrifying force, erupting in volcanic anger, destroying anything in her path. My dad and I would hide, frightened, as she unleashed her fury, only to eventually exhaust herself and collapse in tears. Despite these meltdowns, she generally was filled with immense sweetness and generosity, often giving away her own possessions to bring joy to others. It was obvious that she longed for love and acceptance.

With the turbulence of those times behind me, I hoped that the memories of fear and terror would gradually dissipate, leaving space to cherish my mom for her genuine and compassionate nature. This realization brought a comforting sense of peace amidst the lingering grief. With this newfound tranquility, a pressing concern surfaced—what would become of my disabled dad?

Chapter 8

Nightwork for Daylight

*The work done in the cover of night
lays the foundation for the
achievements that bask in daylight.*

Sleep was impossible that night after having my world turned upside down. I felt an innate understanding that the responsibility for my dad living across the country and everything that came next rested entirely with me. Years of dealing with crisis after crisis, like my parents being unexpectedly arrested, had honed my ability to remain composed in chaos and act decisively. Unable to rest, I silently made my way downstairs to the dining room, illuminated only by the faint glow of kitchen appliance nightlights, and opened my laptop. There, I began the somber task of planning my mom's funeral.

I reached out to the funeral home near my parents' house, a place I'd passed countless times during my childhood. Its parking lot was adjacent to my elementary school's sports field. Ironically, it sat directly across from a nursing home, coincidentally where my dad had rehabbed after a stroke a few months earlier. To my surprise, someone answered my call, although it was around 1:00 a.m. local time. I was

connected to Frank, whose role, though grim, was crucial in transporting bodies from the coroner to the funeral home for preparation. “I’m going to take good care of your mom,” he assured me before walking me through the service planning details.

My initial assignment was to write her obituary, a daunting endeavor that meant officially announcing to the world that my mom was gone. I was provided a template, but it seemed inadequate for capturing the essence of her life. Online research showed a range of obituaries, from lengthy accolades to brief, poignant summaries and even a few humorous takes. How could I distill my mom’s entire existence into a few sentences? How could I convey her true spirit and the impact she had? Striving to honor her in a way that reflected her greatness, I focused on her most memorable and positive qualities, carefully navigating around the more painful truths.

After much contemplation and revision, I crafted an obituary that celebrated her life, highlighting her remarkable attributes and the indelible mark she left on those who knew her:

Terry passed away suddenly at her home on Sunday, August 15, 2021, at the age of 61. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, PA, Terry has been a resident of Levittown, PA, since 1988. Until her retirement in 2019, Terry’s expansive career allowed her to brighten the lives of anyone in her presence. She was a fabulous cook, a beautiful singer, and had endless creativity—but her favorite pastime was being with her family—beloved wife, loving mother, and devoted “Mimaw” to her granddaughters...

Growing up, religion didn’t play a major role in our family life. My dad had awful memories of Catholic school

during his youth in the nineteen fifties, a time when disciplinary actions by nuns were harsh and accepted, including beatings with yardsticks. He never forgot how Sister Margaret incinerated his pet rat, Pete, which he had brought for show and tell in third grade. My mom, on the other hand, was practically raised in her family's Baptist church, a requirement imposed by her devout mother. As a result, both my parents were disillusioned with church, and we only attended for rare occasions like family weddings and Maw's funeral. I was always appreciative that they gave me the freedom to explore spiritual beliefs on my own terms.

Now, faced with planning my mom's service, I felt out of depth, without a church or officiant to whom I could turn. Our family had always embraced non-tradition, so I saw no reason to start conforming in my mom's absence. Respecting my mom's wish, I chose cremation. She loved to receive flowers and keep full vases all around the house, but roses were her favorite. I chose the most gorgeous white urn encircled with a rose bouquet scene to ensure my mom kept her beauty in the afterlife. So that she could have an outfit change, I also selected a tiny purple keepsake urn adorned with a hummingbird suckling nectar from an orange trumpet flower under an endless blue sky. I thought these urns were most appropriate since they complemented the rose tattoo on her ankle as well as the hummingbird tattoo on her back. The larger urn was for my dad, while the smaller one was for me to take her around the world.

With the obituary and urns sorted, finding a funeral officiant was my next challenge. But we didn't have a minister because we weren't churchgoers. I reached out to the funeral home's recommended minister with no response.

There were no close family members to ask; my mom had been estranged from her family for years. I couldn't ask her best friend to give the eulogy; she was an emotional wreck from the sudden passing. Aware that my mom would have preferred to keep my dad out of the spotlight for her eulogy, having spent many years overshadowed by him, I realized the responsibility fell on me as the most fitting choice to lead the funeral and deliver her eulogy.

That night, struggling to find sleep and wishing it was all just a bad dream, I turned back to my spiritual center for a grief meditation by our reverend, Michael B. Beckwith of Agape International Spiritual Center. He shared that grief is a complex emotion stemming from various sources beyond the death of a loved one, including relationship breakups, health diagnoses, financial instability, and even life transitions. Each cause of grief carries its unique pain and challenges, often leading to secondary losses, including the loss of safety, dreams, or identity that further complicate the grieving process. His guidance on navigating grief offered a structured approach to transforming such sorrow into great strength.

- 1. Embrace Your Emotions:** Fully experience the range of feelings associated with the loss—grief, confusion, disbelief, anger, and longing. Acknowledging these emotions is the first step toward healing.
- 2. Acknowledge Their Legacy:** Reflect on the positive impacts and qualities your loved one embodied—wisdom, courage, curiosity, positivity, integrity, resilience, and more—and consider how these gifts have shaped your life and their unique contributions to the world.

- 3. Live Out Their Legacy:** Commit to embodying the most significant quality of your loved one in your daily life. By living out this attribute, you honor their memory and continue their impact.
- 4. Create a Tribute Project:** Consider starting a project in their honor to channel your grief positively. This could be an artistic endeavor, establishing a nonprofit, or writing a book. Such a project not only serves as a therapeutic outlet but also ensures their spirit remains a part of the world.

His words on navigating grief, recognizing the gifts our loved ones leave us, and embodying their best qualities provided a comforting perspective. Inspired by this, I decided to honor my mom by engaging with everyone I meet, spreading warmth and kindness while infusing every room with positivity. I follow her example of generosity by always having something to give to others, whether it's a thoughtful gift or a listening ear. Last but not least, I embrace her spirit of authenticity and humor by incorporating her uninhibited swearing into my interactions, infusing conversations with lightheartedness and laughter. Her jaw-dropping remarks were always followed by bursts of laughter, as she had a knack for making unfiltered, exaggerated comments that left everyone in stitches. In doing so, I pay tribute to my mom's legacy and carry forward the impact she had on the lives of those around her.

Emboldened by this new perspective, I courageously committed to leading my mom's funeral. Over the next week, I poured my heart into writing her eulogy, a tribute to her life and the lessons she taught me.

Chapter 9

Quest for the Rings

Amidst the chaos of loss and remembrance, we uncover treasures of resilience and love, guiding us toward healing and honoring cherished memories.

My final trip to my parents' home in Pennsylvania was in August 2021, two weeks after my mom had passed away. I had come from Los Angeles to help organize the funeral and assist my dad in any way possible. Returning to the house felt different this time; its atmosphere was eerie, marked by the absence of my mom and the realization that she would never return. Upon entering, I was immediately struck by an overpowering mix of odors—trash, the litter box, body odor, and an indescribable smell of neglect. The disorder that usually characterized the house, exacerbated by my dad's hoarding habits, seemed magnified. And the usual broken appliances, burned-out lights, and holes in the walls and doors were more noticeable than ever. My mom had struggled to keep up with cleaning after him, but now the chaos was overwhelming.

The kitchen, a place of so many fond memories with my mom, was unrecognizable. It was here we shared

countless cups of coffee and hysterical laughter and where the aroma of her famous peanut butter cookies and sweet tea once drifted. On holidays, she went all out, preparing lavish spreads that far exceeded what the three of us could ever eat. These occasions were special, marking the few times a year we had plenty, all thanks to the generosity of food bank donations. She'd cook an array of dishes: turkeys brimming with stuffing, hams glazed and adorned with cloves and cherries wrapped in pineapple rings, creamy macaroni and cheese, hand-mashed potatoes drenched in gravy, tangy cranberry sauce, bundt cakes laced with icing, and centerpieces of assorted fruits. Now, the kitchen was cloaked in darkness and filth, barren of the warmth it once held.

Flies buzzed around a mini refrigerator oddly positioned at the kitchen entrance. My mom's cherished plants, once thriving in the bay window, were now bare as their shriveled leaves had fallen off and brown stems tilted in dry dirt.. The sink was overrun with dishes, and the trash can overflowed. Bending down, I cautiously opened the small refrigerator's door, only to be horrified as bloody water spilled onto the floor from long-forgotten rotten meat. Maggots writhed over the decayed meat, releasing a foul stench as flies swarmed out.

I fled to the dining room, overwhelmed with disgust, only to find it cluttered with old newspapers and miscellaneous items, some dating back fifteen years. The usual disarray was now doubled, with only a small space cleared for my dad to eat. Stunned by confusion and disbelief, I instinctively ran out of the house and into the street. The urge to escape, to breathe fresh air and make sense of the shocking scene, was overpowering. As I wandered the

QUEST FOR THE RINGS

familiar block, memories of biking the streets flooded back. The night air was thick with humidity, visible in the glow of the streetlights. Under the streetlights, heartache washed over me for my elderly, power chair-bound, PTSD-stricken father, enduring such deplorable conditions. Worse still, he seemed to accept this chaos as normal. I knew I had to return and help him.

* * *

Upon resuming my inspection, the dining room led into the living room, where my dad often dozed off in front of the TV. A functional TV was mounted beside a broken one, itself atop a broken big-screen TV in true hoarder fashion, all atop a dusty stand. Dust blanketed every surface and photo frame. Next to the couch, where he sat, a small tray table held crumbs scattered on the floor near another overflowing trash can. The presence of two full-sized leather couches and a loveseat crammed into the small space always puzzled me, as did the oversized recliner angled in between.

During my last visit just a month prior, my mom and I sat on that loveseat. Her alcohol-induced cognitive decline became evident when she retrieved a pair of dirty pink clogs from under the TV stand, saying, "I've been looking for these," as she nonchalantly brushed off mounds of cat fur and sunflower seed shells before slipping them on. Tragically, it was in front of that loveseat where my mom was later found dead on the floor.

From the moment I learned of my mom's passing, her voice echoed in my mind, urging me, "Find my rings," referring to her wedding rings. She cherished her wedding

rings as her most prized and valuable possessions. I went upstairs to check her jewelry box, feeling as if the house itself whispered secrets to me. It seemed to reveal past echoes of heated disputes, depths of despair, aches dulled by alcohol and painkillers, and futile attempts at cleanliness amidst enduring squalor.

Reaching the upstairs hallway, the sight of continued disarray through the open bedroom doors made a grim hypothesis apparent; she killed herself to get away from it all. She took a few extra gulps and silently slipped away, seeking solace in an overdose. This notion that she ended her life to flee the anguish and depression made accepting her death even more painful.

My dad admitted he hadn't been upstairs in years, given his difficulty climbing stairs. Entering his office first, it appeared unchanged from my last visit. The walls were covered with posted newspaper clippings, anti-war posters, and unframed photos. A makeshift shelf by the door, constructed from Home Depot buckets and plywood, sagged under the weight of mounds of papers, aged and yellowed. Opposite, two metal filing cabinets, crammed with papers, framed the windows. The center held a repurposed dining room table as his desk, cluttered with paperwork and an outdated computer setup, leaving scant space to sit.

I recall the sweltering summer days of my childhood, when the office was my bedroom, spying through those windows, watching my neighbors enjoy their in-ground swimming pool. Their laughter and playful splashes filled the air. I longed for an invitation to swim, especially as I languished in the stifling heat and humidity of my room without an air

conditioner. Ready to move on from the office, I prepared myself for what awaited in my mom's room. It was as dim and unkempt as ever, filled with mismatched furniture, and my childhood artwork still adorned the walls. Her bed, neat yet covered in cat hair, bore an open suitcase with clothes both folded within and strewn about, suggesting either packing or unpacking—her intentions unclear.

The message “find my rings” persisted. I scoured her room: the bedside table, jewelry boxes, dresser—still no wedding rings to be found. The bottom drawer of the chest beside the closet was slightly open. I began searching through the drawers from the bottom up. When I reached the top drawer, I was met with an unexpected sight. “Four rows ... two boxes deep ... five, six, seven, EIGHT columns!?” I murmured to myself in bewilderment, eyeing the meticulously organized small boxes.

Opening the first, a Tiffany-blue jewelry box adorned with a dainty white satin ribbon, I discovered a breathtaking David Yurman-style silver ring featuring a 3-carat, cushion-cut mystic fire topaz. The subsequent box revealed its matching necklace. The following two boxes contained rings identical to the first, yet each was set with a distinct gemstone. As I continued to open each box, I uncovered an array of dazzling bracelets, rings, earrings, and necklaces crafted in gold, silver, and rose gold. The abundance puzzled me—why were there so many?

In addition to her addiction to alcohol, it turns out that she also had a compulsion for home shopping networks; I just never knew it was this serious. Over the last year, she had acquired an air fryer, a bread maker, an airbrush makeup set, magnetic eyelashes, perfumes, sterling silver jewelry boxes,

plus what appeared to be thousands of dollars' worth of jewelry. Finding these numerous boxes was bittersweet; it was tragic that she lived from paycheck to paycheck yet felt compelled to purchase so many frivolous items. However, her preparedness in always having a gift ready for friends and family visits finally made sense. I gathered a selection of the boxes along with a few other memorable items—family photographs, my mom's cherished knit shawl, her "But First, Coffee" T-shirt, and especially some silk scarves that still carried the scent of her signature perfume.

Despite my rationalizations, I couldn't bring myself to rest on her hard, fur-laden bed in the stifling, humid bedroom. I made my way back downstairs, tiptoed past my father asleep on the couch with the TV blaring, retreated to his bedroom, and quickly fell asleep.

