

Chapter One

This Is My Life

When asked to describe myself, I always answer that I am an empowered Latina, a woman who knows that she can provide for herself financially, emotionally, and spiritually. I am proud not just of who I am, but also of the *process* of becoming who I am.

As a businesswoman and professional, an educator, a member of numerous community boards, and a mother, I may not appear to be someone who has been through tragedy after tragedy. If you met me, you would never be able to guess what my life was like as a child and young adult. I've been knocked down over and over again, both literally and figuratively, but there is nothing in the world that can keep me down, because despite the odds, I've never allowed my soul to die.

There have certainly been times when I have fallen into the trap of giving my power away to various people and situations, especially because I'd been "trained" by my father and my culture to do so. I didn't know any other way; I didn't have certain resources to help me find a better method of self-discovery. Now I have learned how to take care of myself, and more important, I know why it is absolutely necessary to put myself first.

I would like to share with you some aspects of my own life, examples of the way I grew up, how I gave my power away and how I reclaimed it. The rest of the book is about *you*. I hope that my own story of survival and success will help you find the strength within yourself to take back your power and control the rest of your life.

AN AMERICAN DREAM POSTER FAMILY

At the beginning, my parents' relationship was the stuff of romance novels. They met at the airport in Mexico City, where my mother had gone for vacation from her native Chihuahua. My father was a handsome commercial airline pilot, living in Quito, Ecuador. But after that brief encounter, they didn't see each other again—until they got married four years later. During the intervening years, they wrote to each other constantly, with an occasional phone conversation in between. Pressured by the family, my mother got engaged to a doctor in Chihuahua, but the day before the wedding she ran away to Quito and married my father instead.

A year later they decided to leave Ecuador because they wanted better opportunities for themselves and the children they planned to have. They arrived in Los Angeles in 1969 with a grand total of \$200 in their pockets but determined to realize that dream. Without knowing a word of English they began working in factories at a time when the American dream was attainable to anyone willing to work hard—educated or not. My father made \$20 a week at a lumberyard; my mother, \$15 at a factory making plastic plates.

When my mother was eight months pregnant with her first child, Dad was horrified to learn that she wasn't allowed to sit down on the job. To get a few minutes rest, she would pretend to need to use the bathroom. Employees, however, were allowed only four minutes maximum to relieve themselves. My furious father decided then and there that neither he nor his family would ever again work for someone else. He would not be disrespected by anyone again, he swore.

So in 1970, his entrepreneurial adventures began. With \$700 of their savings, my father went to a wholesaler and purchased some stereos and radios. He took a blanket from home, set the merchandise on it and stood in the vendor's line at the Azusa swap meet. He made \$30 on his first day. He was the happiest man in the world. For a while he continued working in the lumberyard during the week and selling stereos at the swap meet on weekends. Shortly after I was born in 1971, my father opened his first business, a record store named Discoteca Latina. Within five years, he had opened a retail electronic store and invested in a number of other business ventures.

By 1977 my father was a millionaire. In less than a decade he had gone from impoverished and vulnerable to wealthy and powerful. He had everything a man could ask for, including a faithful and hardworking wife and three beautiful daughters.

As with many daughters', my life was ruled by my father. He was king of his castle, and had reason to be proud of his own hard work. He insisted that his daughters be well-educated, so we were sent to strict Catholic schools. We were expected to excel, which we all did. We never disobeyed Dad, a strict disciplinarian who used both words and fists to impose his will on us—just as his own father had done. We took lessons in everything, from ice-skating and baton twirling to ballet and piano. We had so many classes and activities that my older sister developed stomach ulcers from the incredible pressure to perform. Although it could be frightening, I managed to cope, mostly because I simply believed that our lifestyle was normal, and everyone around us confirmed that.

We enjoyed (if you could call it that) luxurious surroundings and expensive baubles, given to us by a man who would build us up