* * *

The next morning, I got up early to tidy the house before the cleaner I hired arrived to assist my husband and me. I watched as my husband carefully vacuumed the cluttered paths that served as walkways through the living room. Normally, watching him clean would be slightly erotic, but instead, I was shocked to see the vacuum's canister filled with dirt after just one pass over the narrow floor space. After five hours, our cleaner, drenched in sweat, had done his best and was understandably ready to leave. I couldn't fault him, even though I'd been cleaning for two hours prior to his arrival.

I spent the rest of the day tackling the downstairs bedroom—my dad's bedroom, as my mom preferred her own space upstairs to escape the constant noise of his

twenty-four-hour news channels. Surprisingly, my dad's room was relatively clean compared to the rest of the house. A half-empty bottle of Macallan scotch whiskey was positioned front and center on his dresser, a souvenir of the last drink my mom had, according to him. She had a love for dark liquors. At restaurants, she'd order "a double shot of Henny and a Corona." Within ten minutes, she'd be anxiously scanning the restaurant for the server to order another round. The drinks transformed her from Jekyll to Hyde. I remember helping my dad upright toppled dressers, spilled drawers, broken lamps, and a shattered TV that landed my mom in jail after a drunken rampage.

As I cleaned the bedroom, straightening up and dusting, I decided to change the bedding. Removing the comforter revealed a sheet stained with urine. "I can't let him sleep on this," I thought, dismayed. But when I removed the sheet, I found a shocking message scrawled in huge black letters across the mattress:

**F U C K
Y O U**

My heart dropped at this haunting message from beyond, a fierce reminder of the tumultuous swings between the love and loathing my mom harbored for my dad.

I scrubbed the message off the mattress, disinfected it, and washed the stained linens, feeling ready to end a long day. A lonely hardshell sunglasses case rested on the bedside table to the left of the bed. Compelled by an inexplicable urge, I lifted it and gave it a gentle shake, anticipating the sound of sunglasses rattling inside. Instead, I heard a curious jingle of light metal.

PRISMATIC

Upon opening the case, I was flooded with relief and happiness to discover my mom's cherished wedding rings. The gold set was beautiful, with a band of intertwined diamond baguette ribbons and an engagement ring featuring a marquise-cut diamond accentuated by baguette-cut diamonds. She loved those rings, and so did I. So much so that I designed my wedding set based on hers. Finally finding her rings brought me comfort, keeping a piece of her close to me.

Chapter 10

Beautiful in Every Way

*Bravery isn't just about facing challenges;
it's about carrying on with love, laughter,
and unapologetic authenticity.*

I checked into my regular hotel near my parents' house, but this visit was vastly different from the last one just a few weeks ago, under much happier circumstances. Now, I was checking in for my mom's funeral, accompanied by my husband, an older half-sister from my dad's first marriage, plus an aunt and uncle from my mom's hometown. The familiarity of the setting juxtaposed with the current situation made this stay profoundly heartbreaking.

On the day of the funeral, I dressed with exceptional care, preparing for the upcoming responsibility of leading my mom's funeral. I aimed to look beautiful for her and to honor her memory with pride as I led her service. I also secretly hoped that my polished appearance might deter impending questions surrounding her death.

Donning an elegant, sleeveless, knee-length black dress, I noted the mock neck collar adorned with crystals echoed the sparkly crystals on my nails. I devoted extra attention to

parting and brushing my hair and ensured that each strand of my hair was perfectly curled.

My meticulous preparation that morning was a tribute to my mother's own ritual. As a young child, I'd watch in fascination as my mom would get ready for a night out. Her ensemble was always complete with lipstick matching her nails and oxblood leather riding boots, complementing her cherished Etienne Aigner purse. Jewelry—whether emerald cut rubies in 14K gold, hand-strung Tahitian pearls, or blue topaz birthstone pieces set in sterling silver—was perfectly coordinated with her outfit, followed by a fur coat, all gifts from my dad's lucrative cocaine dealings before they lost all their riches. She was stunning, and I idolized her, often playing dress-up with her high heels, wigs, and makeup after she left for the evening.

After getting ready, I drove to pick up my dad and take him to the funeral. Upon arriving, the door was locked, and I knocked loudly while waiting for him to hobble to the door. He greeted me with a puzzled look. "Where are you going all dressed up this early in the morning?" he questioned.

"Dad, today is Mom's funeral..." I reminded him, my heart sinking as I realized he had forgotten. My mom used to say he was losing his mind, and I never took it seriously until that moment. I wanted to arrive at the funeral home early to prepare, so I asked my husband, Eric, to assist my dad in getting ready.

Arriving at the funeral home, I wasn't sure how many people to expect, given my mom's wide-reaching influence. I prepared programs for a hundred attendees and brunch reservations for fifty guests. Yet, to my surprise, fewer than twenty people showed up, mostly mine and my dad's

friends. I was appalled and disheartened that so few people showed up to pay respects to such a phenomenal woman. However, I rationalized that those who were present were exactly those who were meant to be present and proceeded with the service.

* * *

Thank you to each and every one of you here today to celebrate the life of my mom, Terry. If she could be standing here today, I think she would say:

*I'd like the memory of me to be a happy one.
I'd like to leave an afterglow of smiles when
life is done.
I'd like to leave an echo whispering softly
down the ways,
Of happy times and laughing times and
bright and sunny days.
I'd like the tears of those who grieve to dry
before the sun,
Of happy memories that I leave when my life
is done.*

My dad and I are thankful that you're all here to celebrate Terry's life. We can't control our thoughts but we can control our emotional responses to our thoughts. When I think of my mom and my eyes start to tear, I immediately say to myself—she IS and always will be beautiful in every way—because I know that her spirit is eternal and she is resting in peace.

Withstanding tough times like this makes us stronger and more resilient. By sharing my words and feelings with you today, I hope that it helps us all heal and makes us all stronger to move forward.

I never thought I'd be standing here giving my mom's eulogy—or "YouGooglely"—as Derek Zoolander would say. One of our favorite things to do together was to watch funny movies and recite the catchphrases to each other daily. I'd be remiss if I didn't weave some of her favorite phrases into my dedication to her today.

I think anyone who truly knew and loved Terry would agree that she can be described as having the unapologetic nature of Cardi B. mixed with the hilarity of Dave Chappell, plus the loving heart and tenderness of Mother Teresa! And those of us who knew and loved her—our lives will never be quite the same!

I couldn't help but ask WHY—WHY did she leave us so soon? Perhaps Terry's purpose was to show the world that in any event and under any circumstance, you can spread joy and evoke happiness in others to make the world a brighter place. Let's think about all the gifts Terry gave us: her enthusiasm, her contagious cheerfulness, her joyous laughter, her endless generosity, her free-spirited thoughts, and her unfiltered "mutha-fuckin'" opinions—oh, how she loooved to swear! Let's think about all the qualities she exuded: strength, love, selflessness, and perseverance. Today, let's shift our thoughts

and energies from grief to joy for Terry. Joy that she is finally resting—free of sadness, pain, worry, and exhaustion. Absence in the body is presence with the One, and she is with us now more than ever.

Terry passed away suddenly in her home on Sunday morning, August 15, 2021, at the young age of 61. My mom's sudden passing demonstrates how precious life is. My dad recalls watching a movie and laughing with her just the night before. Please be sure to tell your loved ones today and every day how much you love and appreciate them.

Terry was wife, partner in crime, best friend, and caregiver to my dad, Bill, for 43 years. Terry was a loving mother to me, my sister, and her fur babies. My sister and I are incredibly supported today by our loving husbands, whom Terry loved very much. Terry was the devoted "Mimaw" to her beautiful granddaughters, Eden (eight) and Eliana (five). Terry will be missed dearly by her many sisters, brothers, and best friend, Sandra—she loved Sandra and Sandra's family just as much as she loved her own.

For the past decade, my mom was devastated by the losses of our family matriarchs, Aunt Kathy and Aunt Dinky. I know she's with them now, dancing and singing around a succulent feast they cooked together—just like they sang and danced and cooked together when they were here on Earth.

Of her many interests, my mom loved cooking the most—and she loooved it when people loved her

cooking! She just couldn't wait to wake us up in the morning to try her newest dish—she would literally wake me up with a forkful of food close to my face and say excitedly, "Try this!" with a huge smile on her face. We loved her homemade cross-hatched peanut butter cookies, huge birthday cakes, and elaborate holiday dinners.

Before working in construction, she held a lot of jobs in our community—sometimes two or three jobs at a time to support our family. I was always amazed by all the people she knew in every store. "Hello, my angel!", "Good morning, good lookin'!", "Heeey girlfriend!" When I'd see their response to her warm greeting, it was obvious that Terry brightened the lives of anyone in her presence. Terry was a unique emanation of God. While her spirit is no longer in her body, her spirit can live on in all of us. By embodying her cheerful qualities to the best of our abilities each and every day, we can let our lights shine and brighten the world as she did to honor her legacy.

Let's take a moment of silence to reflect on the many joyous occasions we were blessed to have shared with Terry. Let's remember her silliness, her big bright smile, her warm hugs, her juicy kisses, her whole-hearted love, and her brilliant radiance.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for being here today to memorialize the everlasting spirit of Terry Perry. May her spirit live through us all. Please join me in prayer.

BEAUTIFUL IN EVERY WAY

Dear God, omnipresent source of all energy and infinite possibilities, let us rest assured knowing that Terry is with you—that her spirit is now free to travel this world, through the universe, and on to other dimensions. In her journey, we pray that she will experience eternal bliss.

God, bless everyone who is here today, and bless our friends and families who could not be with us. I pray that each and every one of us will call upon the strength within to push through hardships and prevail as happy, healthy, and living in abundance for the rest of our days.

I pray that we give meaning to the loss of Terry by transmuting feelings of depression to the expression of her free spirit, strength, love, joy, and generosity, and allow her spirit to live on through us. Terry IS and always will be beautiful in every way.

Chapter 11

Unraveling Identities

The essence of our journey is not defined by the peaks we achieve, but by the depths from which we commit to ascend.

Back in Los Angeles, life felt surreal. As I drove to work, observing people around me in their cars, walking the sidewalks, and crossing streets, all I could think as I watched each one was, “You’re going to die, you’re going to die, and so will you.” The loss of my mom heightened my awareness of the fragility of life. It underscored how precious and fleeting life is, prompting a desire to live each day as if it were my last. Yet, despite this realization, I felt hollow and lifeless inside. In the ensuing months, I threw myself into work as a distraction, but my mind was elsewhere. Home didn’t feel like home anymore; I neglected cleaning and the well-being of my family, wanting only to sleep. The thought of people finding out about my mom’s death filled me with dread. Condolences only reignited my grief and sorrow, reminders I desperately wanted to avoid. Managing my disabled dad’s care from thousands of miles away, in addition to caring for my young daughters, husband, and myself, became an overwhelming burden.

One restless night, I made my way downstairs to seek solace in front of the fireplace. Familiar as I was with the feelings of depression, what I felt was much different: more profound, more engulfing, and had an inescapable grip. Driven by a need to understand the feeling and find a way out of its clutches, I turned to the internet to research the stages of grief. I was determined to claw my way out of this deep, dark pit of despair. As I delved deeper, I discovered my grief's multifaceted nature. My sorrow wasn't solely tied to the loss of my mom; it was a complex amalgamation of unresolved pain. Her passing unearthed suppressed traumas from my childhood, marked by years overshadowed by her struggle with alcoholism. I found myself mourning not just her absence but the absence of a nurturing relationship we never had—both in my childhood and adulthood. Beyond her, I grieved over a stolen childhood, one that was marred by the chaos of my parents' drug addiction. This multifarious grief highlighted the loss of what could have been—a stable family, a carefree childhood, and an uncomplicated bond between a mother and her child that I yearned for but never experienced.

Hours passed as I immersed myself in studying, taking notes, and planning my bounce back. I concluded with a moment of silent meditation to give thanks for my life and my newfound path to healing, only for my peace to be interrupted by a phone call at 2:00 a.m. It was Nora, frantically informing me of a fire at my dad's house. Despite his disabilities, my dad had miraculously escaped unharmed and alerted Nora to the danger of the strong winds sweeping flames her way. My gut told me that he set the fire with his kerosene heaters and maze of extension cords plugged into overloaded power strips. I was immediately mad at myself for not unplugging them during my last visit.

Nora connected me with the firefighters on the scene, who explained that a faulty electrical panel was the culprit behind the blaze—which was a huge relief. The firefighters assured me that he'd be taken to the Red Cross for new clothes, a hot meal, and a warm bed. With that reassurance, I went back to bed in preparation for the impending challenges of the upcoming day.

Later that morning, I received a call from a public adjuster who found my dad traumatized, unwilling to leave his property, and sleeping in his car in his driveway. The reality of the fire was far worse than I had imagined. The damage rendered the house completely uninhabitable. Every room bore the scars of the blaze, with charred walls and collapsed ceilings, making any repairs futile. I arranged for my dad to stay at the nearby Sheraton Hotel—where I used to work in its steakhouse to pay my way through college. The public adjuster generously took my dad to get some food and a new phone before dropping him off at the hotel. A neighbor who learned about the house fire on the news lovingly brought him a duffle bag of new clothes.

The next day, the public adjuster brought my dad to the airport to start his new life in Los Angeles with me. I met my dad at the airport and found him on a bench with all of his belongings—just two walking canes and the small duffle bag recently gifted to him. Despite his new clothes, he was still wearing his smoke-filled clothes from the fire two nights prior. The soles of his sneakers had melted and detached from the shoes, creating a flip-flop sound with each step. This tragic disaster brought an unexpected gift—reuniting me with my dad for Christmas, something I had longed for but didn't think was feasible.

Reconstructing my dad's Pennsylvania home from California was no easy feat. Eventually, I navigated through insurance claims to have his house rebuilt and sold the following summer. I had his car and a few salvaged belongings shipped to us from across the country. Securing housing in a nearby lavish assisted living facility represented a significant departure from his previous living conditions, marking a new chapter of comfort and care.

As time went on, my dad and I gradually found ways to cope and heal from the traumas of my mom's passing and his devastating house fire. My dad was adapting quite nicely to life in Los Angeles, taking pleasure in basking in the sun while reading his newspaper and truly appreciating the comforts of his new, upscale assisted living center. Despite the deep void left by my mom's absence, having my dad close by brought a sense of solace. He reveled in his role as Pop-Pop to my daughters, a joy we hadn't experienced often when he lived so far away. It was heartwarming to have him as part of our daily lives. Slowly but surely, it felt like we were finally settling into a new sense of normalcy.

* * *

One night after dinner, while helping my younger daughter with her family tree school project, we encountered some gaps in our family history. To find answers, we delved into my long-neglected online genealogy account. The site was updated with a new look and featured info I'd never seen before. To my surprise, a DNA origin insight revealed that I'm 49 percent Jewish. Given my father's long standing participation in pro-Palestine efforts, I doubted he had any clue of Jewish heritage. Yet this DNA information suggested

he might be entirely Jewish. Equally surprising was a DNA origin insight that I'm 25 percent Nigerian, implying my mother was likely 50 percent Nigerian—a fact she probably never knew, as she had never mentioned it. Despite potential variability in the data, the percentages were substantial. As I tried to absorb this newfound knowledge, I noticed there was a new message awaiting my attention in my inbox:

Danielle,

I am new to this site and just got my DNA match results about two months ago. The match with you is the highest of any that has been reported. If you are interested, I would like to explore this DNA match with you.

Hope to hear from you soon.

The sender, an eighty-year-old man with a 50 percent DNA match, suggested he could only be my son or my father. The notion that he could be my son was immediately dismissed due to my certainty that I had no other children and his age. Despite the initial shock, I knew he must be my father, given the undeniable genetic evidence. This unexpected connection stirred a whirlwind of emotions within me. It had been eleven months since my mom passed away, my “dad’s” house burned down, and I’d just moved him across the country, only to find out that he’s not my biological father!?

Receiving this message from my biological father was the beginning of unraveling a complex tapestry of my past. When I asked about how he met my mom, he mentioned his old office on 1010 St. Paul Street in Baltimore, a detail that

instantly resonated with me. My mom had often joyfully recounted living at “Ten-Ten St. Paul Street” in a cheerful, melodic manner. It’s uncommon for parents to frequently reiterate specific details of their past to their children, especially emphasizing the precise address of where they once lived—on numerous occasions. So I was convinced of the truth of this man’s words. It made me wonder if she had been leaving me clues all along.

This man, my biological father, knew my mom as “Bonnie,” a name she never used around me, although she had used aliases like “Reva” and “Amy” due to her profession. During our conversation, he disclosed a startling detail: “Bonnie” had once confided in him her intention to give her baby—me—to her sister, Terry, for upbringing. This was a shocking twist. My mom actually had a sister named Bonnie; however, she passed away years earlier, leaving me no way of corroborating the story. Was it possible that the people I had known as my parents for 39 years weren’t my biological parents!?

I was blown away in a whirlwind of confusion and disbelief. I felt as though I was losing my grip on reality, torn between wondering if I was part of an elaborate hoax or just trapped in a nightmare. Desperate for insight, I reached out to my mom’s best friend, Sandra.

“Yes, it’s true,” she admitted softly, her voice tinged with reluctance to betray her best friend’s trust. She divulged the long-kept secret, confessed by my mom in a moment of drunken vulnerability. Sandra went on to reveal that my dad knew of the situation all along; my mom had been uncertain about my paternity just as Bill was released from jail. And even though Bill knew he definitely couldn’t be the father, he embraced fatherhood wholeheartedly.

I was stunned. My parents had lied to me my entire life. Why was this kept secret? In a hunt for answers, I reached out to my half-sister. “Oh great! You found your biological dad! He’s a police officer in Baltimore, right?” she responded in a congratulatory tone. My mom had obviously confided in my half-sister, too. At some point, my mom must have considered the possibility that a police officer could be my biological dad and had shared this theory with my half-sister.

Learning that everyone close to me knew that my dad wasn’t my biological father while I was completely in the dark was like a tidal wave of disbelief, confusion, and betrayal washing over me. There was also an insatiable curiosity about the alternate life I might have led instead of enduring the struggles caused by my dad’s drug addiction, which plunged us into poverty. In the midst of processing this upheaval, the realization that my dad, despite not being my biological father, actually *chose* to raise me as his own, and for that, I was grateful. This spoke volumes about his character and the depth of his love for my mom and me.

But what about my mom, known as “Bonnie” to my biological father and “Terry” to my dad and me? Was I actually raised by an aunt, just as Terry had been? As I pieced together the various accounts of the story, it became apparent that my mom had indeed used the alias “Bonnie” and had possibly considered giving me away to maintain her appeal to clients. While shocking, it shed light on the lengths she went to secure her livelihood, navigating the unimaginable circumstances she found herself in.

These shocking discoveries strangely led me to a newfound appreciation for the life my parents gave me.

It dawned on me that, despite their troubled pasts and personal battles, they likely did the best they could with the resources and knowledge they had. Despite the burden of early parenthood, amplified by the absence of loving parents or role models, they persevered. I finally understood the lengths to which they went to provide for me. Despite its imperfections, their care was rooted in love, nurturing a resilience within me that I carry to this day.

These discoveries also illuminated a pathway toward exploring and embracing a part of my heritage that had remained concealed. I chose not to mention the news about my biological father with my dad. Despite his knowledge of my true paternity, his dementia made it uncertain if he even remembered or how he might process such information in his current cognitive state.

* * *

My biological father and I quickly started building a relationship. Our conversations flowed effortlessly, as if we were long-lost friends reunited. Even at eighty years old, he had a youthful vigor and a silly sense of humor that never failed to make me laugh. We would talk every day, sometimes for hours, immersing ourselves in each other's lives, exchanging stories, and discovering the numerous similarities between us.

Eager to introduce him to my family, I arranged a FaceTime call with my husband and kids. The interaction was seamless, as if he had always been a part of our family. In the shadow of my mom's passing and grappling with the progressive toll of my dad's dementia, finding my biological father brought a glimmer of unexpected joy amidst the

sorrow. As our relationship grew, he'd regularly send me treasures from his past—old photos, passports, and even a cherished figurine gifted to him by my mom. These pieces of his history, interwoven with stories of my mom, allowed me to see her in a different light, illuminating different facets of her life and personality that I had never known before.

In his retirement, he enjoyed woodworking and pottery and generously sent me some of his impressive vases and bowls. I told him about how my mom's urn had been destroyed in the house fire, and the beautiful rose scenery melted away, leaving scorched metal. He later surprised me with a new handcrafted ceramic urn—it was an incredibly thoughtful gesture that deeply touched my heart.

Our bond strengthened each day, and the excitement of this connection inspired me to plan a trip to meet him for Thanksgiving. The anticipation of finally meeting felt like a step toward healing the void left by my mom's absence. He was thrilled with the plans and even offered us to stay with him. However, we had already booked a hotel since we were also visiting my husband's family, who lived nearby. My biological father and I planned dinners and day trips for our time together, and our vacation plans were beginning to come together beautifully. I was filled with excitement at the idea of finally meeting my biological father, finally hugging him, and just simply spending time together and getting to know each other better.

Just two days before our scheduled trip, everything took a sudden, drastic turn. A seemingly minor disagreement escalated, culminating in him telling me not to visit. He made sure to reiterate his wishes in a subsequent email, as if his verbalizing it wasn't painful enough. This sudden change of

heart was bewildering. Amidst the grief of losing my mom and watching my dad's decline into dementia, the prospect of forging a relationship with a parent I had just discovered offered a beacon of hope. To have that connection severed so swiftly was a massive blow.

My dad, with all his imperfections and speckled past, had made a conscious decision to be my dad, embracing me as his own without hesitation. My biological father, on the other hand, presented with a similar option, pushed me away, leaving me to wonder what I could have done to warrant such a rejection.

As I experienced a rollercoaster of emotions—from the elation of our blossoming relationship to the venomous sting of rejection exacerbated by recent loss and grief, I reached a pivotal moment where I knew something had to change. The loss of my mom, compounded by the complexities of discovering and then losing a connection with my biological father, left me enveloped in a shroud of sorrow and depression. However, it was during this darkest period that I found the strength to transform my pain into a catalyst for profound personal growth.

Chapter 12

From Business to Personal

With each decision we make, we stand as either architects of our destiny, constructing bridges that span toward our dreams, or as wielders of sledgehammers, demolishing the barriers of past limitations.

While I was thriving in the business world, I felt like I was failing in my personal life. The grip of depression was so strong that it led me to withdraw from precious moments with my family, neglect self-care, and ignore everything that used to matter. This downward spiral pushed me to a critical decision—I resigned from my job. Deciding to leave my job was one of the most challenging decisions I’ve ever made. Throughout my career, climbing the ladder of success was not just about professional fulfillment; it was a means to rise above the poverty of my upbringing and validate my worth, ensuring I never felt like an outcast again. My career had become a significant part of my identity, a source of pride, and a testament to my ability to overcome adversity. Yet, as depression overwhelmed me, disconnecting me from everything I valued—my family, my health, and even the essence of my home—I realized that prioritizing my

health was imperative. It meant stepping away from the things that frivolously defined me to heal and rebuild the foundational aspects of my life that truly mattered.

Facing the void left by my resignation, I found myself at a crossroads, contemplating a future uncharted while reflecting on my career's journey and the skills meticulously sharpened along the path. It was a moment of profound clarity, prompting the question: Could the same principles that propelled me to success in the business world be the key to rebuilding my personal life? This introspection led me to the application of my business acumen in a new, deeply personal project—myself.

Motivated by a desire to heal, I launched a comprehensive personal business plan to restore and optimize my total well-being. I possessed all the business expertise needed to set and achieve goals. Additionally, I'd amassed volumes of medical information during my career in medical sales. However, it was critical for me to develop a comprehensive understanding of personal development to achieve holistic success across all facets of my life. I dedicated myself to extensive research and significant investments in health and wellness, exercise, nutrition, alternative medicine, supplementation, biohacking, and high performance.

As my plan progressed, my activities weren't just supporting my recovery; they were transforming me into the best version of myself and propelling me to new, higher levels of success in all areas of my life. People were often curious about my detailed health regimen, the array of seminars I attended, and the numerous courses I undertook. When I'd explain how this system was enabling me to overcome multiple traumas and losses and excel to greater levels of

achievement, it was evident that my story was inspiring hope for many grappling with their own challenges.

These conversations served as a confirmation of a feeling that had long smoldered within me. The feeling of being an outlier wasn't a sign of disconnection, but a hint of my unique destiny. Not fitting into predefined molds was not an indication of my failure to align with the world, but a signal to blaze my own trail. With this revelation, I pledged to live a life of intentionality aimed at uplifting others. My purpose became crystal clear—to guide others burdened by the shadows of their past to pursue bright futures vibrant with abundance and fulfillment. I needed to share my blueprint for architecting the lives these beautiful souls were meant to lead, ensuring that the adversities they faced became stepping stones rather than stumbling blocks on their path to achievement.

While working on my personal business plan, I joined numerous personal development programs that were adept in enhancing mindset but fell short in elements of business acumen critical for professional growth. While the business development programs I joined provided valuable hard skills training, they tended to overlook the soft skills necessary for forging relationships that serve as the foundation for any thriving business. Furthermore, these programs rarely touched upon the health and wellness tactics key to combating the stressors of life, let alone offering spiritual guidance to inspire global contribution.

Determined to fill these gaps, I envisioned a comprehensive program that could holistically address these diverse yet interconnected needs. With years of certifications in personal training, naturopathy, reiki, sound

healing, meditation, and life coaching, coupled with my extensive background in sales, business development, and leadership, I set out to create a unique methodology. One that emphasized holistic growth, balancing professional pursuits with personal development, relationships, health, and overall well-being. This approach would underscore the importance of harmony and fulfillment in all aspects of life, beyond mere material wealth or career accomplishments.

In the next chapter, I'll delve into the system that became my guiding light. This transformative journey wasn't just about shedding the weight of grief and depression; it was about emerging stronger, both physically and mentally, and reclaiming a sense of purpose and success in my life. First, I'll share how I confronted and gradually erased the grief that had taken hold of me by employing specific strategies to process my emotions healthily and constructively. Then, I'll detail the rigorous but rewarding regimen that not only brought me into the best physical shape of my life but also fortified my mental health, providing a foundation of resilience and clarity. Lastly, I'll reveal how these profound internal changes propelled me to new heights in my career, surpassing my previous achievements and setting new benchmarks for success. More importantly, I'll show you how to adapt and apply these tools to your own life, regardless of the challenges you face.

This isn't just my story; it's a roadmap for anyone looking to overcome adversity, rebuild from loss, and achieve a fulfilling and successful life.

Part III
New Horizons

Chapter 13

Charting Your Course

Navigate your path with unwavering courage, for in the vast sea of life, your dreams are the North Star guiding you to greatness.

In business, a gap analysis is a strategic tool used to assess the disparity between current performance levels and desired objectives. It involves identifying the gaps in processes, resources, or capabilities that hinder the organization from achieving its goals, allowing for targeted interventions to bridge those gaps effectively.

Similarly, in life, a gap analysis involves evaluating the misalignment between where you currently stand and where you aspire to be in various facets such as career, relationships, health, and personal development. By identifying these gaps, individuals can gain clarity on areas requiring improvement or development, enabling them to take intentional actions to close those gaps and move closer to their desired outcomes.

Setting and physically writing down your ambitions isn't just a productivity hack—it's a proven strategy for success. According to a study cited by Fast Company, people who write down their goals are 42 percent more likely to achieve

them. But the benefits go beyond mere statistics. The act of goal planning has profound effects on the brain, influencing behavior, emotions, and cognitive functions in powerful ways. Writing down your goals enhances memory and recall, triggers the release of dopamine for motivation, improves focus and concentration, reduces stress, and activates key areas of the brain responsible for decision-making and problem-solving. Moreover, goal planning encourages a growth mindset, fosters resilience, and enhances problem-solving skills—all essential elements for personal growth and achievement. By embracing goal planning as a daily practice, you can unlock your full potential and create the life you desire.

Once you've taken the following initial gap analysis steps, you'll learn detailed instructions for crafting your tailored strategy of transforming your vision into reality.

"I've included space in this book for you to follow along and write after each prompt. Feel free to use these areas to jot down your thoughts, reflections, and plans. Your journey is unique, and these pages are here to capture your progress and insights as you go."

Navigate Your Current Position

Begin by taking stock of your current situation. This step is like finding your location on a map before embarking on a journey. It requires a thorough and honest assessment of where you stand in relation to the goal you want to achieve. By understanding your starting point with clarity—including your resources, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, you can lay a solid foundation for your journey ahead.

Navigate Your Current Position:

Aspire Toward Your Destination

Once you have a clear picture of where you currently stand, it's time to envision your desired destination. Think about what success looks like for you in different areas of your life. Consider your passions, values, and aspirations. Whether it's advancing in your career, nurturing meaningful relationships, improving your health, or pursuing personal growth, dare to dream big. Envision your future with clarity and conviction, and let your visions pave the way to the life you truly desire.

Aspire Toward Your Destiny:

Visualize the Gap Between the Two

With your current position and desired destination in mind, it's essential to assess the gap between the two. This step involves identifying the obstacles, challenges, and opportunities that lie ahead on your journey. What skills, knowledge, or resources do you need to enhance or acquire? What potential roadblocks or limitations might you encounter? By understanding the terrain ahead, you can anticipate potential hurdles and strategize effectively to overcome them.

Visualize the Gap Between the Two:

By following these three fundamental steps—identifying your current situation, envisioning your desired future, and assessing the gap between the two—you equip yourself with the knowledge and direction needed to embark on your journey. The action plan you create becomes the vehicle that will transport you from where you are to where you want to be, transforming the path from a mere concept into a navigable route to success.

Gain Crystal Clarity

Before setting goals to bridge the gap between your current state and desired destination, it's crucial to define

your values, mission, and vision to ensure that your goals are aligned with your overarching purpose and aspirations. Values, mission, and vision serve as the guiding stars of personal development, much like they do for businesses, illuminating your path and steering you toward fulfillment in life's vast landscape.

Values are the bedrock of existence, shaping beliefs and priorities across all facets of our lives. They anchor our decisions, relationships, and pursuits, ensuring alignment with our deepest convictions. Mission gives purpose to our endeavors, encapsulating our unique contribution to the world. It resonates across personal growth, professional endeavors, and relationships, driving us toward fulfillment and impact. Vision paints a vivid picture of our desired future, inspiring us to reach beyond our current reality and manifest our dreams into existence.

Embracing our values, mission, and vision not only provides a roadmap for our journey but also nurtures our mental and emotional well-being. As we align ourselves with these guiding principles, we experience a deep sense of clarity and purpose, illuminating the path ahead with unwavering certainty. This alignment infuses our lives with meaning and direction, empowering us to face obstacles with resilience and grace. By living authentically and in tune with our core beliefs, we cultivate a profound sense of confidence and self-assurance, enabling us to navigate life's twists and turns with intention and grace.

Now, let's embark on a journey of self-discovery and empowerment as we assess the clarity of your values, mission, and vision. Take a moment to dive deep into your heart and soul, and let's uncover the guiding principles that will light your path to greatness.

Define Your Values:

- What core principles fuel your fire and drive your actions?
- Reflect on the following guiding principles as you consider values that define with who you are and who you aspire to be: integrity, compassion, courage, resilience, authenticity, gratitude, kindness, creativity, growth, balance, empathy, honesty, generosity, loyalty, determination, patience, optimism, humility, forgiveness, and mindfulness. Which resonates with you the most?

- Which virtues do you hold in high esteem and strive to embody?

- When do you feel most aligned with your true self and purpose?

- Recall a time when you faced a tough decision. What values guided your choices?

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Declare Your Mission:

- What is your life's mission or calling? What inspires you to make a difference?

- How do you envision leaving your mark on the world or your community?

- Reflect on moments of pure joy and fulfillment. What were you doing, and why did it resonate with you?

- What unique talents and passions do you possess that can contribute to your mission?

- How do you want to be remembered, and what legacy do you aim to create?

Craft Your Vision:

- Envision your future five or ten years from now. What does your ideal life look like?

- What specific goals or accomplishments signify success to you?

- How do you see yourself making a positive impact on your life and the lives of others?

- Picture your dream life in vivid detail. How does it feel, look, and sound?

- What steps can you take today to bring your vision to life and align your actions with your desired future?

Embrace these questions as opportunities for growth and transformation. Let them guide you toward a life of purpose, passion, and fulfillment.

Implement an Action Plan to Bridge the Divide

Now that you've gained crystal clarity on your values, mission, and vision, it's time to embark on the next phase of your journey: crafting your personalized strategy for success. The M.A.S.T.E.R.M.I.N.D. framework is a powerful tool designed to align your goals and actions with your core principles and aspirations. This framework provides specific instructions to ensure that your path forward is not only clear but also uniquely tailored to your values, mission, and vision. By following these steps, you'll be equipped to navigate life's challenges with confidence and purpose, forging a path that leads to lasting fulfillment and impact.

- ★ **Motivation:** What drives you toward your goal? Consider the passion, purpose, and values that fuel your desire for success. Imagine the impact on your life, relationships, and future aspirations. Conversely, reflect on the potential consequences of not achieving your goal. Connecting with your intrinsic motivation will fortify your resolve and keep you on course, even when faced with challenges.

What Drives You?

- ★ **Articulate:** Start by crafting S.M.A.R.T. goals, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Specific goals help you define exactly what you want to achieve, while measurable goals allow you to track your progress. Achievable goals ensure they are within

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reach, relevant goals keep you focused on what truly matters, and time-bound goals provide a sense of urgency to propel you forward. With S.M.A.R.T. goals as your guide, you'll navigate your path to success with clarity and confidence.

Specific:

Measurable:

Achievable:

Relevant:

Time-bound:

- ★ **Sensory:** Close your eyes and let your imagination run wild to bring your goals to life. Envision the sights, sounds, smells, and sensations associated with achieving your goals. Feel the triumph, the joy, and the changes that come with success. This sensory

journey breathes life into your aspirations, making them tangible and compelling.

****Pause and Visualize****

- ★ **Transform:** Take the vision from your mind's eye and articulate it into a written mission statement. Craft a clear and concise declaration that encapsulates your goals, aspirations, and intentions. This act of creation cements your vision, transforming whispers of the future into shouts of possibility.

Mission Statement:

- ★ **Envision:** Create a vision board to mirror your dreams. Assemble images, words, and symbols that represent your goals and aspirations. This collage of aspirations serves as a visual representation of your dreams, reinforcing your commitment and igniting your imagination. Place your vision board in a prominent location where you can see it and your written declaration daily, allowing them to serve as a constant reminder of what you're working toward.

MY VISION BOARD

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- ★ **Recite:** Craft a personal affirmation that articulates your dedication to achieving your goals. This vow, made to yourself and your dreams, strengthens your resolve and fosters accountability. Recite your commitment statement daily to reinforce your commitment and stay focused on your goals.

Personal Affirmation:

- ★ **Mitigate:** Identify potential hurdles and pitfalls that may impede your progress. Consider external factors, internal challenges, and unexpected circumstances that may arise along your journey. Devise contingency plans and if/then tactics to address each potential obstacle proactively. These plans serve as your armor, shielding your ambitions from the arrows of the unexpected and empowering you to navigate challenges with grace.

Potential Hurdles:

- ★ **Implement:** Elect a champion or establish a mechanism for accountability to support you on your journey. This ally could be a mentor, coach, accountability partner,

digital diary, or public commitment on social media. Choose someone or something that resonates with you and holds you to your promise. Your champion will cheer you on, provide guidance, and hold you accountable every step of the way.

My Accountability Partner:

- ★ **Navigate:** Break down your overarching goal into smaller, manageable tasks and routines. Identify the daily actions and habits that will move you closer to your goals and schedule them on your calendar. Additionally, schedule milestones of your goal as well as the action steps needed to achieve them. By committing to consistent action and prioritizing tasks that align with your goals, you'll maintain momentum and progress.

Tasks and Routines:

- ★ **Delight:** Create a personal reward system to stay motivated and to celebrate your progress along the way. Mark significant milestones with moments of joy, gratitude, and celebration. These festivities are not just rewards for your hard work, but also serve as reminders of how far you've come. Celebrate your

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achievements with friends, family, or supporters who have cheered you on throughout your journey. Let these moments of delight fuel your fire and inspire you to press onward toward your ultimate vision.

My Rewards:

The M.A.S.T.E.R.M.I.N.D. framework encapsulates the steps involved in the goal-setting framework and enhances them with visualization, creation, and action. By applying this framework to your goals, you'll be well-equipped to turn your aspirations into reality and create a life filled with purpose and fulfillment.

This process isn't limited to specific goals; it's a versatile tool for embarking on an epic quest across all facets of life. Whether you're aiming for professional growth, personal development, physical health, mental wellness, financial stability, thriving relationships, or spiritual fulfillment, each step is meticulously crafted to engage your mind, stir your soul, and energize your actions. Let this framework empower you to bridge the gap between the ethereal and the tangible, transforming today's visions into tomorrow's realities. You are the architect of your life and the mastermind of your dreams!

Chapter 14

Basking in the Spotlight

Victory lies in the courage to defy convention and embrace your unique journey.

Eager to get back into shape after having my second daughter, I joined a nearby kickboxing gym. For several weeks, I attended bag classes, mastering the fundamentals and synchronizing punch and kick sequences. The allure of the octagon was inescapable, its presence a constant intrigue. Yet, the prospect of being the only woman in the ring, older than most of the men, and my lack of experience, filled me with dread. Until one day, I mustered the courage to confront my insecurities head-on and stepped into the ring. The dynamics of fighting a moving human target, of dodging and landing blows, demanded a heightened level of focus and adaptability.

Determined not to be perceived merely as “the girl” in the class, and driven by an unwavering resolve to hold my own, I absorbed every instruction with voracious attention, mirroring each move with precision and determination. My dedication paid off, and I found myself rapidly advancing, a testament to the rigor of training against only men, which expedited my learning. A few weeks in, the coach asked if

I was thinking about signing up for Fight Night. Unfamiliar with the event but fueled by a hunger for challenge, I casually agreed. The realization that I had committed to a bona fide fight against a kickboxer from another gym did not deter my spirit; instead, it galvanized my resolve. My training regimen intensified exponentially; from attending a single night class per week, I escalated to four, supplemented by daytime classes and personal training sessions, all aimed at honing my skills for the impending bout.

To be honest, I was a little nervous about what I'd just committed to. But for me, there was no turning back, and the path ahead demanded rigorous preparation for the looming challenge. I went all in on my commitment, transitioning from a casual engagement of one night class a week to a rigorous regimen that included four night classes, supplemented by daytime sessions and personal training, all to enhance my skills with the utmost urgency.

When Fight Night arrived, the culmination of my efforts was put to the test. After three intensely grueling rounds, victory was mine! The euphoria of standing on the edge of the octagon, basking in the spotlight with my arm held high by the referee as the winner, was an unparalleled feeling of triumph and invincibility. The medal I earned became a symbol of my resilience and determination, and I proudly wore it around town as a badge of honor throughout the weekend.

Women from bag classes congratulated me whenever they spotted me around the gym. Gradually, more women ventured into the octagon, openly acknowledging that it was my courage that inspired them to take the leap.

Kickboxing was one of the most rewarding risks I've ever taken. It elevated my self-confidence to unprecedented

levels that radiated through every aspect of my existence. My newfound assurance not only empowered me in the ring but also infused vitality into my relationships, career, and personal endeavors. As I embraced the challenges and victories of kickboxing, I discovered an inner strength that transcended physical boundaries, enriching my life with resilience, determination, and boundless optimism. Yet I continued to face opposition outside the octagon. My decision to embrace a sport perceived as risky, especially as a mother, stirred discomfort and judgment in others. I soon realized that my choices, which deviated from societal norms, inadvertently prompted others to project their insecurities onto me.

The negative feedback and disapproval illuminated a harsh truth: only you can grasp the profound impact that your unique vision holds. No one will resonate with your passion like you do—because it's uniquely yours. Moving forward, I knew that I could either keep quiet about my passions or selectively confide in those who understood my journey. Instead, I boldly proclaim my passions, prepared to disregard any negative opinions—because other people's approval is not a prerequisite for my happiness.

I also learned that stepping into the octagon was stepping into the person I needed to embody to win. Winning the fight demanded dedication to training at full intensity, courage and boldness in the face of extreme danger, a sharp focus on my opponent's strategies and movements, seamless execution of complex combinations, and pacing to sustain endurance—all of which served me inside and outside of the octagon.

This journey of overcoming my limiting beliefs and those placed on me by society not only reshaped my identity but

also illuminated the path for others to follow, proving that true strength lies in the courage to embrace our prismatic selves and transcend the confines of convention.

Limiting beliefs are the internal narratives that convince us we're not good enough, not strong enough, or not worthy of achieving our dreams. These beliefs are often ingrained in us through past experiences, societal norms, or the opinions of others, acting as invisible barriers to our goals. No matter how well-crafted your plan to achieve your goals may be, it will be ineffective if limiting beliefs are holding you back. Now that you've heard my story of confronting and overcoming my fears in the octagon, let's explore how you can identify and conquer your own limiting beliefs to achieve your goals.

- What are some recurring thoughts or beliefs that arise when you think about pursuing your goals or dreams?
- Have you ever experienced moments where you felt unworthy or incapable of success? If so, what triggered those feelings?
- Reflecting on past experiences, are there any instances where you felt limited by fear or self-doubt? What were the underlying beliefs driving those emotions?
- How do societal norms or the expectations of others influence your perception of what you can achieve?
- Are there any patterns in your behavior or decision-making that suggest you may be holding onto limiting beliefs? If so, what are they, and how do they manifest in your daily life?

Once identified, the journey to overcoming these beliefs begins. This process involves challenging these narratives, reframing your mindset, and taking concrete steps toward change.

- ★ **Challenge the Belief:** Ask yourself, “Is this belief truly reflective of my abilities, or is it a narrative I’ve been conditioned to accept?” Seek evidence that contradicts this belief.
- ★ **Reframe Your Mindset:** Replace each limiting belief with an empowering belief. For example, change “I can’t handle this challenge” to “I have the strength to overcome challenges.”
- ★ **Affirm a New Belief:** Select one limiting belief you’ve identified. For the next month, focus on challenging and reframing this belief through daily affirmations. Then journal about your experiences, feelings, and any shifts in your mindset.

The path to overcoming limiting beliefs is not a one-time event, but a continuous journey of self-discovery and growth. Like stepping into the octagon, it requires courage, persistence, and the willingness to face our innermost fears—the only true limits are the ones we place on ourselves.

Chapter 15

Prismatic Success

Only when your cup overflows can you truly pour into the lives of others.

While reminiscing about my mom and admiring the exquisite collection of jewelry she'd given me over the years, I wondered how I could ever embody and uphold her unique quality of gift-giving. As I brainstormed ways to bring joy to others, like the joy my mom spread through gifting jewelry, I realized my love for crystals mirrored her passion for jewelry. I'd always been fascinated with crystals for their beauty, vibrant colors, and diverse range of applications, and I'd collected hundreds of crystals spanning every variety, shape, and size. All matter, including crystals, vibrates at specific frequencies due to its atomic and molecular structure. Each type of crystal has its own unique vibrational frequency determined by its composition. For instance, quartz crystals vibrate at a high frequency, promoting clarity and focus, while amethyst crystals vibrate at a lower frequency, fostering relaxation and intuition. These vibrations interact with our energy fields, influencing our well-being and facilitating healing and transformation. Inspired by my passion,

I decided to extend my mom's gift-giving legacy by sharing my love for crystals. Whenever I learn of someone facing challenges, whether they seek strength, clarity, healing, peace, or otherwise, I love gifting them a crystal specific to their needs. Hearing how they use the crystal, whether it's months or years later, fills me with great joy.

While studying my crystal collection, I noticed how light refracted through one of the gems, revealing the spectrum of colors inherent in white light. This phenomenon sparked a realization—that success is multi-faceted, much like the diverse hues refracted through a prism, and its meaning can vary greatly among individuals. A holistic approach combining business strategies for goal achievement with personal development tools and health and wellness resources can nurture continuous growth across the spectrum of life. My amalgamation of business acumen, health and wellness expertise, and personal development experience evolved into “Prismatic Success,” a comprehensive program designed to accelerate personal breakthroughs and enable individuals to achieve excellence across seven key facets of life simultaneously: professional development, personal growth, physical health, mental wellness, financial stability, relationships and social life, and spiritual fulfillment.

For a directory of resources and products curated to support your journey, visit www.DanielleLopez.info/resources or text “Prismatic” to 26786.

Mental Wellness

This facet focuses on maintaining and improving one's emotional and psychological well-being. It includes managing stress, understanding and processing emotions

healthily, and developing coping mechanisms for life's challenges. Mental wellness is foundational, affecting physical health, personal development, the quality of relationships, and professional growth.

Shockingly, stress and trauma can alter DNA function, a phenomenon explored in epigenetics.¹ In essence, these experiences can leave lasting imprints on our genetic makeup, shaping how our genes are activated or suppressed. This delicate interplay between our environment and genetic expression can have profound implications for our well-being.

For instance, prolonged exposure to stressors or traumatic events may lead to detrimental changes in DNA expression, potentially increasing the risk of mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Moreover, epigenetic modifications induced by stress and trauma may also contribute to the development of chronic physical ailments, including cardiovascular diseases, autoimmune disorders, and even certain types of cancer.

Understanding the impact of stress and trauma on DNA expression underscores the importance of adopting strategies to mitigate their effects and promote holistic well-being. By cultivating resilience, practicing self-care, and seeking support when needed, individuals can navigate these challenges more effectively and empower themselves to lead healthier, more fulfilling lives.

The sign on an airplane stating "secure your own mask before helping others" serves as a powerful metaphor for life. Just as in an emergency on a plane where you're

¹ Dom Byrne, "How Trauma's Effects Can Pass from Generation to Generation," Nature News, April 26, 2023, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-023-01433-y>.

instructed to put on your mask first to ensure you're getting enough oxygen, in life, ensuring your own well-being is crucial before you can be of genuine help to those around you. Self-care is a foundational element of being able to offer support, love, and assistance to family, friends, and those in need. Without attending to your own health, emotional, and physical needs first, you may not have the capacity, strength, or resilience to care for others.

In cultivating my own Prismatic Success, I recognized the need to prioritize self-care before being able to assist my family again—and I would have to regain my mental wellness as the initial step. Feeling utterly isolated in my grief, it seemed as if no one could truly grasp the depth of my suffering, shaped by a past filled with turmoil and neglect. Despite this, I recognized an essential need: to seek help, to heal, and to find a path back to my true self. It was clear that therapy would be the cornerstone of my journey toward mental health and overall wellness.

Given my hectic work life and family responsibilities, I had little time for traditional in-office therapy. Recognizing this, I sought alternatives that fit my tight schedule without compromising the care I needed. I discovered a personalized online mental health service offering tailored therapy that matched my unique needs. I embarked on a therapeutic journey, one virtual session at a time, laying the groundwork for reclaiming my wellness and, ultimately, my life.

As therapy sessions became a regular part of my routine, a clearer picture of my mental health started to emerge. Therapy revealed that my struggles with depression and anxiety, which I've been managing since high school, were indeed triggered and intensified, considering the recent events. However, what truly took me by surprise was being

diagnosed with ADHD as a 38-year-old adult. I'd previously assumed ADHD was just for kids; I was surprised to learn that it can accompany adults with anxiety and depression, which certainly explained many lifelong quirks in my behavior. Despite the initial shock, I embraced my diagnosis and studied everything I could about ADHD, leading to self-understanding and a new perspective on leveraging my strengths and supporting my weaknesses.

Another crucial component of my recovery was hypnotherapy. Prior to undergoing hypnotherapy, discussing my mom's passing would invariably lead to tears. Hypnotherapy guided me through past experiences, enabling me to reevaluate them from fresh angles and even rewrite certain scenes. This process granted me a new understanding of events, liberating them from their hold on my current outlook on life.

Meditation became a regular part of my mental health routine, offering me a sanctuary of calm in the chaos of everyday life. Journaling afterward allowed me to capture insights and revelations that arose during meditation. This structured way to explore and release mental clutter has significantly contributed to my overall well-being, reducing stress, enhancing self-awareness, and fostering a sense of inner peace.

Improving mental health is like tuning a complex, intricate musical instrument. Initially, the instrument might be out of tune—each string (depression, anxiety, ADHD) producing discordant sounds that clash with the harmony we seek in our lives. Therapy acts as the skilled hand of a master tuner, adjusting each string with precision and care, ensuring that they resonate at the perfect pitch.

Meditation and journaling are like daily practice sessions for the musician, ensuring that the instrument remains in optimal condition and continues to produce beautiful music. Over time, with patience and dedication, the once out-of-tune instrument becomes a source of strength and beauty, capable of playing complex compositions with ease and confidence. Every note played is a step closer to achieving inner harmony and peace.

Our mindsets, whether fixed or growth-oriented, shape how we approach life's challenges. Embracing a growth mindset, rooted in the belief that change and development are possible, empowers us to learn from setbacks and cultivate a more positive perspective. This mindset shift is backed by the brain's neuroplasticity, which enables our neural networks to adapt and grow in response to new experiences. Through continuous practice, we can challenge and reshape distorted thoughts and self-defeating beliefs, ultimately paving the way for greater happiness and fulfillment in life.

As we fine-tune the intricate musical instrument of our minds, it's essential to periodically pause and assess its current state of harmony. Consider this your moment to reflect on your mental health, using a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 indicates a deep need for tuning, and 10 represents a well-balanced, harmonious state. Ask yourself:

- How would you rate your overall sense of mental well-being?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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- How effectively do you manage stress?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How confident do you feel in handling emotional upheavals?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Rate your satisfaction with your current coping mechanisms for anxiety and depression.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Assess the level of clarity and focus in your daily life.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Evaluate your sense of connection and support within your social networks.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To embark on improving your mental health, consider the following initial steps:

- ★ **Seek Professional Guidance:** Just as a master tuner is essential for the perfect harmony of a musical instrument, a mental health professional can provide

the expertise needed to guide you toward emotional and psychological well-being.

- ★ **Practice Mindfulness and Meditation:** Incorporate regular meditation into your routine to improve focus, reduce stress, and enhance self-awareness. Think of it as practicing scales on your instrument, which is essential for maintaining its tune.
- ★ **Journaling for Insight:** After meditation, journal your thoughts and feelings. This acts as composing your own music, allowing you to express and understand the melodies and dissonances within your mind.
- ★ **Educate Yourself:** Learn about mental health, much like studying music theory, to understand the complexities of your emotions and behaviors.
- ★ **Build a Supportive Community:** Surround yourself with people who encourage and inspire you, just as musicians thrive in a community of fellow artists who push them toward excellence.
- ★ **Adopt Healthy Habits:** Engage in regular physical activity, maintain a nutritious diet, and ensure adequate sleep to keep your instrument in prime condition.
- ★ **Consider Complementary Therapies:** Alternative therapies for mental wellness include art therapy, music therapy, dance/movement therapy, mindfulness and meditation, yoga, animal-assisted therapy, and biofeedback. These approaches offer diverse ways to explore emotions, reduce stress, and promote overall well-being, catering to individual preferences and needs.

Whether through creative expression, physical movement, or mindfulness practices, these therapies can enable you to conduct your inner orchestra with calm and ease. By assessing where you are and taking deliberate steps to tune your mental health, you'll find yourself composing a life symphony that resonates with joy, peace, and fulfillment.

Physical Health

Physical health encompasses the well-being of the body through fitness, nutrition, and disease prevention. It fundamentally supports professional productivity and personal development by enhancing cognitive functions and physical stamina. Good physical health is crucial for mental wellness, as it helps mitigate symptoms of depression and anxiety and fosters stronger social interactions by enabling active engagement in relationships and community activities. Financially, it curtails medical expenses, safeguarding financial stability. Furthermore, practices like yoga and meditation contribute to spiritual fulfillment by harmonizing body and spirit, underscoring physical health's integral role across all life facets.

Tackling my physical health was as crucial as addressing my mental well-being. The passive nature of my remote work had taken its toll, leading to weight gain and an overall decline in fitness. Determined to reverse these effects, I introduced active furniture into my home workspace, including a standing desk positioned over a treadmill, to encourage movement. A light therapy lamp helped combat fatigue and improve sleep, while a stationary bike became my new fitness staple, kicking off a daily exercise habit aimed at boosting my metabolism and overall health.

Curious about optimizing my physical health further, I turned to DNA testing. A simple cheek swab offered insights into how to personalize my diet, supplements, and workout routines to my body's specific needs based on my genetic makeup. This bespoke approach was further refined by blood tests, which highlighted my low testosterone levels—a key factor in my lethargy and difficulty in gaining muscle. Hormone replacement therapy was a game-changer, energizing my workouts and enhancing my mood.

Biohacking became my next frontier. By making lifestyle adjustments and utilizing cutting-edge technology, I aimed to fine-tune my body's functions for peak performance and longevity. Wearable tech played a significant role in this journey, allowing me to monitor and analyze my activity levels, calorie burn, and even the detailed breakdown of my body composition over time.

Informed by my DNA and lab test results, I adapted my fitness routine and diet to suit my body's specific muscle fiber composition and metabolism. Exercise not only improved my physical fitness, but was also a powerful tool for boosting my mental health.

When we work out, our brains release a cocktail of chemicals like endorphins, serotonin, dopamine, and more, all of which contribute to improved mood, reduced stress, and enhanced cognitive function. These natural mood enhancers help us feel happier, more motivated, and better equipped to handle life's challenges.

To support my muscle recovery, I incorporated cryotherapy, PEMF (pulsed electromagnetic therapy), and red-light therapy, which collectively reduced inflammation and sped up healing. I crafted a diet complemented by supplementation that was most beneficial for my DNA.

Nootropics and herbal remedies further balanced my mood and mental clarity.

E-stim (Electrical stimulation) therapy became a fundamental aspect of my routine for boosting cognitive functions and mood. By stimulating brain activity, this technique enhanced my focus, memory, and overall brain health while simultaneously alleviating stress.

My journey in tackling physical health mirrors the meticulous crafting of a tailor-made suit, where every stitch, fabric, and fitting is customized to the model's exact dimensions, enhancing not only the suit's appearance but also its comfort and functionality. Just as a tailor selects materials and designs based on the individual's measurements and preferences, I used DNA and blood tests to tailor my diet, exercise, and wellness routines to my body's unique genetic blueprint. This personalized approach, like the art of tailoring, transformed my health and wellness journey into a perfect fit for my needs, optimizing my physical and mental performance much like a bespoke suit crafted to optimize the wearer's confidence and presentation.

Just as understanding your measurements is essential before tailoring the perfect suit, assessing your current state of physical health is crucial before embarking on a journey of improvement. To begin, let's use a simple self-evaluation scale from 1 to 10, where 1 indicates the most significant need for improvement, and 10 represents optimal physical health. Ask yourself the following questions.

- How would you rate your overall physical fitness?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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- On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you evaluate your daily energy levels?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How do you rate your nutritional habits)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Considering your current lifestyle, how would you assess your stress levels?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Lastly, how satisfied are you with your sleep quality?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Once you've assessed your physical health needs, here are some initial steps to embark on your path to improvement:

- ★ **Incorporate Movement into Your Day:** If you have a sedentary lifestyle, look for opportunities to move more. This could be as simple as taking short breaks to walk around during your workday, using a standing desk, or setting a daily step goal.
- ★ **Evaluate and Adjust Your Diet:** Based on your self-assessment, identify areas of your diet that need improvement. Consider consulting with a nutritionist to

create a personalized eating plan that aligns with your body's needs, preferences, and DNA analysis, if available.

- ★ **Prioritize Sleep:** Assess your current sleep habits and implement routines to improve sleep quality, such as establishing a consistent bedtime, reducing screen time before bed, and creating a comfortable sleeping environment.
- ★ **Manage Stress:** Explore stress management techniques that work for you, such as meditation, yoga, deep-breathing exercises, or any hobby that helps you relax and unwind.
- ★ **Monitor Progress:** Keep track of your physical health improvements by journaling or using health-tracking apps. Celebrate your successes and adjust your strategies as needed.
- ★ **Seek Professional Guidance:** If you're unsure where to start or need tailored advice, consider consulting with health professionals, such as a personal trainer, a dietitian, or a therapist, for mental well-being support.

By evaluating your current physical health and taking deliberate steps toward improvement, you can tailor a wellness journey that fits you perfectly, enhancing not only your physical health but also your overall quality of life.

Personal Development

This area involves the pursuit of growth in one's abilities, knowledge, and self-awareness. It encompasses lifelong learning, skill acquisition, and character building. Personal development enriches mental wellness, enhances physical health through better lifestyle choices, deepens relationships, and underpins professional growth and financial stability by fostering adaptability and competence.

Diving into personal development transformed not just how I viewed past and current challenges, but fundamentally reshaped my outlook on life. From books and courses to immersive events, I embraced a growth mindset, allowing me to transcend my limiting beliefs, discover my true potential, boost my self-esteem, and enhance my self-confidence. Through continuous learning and skill acquisition, I honed my abilities and expanded my knowledge, leading to a clearer sense of purpose and better decision-making.

Acquiring a life coaching certification provided me with additional tools and strategies for coaching myself and holding myself accountable for high performance. This newfound skill is seamlessly integrated into both my personal and professional life. I began informally coaching colleagues and clients, helping them navigate their work challenges and decision-making processes. Witnessing the tangible benefits coaching had on my interactions, I was inspired to take a formal leap into coaching, drawing upon my unique blend of life experiences and business acumen.

Personal development was not merely a tool for resilience; it became a catalyst for inspiring others toward their potential. It enhanced my professional capabilities, leading to unprecedented success in business and, consequently, financial stability. To maintain momentum in personal growth, I curated an annual curriculum of personal development resources tailored to the skills I aimed to acquire for upcoming life and business phases.

Deepening self-awareness helped me create an emotional management framework vital for stress control and self-care. Understanding the link between thoughts, emotions, actions, and character is key to navigating

emotions effectively. Our thoughts shape emotions, driving actions that form habits and define our character. While we can't control every thought, we can change our reactions, a crucial realization that led me to develop a systematic approach to altering negative thought patterns.

Embarking on personal development is akin to setting sail on a vast ocean of self-discovery. Just as a ship navigates through the unpredictable seas, facing storms and calm waters alike, personal development guides you through life's challenges and triumphs. Each book read, course taken, and event attended serves as a compass, directing you toward your true north—your potential and purpose. This journey is not a straight path, but a voyage that requires adjusting your sails to the winds of change, learning, and growth. The acquisition of new skills and knowledge acts as the wind in your sails, propelling you forward to new horizons. In the vast ocean of life, personal development is your vessel to navigate the unknown, turning the vast expanse of possibilities into a journey of transformation and discovery.

Engaging in personal development activities can profoundly reshape the brain through neuroplasticity, the brain's ability to form and reorganize synaptic connections. By learning new skills, practicing positive habits, and managing stress effectively, you can create new neural pathways and strengthen existing connections. This enhances cognitive flexibility, resilience to stress, and emotional well-being. Through continuous personal development, you can harness neuroplasticity to become a more resilient, effective, and fulfilled version of yourself.

As we journey across the vast seas of our own growth and potential, it's crucial to periodically chart our course,

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ensuring we're on the right path toward our personal development goals. To aid in this navigation, I invite you to pause and assess your current position using a 1 to 10 scale, with 1 indicating areas where the wind in your sails might be lacking and 10 representing full steam ahead:.

- How resilient do you feel in the face of challenges?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Rate your current level of emotional intelligence and ability to manage and understand your emotions and those of others.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Evaluate your commitment to continuous learning and self-improvement.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Consider your ability to set and achieve meaningful goals.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Assess the quality of your relationships and your role within them.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Once you've pinpointed areas ripe for development, consider these initial steps to chart a course toward personal growth:

- ★ **Seek Knowledge:** Dive into books, online courses, or workshops related to your areas of improvement. If continuous learning was your lower score, commit to reading one new book a month or enrolling in a course that piques your interest.
- ★ **Embrace Challenges:** View obstacles as opportunities for growth. If resilience is an area for improvement, start by tackling small challenges and gradually building your confidence to face larger ones.
- ★ **Set Specific Goals:** Identify specific areas you want to improve and set clear, achievable goals. For example, if you rated your emotional intelligence lower, consider setting a goal to practice empathy daily or to learn more about emotional regulation strategies.
- ★ **Expand Your Network:** Surround yourself with individuals who embody the qualities you aspire to. Joining communities or groups focused on personal development can provide both inspiration and practical advice.
- ★ **Practice Mindfulness:** Cultivate a daily meditation or mindfulness practice to enhance your self-awareness and emotional intelligence. This can help improve your score in understanding and managing emotions.
- ★ **Reflect and Journal:** Regularly reflect on your experiences and emotions. Journaling can be a powerful tool for self-discovery and for tracking your progress toward your personal development goals.

By assessing where you are, setting your sights on where you want to be, and taking deliberate steps toward your destination, you'll ensure that your personal development journey is both purposeful and rewarding. Remember, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and every effort you make in personal development brings you closer to discovering and becoming your best self.

Professional Growth

Professional growth refers to the continuous development of skills, knowledge, and experiences that contribute to one's career advancement and professional success. It encompasses a range of activities, including further education, skill enhancement, network expansion, and the attainment of higher levels of responsibility and influence within one's field. This concept is not solely about climbing the corporate ladder, but also involves deepening personal expertise and effectiveness in the workplace. This growth is deeply interconnected with other critical life facets, such as personal development, mental wellness, and physical health, influencing and enhancing each. For instance, career advancements can lead to improved financial stability, which alleviates stress and allows for better mental health and the acquisition of resources that further personal and professional endeavors. Additionally, expanding professional networks through career development can enrich social life and even contribute to spiritual fulfillment by aligning one's work with personal values and goals. Professional growth not only propels an individual's career forward but also broadly supports and is supported by improvements across all areas of life, establishing a comprehensive framework for overall success and well-being.

From the age of eleven, I suffered from chronic migraines that brought unbearable pain, light sensitivity, and nausea, disrupting my life multiple days a week for decades. Despite numerous specialist visits, MRIs, and trials of medications with awful side effects, I could never find lasting relief. In my quest for a solution, I turned to alternative medicine and discovered medical marijuana. Upon becoming a patient and using prescribed THC tinctures and vapes, I finally found relief from the chronic pain that had plagued me for over twenty years. My success with medical marijuana and the potential to help so many suffering from conditions including chronic pain, PTSD, anxiety, depression, epilepsy, and more ignited a passion to share this relief with others.

This led me to make a bold career shift from the security of medical device sales to the burgeoning cannabis industry. A CBD manufacturer recruited me to help clients develop their CBD product lines. I immediately fell in love with the industry, the science of cannabis, its various chemical forms, and its wide range of therapeutic applications. It became evident that this career change perfectly complemented my pharmaceutical background and profound interest in medical science. Cannabis's versatility, bridging sectors from legislation to healthcare and entertainment, was endlessly fascinating. Leveraging my experience from multinational corporations to bring structure and compliance to CBD startups, I quickly rose to VP of sales while launching hundreds of businesses and enhancing countless lives along the way.

The journey of integrating personal experience, professional expertise, and my desire for meaningful pursuits propelled me into unprecedented success in the cannabis industry. This transition not only elevated my business acumen but also allowed me to make a more

significant impact than ever before, leading to substantially increased personal income. I learned that income isn't just a reflection of job title or qualifications—it's directly tied to the value you bring to the world. My professional growth from changing industries not only enhanced my business acumen but also increased my capacity to contribute meaningfully and in a valuable way to others.

Changing industries came with its own set of hurdles. Initially, I struggled with a sense of not belonging as a minority woman in a predominantly white male-dominated field, while also navigating societal expectations tied to my role as a mother of two young girls. However, despite the perceived risks and stigma surrounding the cannabis industry, choosing this path turned out to be the most fulfilling decision of my career. I was driven by the opportunity to apply my expertise and create a meaningful impact. This journey allowed me to enhance my leadership skills, refine operational capabilities, strengthen my self-assurance, and enrich various facets of my personal life. The doubts I encountered only reinforced the significance of pursuing one's passion and the value of making choices guided by personal beliefs rather than societal standards. It's crucial to trust in your abilities, pursue your passions with conviction, and recognize that true fulfillment comes from aligning your career with your values and interests.

This journey resembles navigating through a dense forest, where the path to the clearing is obscured by thickets of doubt and towering trees of societal pressures. Just as a traveler must trust their instincts, equip themselves with the right tools, and remain steadfast in their direction, I too had to arm myself with knowledge, embrace my unique skills, and persist despite the uncertainties and challenges that lay ahead.

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In navigating your own professional forest, consider these self-evaluation questions to identify where you stand and where you aim to go, using a scale from 1 to 10 (1 being the least developed and 10 the most):

- How confident are you in your current professional skills and knowledge?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- To what extent do you feel aligned with your career goals, values, and interests?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Rate your current level of job satisfaction and fulfillment.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Evaluate your resilience and adaptability in facing professional challenges.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Assess the strength and diversity of your professional network.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To improve your professional development and find your clearing, start with these initial steps:

- ★ **Map Your Terrain:** Define clear career objectives that resonate with your passions and values.
- ★ **Gather Your Tools:** Invest in continuous learning through courses, workshops, and books relevant to your industry or interests.
- ★ **Find Guides:** Seek mentors and role models who can share insights and experiences to help you navigate your path.
- ★ **Build Bridges:** Expand your professional network by connecting with peers and participating in industry events.
- ★ **Trailblaze New Paths:** Don't shy away from taking calculated risks or exploring less conventional career opportunities.
- ★ **Celebrate Milestones:** Acknowledge and reward your progress and achievements along the way.
- ★ **Keep Your Compass Calibrated:** Regularly reassess your goals and strategies to ensure they remain aligned with your evolving aspirations.

By approaching your professional growth with intentionality and openness, you can navigate through the densest of forests to reach your own clearing, where your career aligns with your deepest passions and potential. Remember, it's not just about reaching the destination but growing with every step you take on the journey.

Financial Stability

Financial stability is not merely accumulating wealth, but achieving a state where your financial situation supports and enhances all facets of your life. It's about creating a buffer against life's uncertainties, allowing you to make decisions based on what is truly important rather than out of financial desperation.

Financial stability provides a foundation of security that activates various psychological and cognitive processes. It reduces stress, thereby enhancing mental clarity and decision-making capacity. With financial worries at bay, you can better focus on personal development and make more strategic life choices, aligning actions with long-term goals.

From an early age, I was ingrained with a sense of self-sufficiency, starting my first job at fourteen at a local pizza shop. Although I was forced to join the workforce at an early age, it ignited my journey through various jobs that significantly shaped my understanding of personal and financial responsibility. Throughout my youth and into my teenage years, I juggled multiple jobs simultaneously, including positions in restaurants, department stores, and promotional modeling gigs. These experiences not only helped me financially but also instilled a strong work ethic and versatility in adapting to different work environments.

After college, I was recruited for a coveted pharmaceutical sales position by Johnson & Johnson, even before graduation. This role was a significant upgrade, providing not just a stable job but also introducing me to the complexities and pressures of the corporate world. My success in this arena led to rapid professional growth, eventually catapulting

Vice President of Sales opportunities within prominent CBD manufacturing companies.

In my twenties, a friend's mom shared a valuable lesson: our career paths are not always linear. It's perfectly fine for the journey to weave side to side as we acquire new skills, as long as the path is ultimately going up. Throughout my career, I strived for continual growth and sought solutions to transform challenges into stepping stones toward greater achievements.

Think of your financial stability as building a fortress. Each financial decision adds a stone to your fortress, protecting you from potential economic invaders. Wise investments and savings are like the high walls guarding against unforeseen difficulties, allowing you to live with peace and confidence.

Evaluate your financial stability with these questions, scoring each from 1 (low stability) to 10 (high stability):

- How frequently do financial worries affect your daily life?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How prepared are you for unexpected expenses?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Are you satisfied with your lifestyle, given your current financial means?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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- How disciplined are you with your budgeting?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How diversified are your investments or income sources?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How secure do you feel about your financial future?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Do your financial plans align with your life goals?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To enhance your financial stability, consider the following initial steps:

- ★ **Fortify Your Foundation:** Develop a comprehensive budget that accounts for all your expenses, savings, and investments. Prioritize needs over wants and review this budget monthly to adjust for any financial changes.
- ★ **Reinforce Your Defenses:** Spend less than you earn and save the difference. Make conscious spending choices that align with your financial goals.
- ★ **Seal Breaches:** Regularly review your subscription services (streaming, magazines, apps) and cancel those you no longer use or need. This can free up a significant amount of money monthly.

- ★ **Strengthen Your Walls:** Set up automatic transfers from your checking account to a savings account every pay period. This “pay yourself first” approach ensures you save before you have a chance to spend.
- ★ **Build a Moat:** Save at least three months’ worth of living expenses to shield against sudden financial demands.
- ★ **Secure the Gates:** Employ the snowball method (prioritizing smallest debts for quick wins) or the avalanche method (targeting highest-interest debts first) to efficiently eliminate debt and prioritize repaying high-interest or large balances first.
- ★ **Construct Watchtowers:** Set long-term financial goals, including retirement. Consider speaking with a financial advisor to create a robust financial plan.
- ★ **Expand Your Territory:** Educating yourself about different investment types and start with investments that match your risk tolerance. Additionally, consider diversifying your income through passive sources and explore side hustles for extra earnings.

By addressing these areas, you can construct a financially stable life that not only withstands future challenges but also supports fulfilling and holistic growth across all areas of your life.

Relationships and Social Life

This facet focuses on building and maintaining healthy, supportive relationships and engaging with a community. Strong social connections contribute to mental wellness, motivate personal development, and can even impact physical health positively. They provide a network of

support essential for navigating life's ups and downs, including career and financial challenges.

Embarking on this transformative journey of self-discovery and personal development profoundly reshaped my relationship with myself. As I gained a better understanding of my own needs, strengths, and areas for growth, I cultivated a sense of self-compassion and grace that had previously eluded me. This newfound self-acceptance empowered me to acknowledge and celebrate my unique qualities while also gently addressing and working through my challenges.

This internal work had a ripple effect on my external relationships, most notably with my family. As I became more attuned to my own emotions and needs, I found myself equipped with greater patience, empathy, and emotional availability. This evolution allowed me to be a more present, understanding, and supportive mother and wife. I learned to navigate the complexities of family life with more ease, transforming challenges into opportunities for growth and deepening the emotional connections with my loved ones.

Moreover, my journey of self-improvement and personal acceptance enabled me to model healthy behaviors and emotional resilience for my children. By prioritizing my well-being and demonstrating the importance of self-care, I fostered an environment where emotional expression and personal growth were valued and encouraged. In turn, my relationship with my spouse flourished as we navigated life's ups and downs with a foundation of mutual respect, understanding, and shared growth.

Ultimately, the journey toward a better relationship with myself was the key to enriching my roles as a mother and wife. It taught me the invaluable lesson that nurturing oneself is not an act of selfishness but a prerequisite

for offering love, support, and guidance to those we hold dear. Through this journey, I forged stronger, more meaningful connections with my family, built on the pillars of self-awareness, compassion, and continuous growth.

Embarking on my journey of personal development, I found myself drawn to and engaging with a diverse array of communities. These groups were composed of individuals who shared my enthusiasm for growth and learning, and we bonded over the topics covered in our various courses. The adage “You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with” resonated deeply with me, guiding my decision to intentionally cultivate my circle of influence. I sought out the mentors I lacked in my youth, those who had navigated the path of success and could offer wisdom and guidance.

As a result, my social network evolved into an eclectic assembly of successful entrepreneurs, seasoned coaches, and thought leaders. This transformation wasn't just about socializing; it was a strategic move toward immersing myself in an environment that fostered growth, innovation, and resilience. Engaging in higher-level conversations with my new peers, my understanding of various subjects deepened exponentially, and my skills developed at an accelerated pace. This dynamic exchange of ideas and experiences enriched my personal and professional life, illustrating the powerful impact of surrounding oneself with individuals who embody the success and values you aspire to achieve. Through this deliberate choice of association, I not only expanded my knowledge base but also elevated my mindset, ambitions, and, ultimately, my achievements.

My personal growth journey profoundly transformed how I approached developing new relationships. By actively seeking out mentors, colleagues, and communities who

shared my passion for personal development, I strategically surrounded myself with people who could offer not just companionship, but also inspiration, guidance, and support. My networking mirrored the principle of the “garden and the gardener.” Just as a gardener cultivates their garden, choosing which plants to nurture and which weeds to remove, I became both the gardener of my social circle and the garden itself, being shaped by the environment I cultivated around me.

Surrounding yourself with accomplished individuals can significantly influence your journey to success, thanks to the activation of mirror neurons in your brain. These neurons fire when you observe someone else perform an action, mirroring their behavior and helping you learn and adopt successful patterns. Being around successful people also enhances empathy, shifts your mindset to a growth-oriented perspective, and boosts motivation and aspiration. Through social learning and exposure to a success-oriented environment, you can internalize the behaviors and attitudes conducive to achievement. In essence, by surrounding yourself with successful role models, you not only gain inspiration and insight but also begin to embody the traits and strategies that lead to success.

To evaluate the current state of your relationships and social life, consider the following self-evaluation questions, rating each on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 signifies the lowest and 10 is the highest:

- How satisfied are you with the quality of your current relationships?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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- To what extent do you feel supported by your social network?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How often do you engage in meaningful conversations or activities with friends or family?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Rate the level of positivity and encouragement present in your interactions.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Evaluate the degree to which your relationships contribute to your personal growth.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Improving your relationships starts with self-reflection and a willingness to grow. Here are some initial steps you can take to enhance your relationships:

- ★ **Assess Your Current Circle:** Start by evaluating your existing network. Identify individuals whose success you admire and those who may not align with your growth ambitions. This initial assessment will help you understand where to focus your networking efforts.

- ★ **Seek Out Role Models:** Actively look for successful individuals within your industry or in areas where you aspire to excel. Attend related conferences and events or participate in webinars and workshops where these individuals might be present. Connecting with role models can provide invaluable insights and inspire you to adopt successful habits.
- ★ **Engage in Growth Groups:** Join groups and organizations that focus on the growth you want to achieve. These platforms provide opportunities to meet and interact with accomplished individuals who can provide guidance and influence your mindset and behavior by example.
- ★ **Utilize Social Media Strategically:** Follow and interact with successful individuals and thought leaders on platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, and industry-specific forums. Engage with their content, participate in discussions, and even reach out for mentorship or advice to gain exposure to their success-oriented practices.
- ★ **Cultivate Meaningful Relationships:** Once you have connected with individuals aligned with your aspirations, strive to develop meaningful relationships. Offer value, be it through sharing your unique skills or knowledge, and seek ways to help or collaborate on projects and initiatives. Genuine relationships can lead to more profound insights and more substantial growth opportunities, helping you internalize the traits and strategies that lead to success.

By taking these steps, you can create a supportive and enriching social environment that not only benefits your

personal development but also enhances the quality of your life and those around you.

Spiritual Fulfillment

A spiritual connection represents a profound bond with something beyond the tangible world, varying widely across cultures, beliefs, and individual experiences. For some, this connection is found in nature's beauty, evoking a sense of unity with all living things and the universe. Others find their spiritual path through religious faith, where rituals and prayer offer a direct line to a divine presence or higher power. Additionally, creative pursuits like art and music serve as mediums for many to experience spirituality, where the act of creation becomes a bridge to something larger than oneself.

Spiritual fulfillment nurtures mental wellness by providing comfort and hope, influences physical health through stress reduction, and enriches personal development by encouraging self-reflection and a broader perspective on life. Mindfulness, meditation, and physical practices like yoga are also key to nurturing a spiritual connection, emphasizing the importance of inner peace, awareness, and the harmonization of body, mind, and spirit. These practices help individuals detach from daily stressors and tap into a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the world. Furthermore, meaningful human relationships can be a source of spirituality, where empathy, love, and kindness toward others foster a transcendent bond that nourishes the soul.

In essence, spirituality is a deeply personal journey that can manifest in countless ways, from philosophical inquiry to the simple act of being present in the moment. Whether through

the awe of nature, the solace of religious belief, the flow of creativity, or the warmth of human connection, spirituality offers a pathway to discovering purpose, meaning, and a sense of belonging. It underscores the idea that beyond our physical realities lies a rich landscape of experiences and connections waiting to be explored, each offering its own unique insights into the mysteries of life and the universe.

Incorporating spirituality into our lives, regardless of religious affiliation, can profoundly impact our mental health and cognitive abilities. Practices like prayer, meditation, and mindfulness have been shown to increase serotonin and dopamine levels, fostering feelings of happiness and reducing depression and anxiety. Spiritual activities also activate the brain's relaxation response, alleviating stress and promoting peace of mind. Furthermore, spirituality enhances cognitive function, self-control, and ethical decision-making while fostering compassion and empathy. These practices can lead to altered states of consciousness, promoting insights and inner peace. Additionally, engaging in spiritual practices promotes neuroplasticity and brain health while instilling a sense of purpose and meaning in life. While individual experiences may vary, the potential benefits of spirituality for mental and cognitive well-being are profound, making it a worthwhile aspect to explore for personal growth and fulfillment.

While navigating through the complexities of life, my evolving relationships became the catalyst for a deeper spiritual exploration. The loss of my grandmother, a pivotal moment in my youth, marked the beginning of a spiritual void. While our family wasn't deeply religious, her passing triggered a crisis of faith within me. It was a period shadowed by secrecy and hardship, as we lived

in a home still bearing the scars of a devastating flood, often without the basic comforts of heat or hot water. At thirteen, grappling with such hardships left me questioning the fairness of the universe. Why would such bad things be allowed to happen to good people?

However, the sorrow of my mom's passing decades later, coupled with my introduction to a trans-denominational spiritual center, catalyzed a profound shift in my perception. I came to understand that the universe, in its infinite wisdom, provides us with exactly what we need, even if it doesn't outwardly look like what we want. This realization helped me transition from a victim mentality, constantly questioning, "Why is this happening to me?" to embracing a more empowered outlook, asking, "Why is this happening *for* me?" I learned to view "failures" and "rejections" not as setbacks but as the universe's way of shielding me from paths and people not meant for my journey. These rejections were a form of divine protection, concealing my unique gifts from those who were not in sync with my true purpose and steering me toward my ultimate destiny. I embraced the belief that the universe is ever-expanding and seeks to manifest itself through us, necessitating our continuous growth and evolution to fully express the unique gifts we hold within. Thus, every challenge became an opportunity to refine and unleash my potential, further aligning me with the cosmic plan designed for my soul's fulfillment.

The comfort of my dad stepping in to raise me, a child he hadn't fathered, was in complete opposition to the rejection I faced from my biological father. Initially, I pondered how different my life might have been under my biological father's care. Yet, with time and spiritual maturity, I recognized that his absence from my life was not a loss, but a redirection. He was not meant to be part of my journey, as he did not resonate

with the mission I was destined to fulfill. The universe, in its grace, concealed my potential from him, guiding me toward a path where I could flourish and embrace my destiny. This spiritual awakening has been a journey of understanding that every experience, every loss, and every redirection is a step toward realizing our fullest potential. It underscores the belief that we are all part of a grander design, with each twist and turn in our story meticulously crafted to lead us to where we are meant to be.

My path to deepening my spiritual connection began amidst personal losses and a search for meaning, echoing the journey of a river that flows toward the ocean. Just as a river traverses through various landscapes, encountering obstacles and merging with other streams, my spiritual journey has been one of navigating through life's challenges and integrating experiences to find a deeper sense of purpose and connection. Every twist, turn, and rapid encountered enriched the journey and brought me closer to the ultimate destination: an understanding of oneness with the universe.

To evaluate your current spiritual relationship, consider these self-assessment questions on a 1 to 10 scale:

- How connected do you feel to something greater than yourself?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How often do you engage in practices that deepen your spiritual awareness (meditation, prayer, etc.)?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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- How fulfilled do you feel in your pursuit of spiritual growth and understanding?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- To what extent do you feel that your spiritual beliefs influence your daily decisions and interactions?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How much peace and contentment do you derive from your spiritual practices or beliefs?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Improving your spiritual relationship involves taking intentional steps toward nurturing your connection with the divine, nature, or your inner self:

- ★ **Spiritual Studies:** Explore various spiritual traditions and practices to find what resonates with you, whether it's through reading, attending workshops, or joining a spiritual community.
- ★ **Daily Devotion Rituals:** Begin by dedicating time each day to meditation or prayer, creating a sacred space for reflection and connection.
- ★ **Embrace Mindfulness:** Cultivate mindfulness in your daily life, allowing you to be fully present and open to the lessons each moment offers.

- ★ **Embody Connection:** Practice gratitude and compassion, recognizing the interconnectedness of all beings and the role of love in fostering a deeper spiritual bond.

Enhancing your spiritual connection entails deliberate actions to deepen your bond with the divine, nature, or yourself. Engaging in practices such as mindfulness, meditation, and prayer helps to center your thoughts, promote inner peace, and reinforce your spiritual path.

Chapter 16

Time Mastery and Organizational Harmony

Time flows like a river—constant but malleable. Redirect its currents to shape your life's journey.

Now that you're equipped with the gap analysis tool, the M.A.S.T.E.R.M.I.N.D. framework, the tools to overcome limiting beliefs, and the seven life facets to apply these resources, the secret to bringing it all together is effective organization and time management. Just as a prism refracts light into a spectrum of colors, effective time management and organization disperse the fog of chaos into clear, actionable paths.

Time mastery refers to the strategic allocation and optimization of your time to enhance productivity, satisfaction, and well-being. It involves prioritizing tasks effectively, managing schedules efficiently, and making deliberate choices about how to spend time in ways that align with your goals and values.

Organizational harmony is the seamless coordination of one's physical and digital environments to support and streamline the efforts put into time management. This includes

organizing workspace, digital files, and communication flows in a manner that reduces clutter and distractions, thereby facilitating a smoother execution of tasks.

Time mastery and organizational harmony are essential across all facets of life. Together, they enhance professional and personal development, enabling you to meet deadlines and engage in continuous learning without compromising work-life balance. They ensure physical and mental wellness through structured schedules that include time for exercise, meals, and relaxation, integrating these activities to prevent conflicts and promote health. In relationships, these practices help you be more present with loved ones, improving social interactions while maintaining a balance with other responsibilities. Furthermore, they support spiritual fulfillment by setting aside dedicated times for reflection and meditation, making spiritual practices a consistent part of daily life rather than sporadic occurrences. Collectively, these strategies boost productivity, enhance interactions, and foster a holistic approach to life management.

Effective time management and organization profoundly reshape our psychological landscape. They transform overwhelming tasks into manageable actions, reduce stress by clarifying priorities, and bolster confidence through demonstrable achievements. Organizing our physical and digital spaces further enhances this effect by reducing mental clutter, which allows for clearer thinking and improved focus. This psychological uplift is crucial as it empowers us to tackle challenges with resilience and creativity, thereby fostering growth in both professional and personal facets. The serenity and control provided by a well-organized environment can significantly elevate our mood and overall mental health, making us more effective and fulfilled in our daily lives.

As I navigated the complex responsibilities of marriage, raising children, and caring for my aging father, my time management and organizational skills were put to the test. These roles demanded not only a significant amount of time and energy but also a high level of emotional and logistical coordination. By employing stringent time management strategies and maintaining a well-organized environment, I was able to meet these demands effectively. The skills I honed during this period helped me maintain balance and ensure that each family member received the care and attention they needed without sacrificing my own well-being.

Moreover, these refined skills proved invaluable when I embarked on my mission to restore my mental health and optimize my overall well-being. Managing new habits, courses, and conferences while juggling family responsibilities and personal health required meticulous planning and organization. I utilized a variety of tools and techniques, such as digital planners and batch scheduling, to maximize productivity and minimize wasted time. This not only helped streamline processes but also allowed me to carve out essential time for self-care and family, which was crucial for my mental and emotional health.

Time management was not merely a practice but a critical lifeline that enabled me to navigate the multifaceted challenges of my personal and professional life. It allowed me to pursue a path toward personal fulfillment and professional success, demonstrating that with the right strategies, it is possible to juggle diverse and demanding responsibilities effectively.

The first step in mastering time management is aligning your time with your overarching life goals. This means prioritizing activities that propel you towards these goals

and minimizing or eliminating those that do not. It's about making intentional choices—deciding to invest your time much like you would invest your money.

Imagine your time as an investment portfolio, where each task or goal is an investment opportunity. Time mastery involves allocating your hours strategically across various activities, much like diversifying your investments to maximize returns. Just as a well-balanced portfolio yields substantial financial growth, a well-allocated schedule leads to significant achievements and personal satisfaction.

Consider these questions to gauge your current mastery of time and organizational skills, rating each on a scale from 1 to 10, indicating the least to the highest level of satisfaction:

- How often do you end the day feeling you've effectively utilized your time?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- Are you able to articulate what tasks consume most of your time and whether these tasks align with your goals?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How cluttered is your primary workspace, and does this impact your productivity?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

TIME MASTERY AND ORGANIZATIONAL HARMONY

- How effectively do you prioritize your daily tasks?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How frequently do you meet your deadlines without feeling rushed?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- To what extent do your physical and digital workspaces support your efficiency?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How well do you balance your professional obligations with personal wellness?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To enhance your time management and organizational skills, consider employing the following tools and techniques:

Time Mastery Tools

- ★ **The Eisenhower Matrix:** The Eisenhower Matrix is a powerful tool for prioritizing tasks based on urgency and importance. This method divides tasks into four categories: urgent and important, important but not urgent, urgent but not important, and neither urgent nor important. This framework helps you focus on

completing tasks that have a significant impact while delegating or delaying less critical tasks.

- ★ **Time Blocking:** This technique involves planning your day in advance and dividing your time into blocks dedicated to specific activities or tasks. This approach is similar to financial budgeting but applies to how you allocate your time. By assigning specific blocks for focused work, administrative tasks, meetings, and personal time, you can create a balanced schedule that reduces the chaos of multitasking and minimizes distractions.
- ★ **Pomodoro Technique:** The Pomodoro Technique is designed to enhance focus and mental agility by breaking work into manageable intervals, traditionally 25 minutes, known as “Pomodoros,” followed by a 5-minute break. After four Pomodoros, a longer break of 15 to 30 minutes is recommended. This technique helps combat fatigue, keeps the mind fresh, and promotes sustained concentration.

Organized Success Systems

- ★ **Morning Rituals:** Morning rituals set the tone for the entire day, providing structure and focus right from the start. Engaging in a series of carefully chosen activities like meditation can center your mind, preparing it for the day ahead, while reading can stimulate your intellect and provide inspiration. Conversely, exercise energizes the body, boosts mood, and enhances mental clarity through increased blood flow. These activities not only prime you physically and mentally but also establish a routine that fosters discipline and sets a productive rhythm for the day. Customizing your morning rituals to align with your personal and

professional goals can help you achieve a higher level of success and contentment.

- ★ **Workflow Organization:** Developing a well-structured workflow system is crucial for efficient task management. By logically sequencing your tasks, you can minimize downtime and streamline the transition between different activities. This system might involve grouping similar tasks together to reduce context switching, prioritizing tasks by deadline or importance, or using tools and apps to remind and assist in task transitions. An effective workflow system not only enhances focus and efficiency but also reduces mental fatigue and stress, as you have a clear roadmap of what needs to be done and when.
- ★ **Declutter Regularly:** Maintaining organized physical and digital workspaces enhances focus and clarity. A clutter-free environment minimizes distractions, streamlines workflow, and reduces mental load. Integrate regular decluttering into your routine by assigning every item a place, removing unnecessary items, and employing digital hygiene—such as labeling folders, unsubscribing from unneeded emails, and deleting redundant files. A tidy workspace boosts productivity and fosters a calm, stress-free work environment.

As you apply these strategies, remember that the goal is not merely to be busy, but to be productive in a manner that's aligned with your values and aspirations. Let these tools and techniques serve as the guide to integrating time mastery and organizational harmony into the fabric of your daily life, enabling you to live intentionally and abundantly across all facets of your life.

Chapter 17

Embrace Your Journey

It's not about where you're sailing from or the storms you're navigating through; it's about how you steer your ship through the storms and the person you emerge as once you reach the shore.

As we arrive at the end of our journey together within these pages, it becomes clear that while our individual narratives may differ, they are united by a common thread. From confronting personal trials to basking in the glow of triumphs, every story echoes a universal truth: our beginnings and adversities are merely chapters in the grander story of our lives rather than its definitive ending. The power to redefine your story lies within you, in the choices you make and the paths you take.

Cultivate a mindset that seeks growth, embraces change, and recognizes the fleeting nature of adversity. In the quiet moments of reflection, ask yourself not why a challenge has come to you, but what it is teaching you. Look for the lessons hidden within the hardships and the silver linings that glisten even in the darkest clouds.

Welcome each day as a new chapter in your story, each obstacle as a chance to exercise your strength, and every

moment of doubt as a call to rediscover your inner fortitude. Embrace every setback as a setup for a comeback, every loss as a lesson in resilience, and every moment of despair as a reminder to summon your inner strength.

Embrace your journey with open arms, an open heart, and a resilient spirit, knowing that each step, no matter how difficult, is leading you toward becoming your best self. Life, in its unfathomable complexity, offers us a spectrum of experiences—each demanding a reaction, a choice, a path. These decisions sculpt our character, our destiny, and, ultimately, our legacy. Live with purpose, love, and a commitment to growth, inspiring others to do the same.

The quality of your life is directly proportional to the quality of your relationships, starting with the one you have with yourself. Surround yourself with voices that uplift, with souls that inspire, and with environments that challenge you to ascend to your highest potential.

As you close this chapter and step into your narrative, remember that each day is a fresh page, and each moment is a chance to build a legacy of inspiration. Move forward with confidence, knowing the dawn awaits despite the darkness. You are equipped to triumph over any challenge and turn your dreams into reality. Embrace your power and purpose because it's not about where you're from or what you're going through, but how you go through it and who you decide to become. Your best chapters await, waiting to be written—by you.

As we reach the final pages of this transformative journey, remember that your path to a Prismatic Life doesn't end here—it's just beginning. Visit DanielleLopez.info and enroll in the Prismatic Life course today to unlock your next

EMBRACE YOUR JOURNEY

level of transformation and boundless potential! With the course, you'll dive deeper into the teachings of this book and create your personalized Prismatic Life success plan. With expert guidance, you'll apply strategic business principles and advanced strategies from *Prismatic* to every aspect of your life: career, health, finances, relationships, wellness, development, and spirituality. Don't wait any longer to achieve holistic success and vibrant living!

As a bonus, you'll have access to our private Facebook community to connect with like-minded individuals, share experiences, and receive ongoing support on your journey to personal growth. Together, we'll inspire, uplift, and empower each other to overcome obstacles and embrace the full spectrum of our potential. Additionally, you'll receive our exclusive newsletter filled with empowering content and actionable strategies to accelerate your progress toward resilience, joy, and fulfillment in every facet of your life. I can't wait to join you on this transformative journey!

With warmth and encouragement,
Danielle

Appendix A

Resources and Support

The journey of self-discovery, healing, and transformation is deeply personal yet universally challenging. For those who see reflections of their struggles in the pages of “Prismatic,” know that you are not alone. A myriad of resources and support networks exist to guide you through the shadows and into your own radiant future. Below is a list of resources designed to offer support, education, and community to anyone in need.

Prismatic Life Resource Directory

For a directory of resources, products, and services curated to support your journey, visit www.DanielleLopez.info/resources or text “Prismatic” to 26786.

Mental Health and Emotional Support

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Website: www.nami.org

NAMI provides advocacy, education, support, and public awareness so that all individuals and families affected by mental illness can build better lives.

Crisis Text Line

Text: HOME to 741741 (USA)

Website: www.crisistextline.org

A free, 24/7 text line for people in crisis. Text from anywhere in the USA to text with a trained Crisis Counselor.

ADDitude

Website: www.additudemag.com

ADDitude is a comprehensive resource dedicated to helping individuals with ADHD and their families. The website provides a wealth of information, tools, and community support to manage attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and related conditions. Through expert advice, personal stories, and practical tips, ADDitude aims to empower those affected by ADHD to lead successful and fulfilling lives.

Substance Abuse and Recovery

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Website: www.samhsa.gov

SAMHSA's National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Website: www.aa.org

A fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

Domestic Violence and Abuse

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Phone: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

Website: www.thehotline.org

Provides life saving tools and immediate support to empower victims and survivors to find safety and live free of abuse.

Support for Children and Teens

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline

Phone: 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)

Website: www.childhelp.org

Offers crisis intervention, information, literature, and referrals to thousands of emergency, social service, and support resources.

Career and Educational Advancement

LinkedIn Learning

Website: www.linkedin.com/learning

Offers video courses taught by industry experts in software, creative, and business skills.

Coursera

Website: www.coursera.org

Provides universal access to the world's best education, partnering with top universities and organizations to offer courses online.

Spiritual Support and Community Engagement

Agape International Spiritual Center

Website: www.agapelive.com

Agape offers a range of spiritual and educational activities aimed at personal growth and community healing. Founded

PRISMATIC

by Dr. Michael Beckwith, the center provides weekly services, meditation sessions, workshops, and community outreach programs. It is a beacon for those seeking spiritual guidance within the New Thought-Ancient Wisdom tradition.

This list is not exhaustive, but represents a starting point for those seeking help. Remember, reaching out for support is a sign of strength, and taking the first step toward change is within your power.

Thank You for Reading *Prismatic!*

I truly value your feedback and enjoy hearing your thoughts. Your insights are crucial for enhancing this book and improving future publications.



I'd be grateful if you could spare two minutes to leave a thoughtful review on Amazon.

Thanks so much!

-Danielle Lopez

Acknowledgments

As I reflect on the journey of bringing *Prismatic* into the world, my heart swells with gratitude for the unwavering support of my family. Writing a book is a solitary endeavor in many ways, but it is also deeply intertwined with the love and encouragement of those who stand by you through the highs and lows. To my husband and my daughters, this acknowledgment is but a small token of my immense appreciation for your enduring support.

To my beloved husband, Eric, your generosity of spirit and unwavering trust have been my greatest gifts. You stood by me, trusting in the process and in the passion that drove me, even when my journey with this book has seemed enigmatic at times. You provided me with the quiet and sanctuary I needed to listen deeply to my inner voice, to let my ideas breathe and take shape, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

For every moment of doubt that you dispelled with your encouragement, for the countless ways you lifted the weight of everyday worries so I could focus on my craft, and for believing in the importance of my dreams as much as I did—thank you. This journey has been mine to travel, but it was your faith in me that lit the way.

To my precious daughters, Eden and Ellie, your boundless joy and endless curiosity have inspired me in more ways than you can imagine. Watching you both approach life with such enthusiasm and resilience reminds me daily of the importance of chasing our dreams and the beauty of remaining true to ourselves. Your laughter was my favorite soundtrack as I penned the pages of this book, and your excitement about this book has been a source of immeasurable pride and motivation. You have been my little rays of sunshine, brightening even the darkest days of this journey. Thank you for your hugs, your artwork that decorated my workspace, and your understanding on those days when I was wrapped up in my work. Your love and support mean the world to me.

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From the bottom of my heart, thank you for being my rock, my inspiration, and my biggest fans. This book is as much yours as it is mine.

With all my love and gratitude,

Danielle

About the Author

DANIELLE LOPEZ is a celebrated author, transformative coach, sales expert, and health & wellness guru. Throughout her award-winning medical sales career, including pivotal roles at Fortune 100 pharmaceutical companies and as Vice President of Sales for top nutraceutical manufacturers, Danielle has generated hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue, launched hundreds of brands, and touched countless lives. Her remarkable track record reflects her profound expertise and leadership in the industry.

Danielle holds multiple certifications in coaching and health and wellness, affirming her commitment to fostering holistic well-being and personal development. Her skills are further honed by mentorship from the world's foremost business, mindset, and performance coaches, providing her with unique insights into achieving personal and professional success.

Currently residing in Los Angeles with her husband and two daughters, Danielle originates from Philadelphia, where she earned her dual BBA in Marketing and International Business. In her free time, she enjoys traveling with her family but finds her greatest fulfillment in guiding others to reach their highest potential. As the creator of the “Prismatic Life” program, she teaches how to apply strategic business principles to all life areas—professional growth, physical health, financial stability, enriching relationships, mental wellness, personal development, and spiritual fulfillment—ensuring comprehensive success and vibrant living. Visit DanielleLopez.info for additional information.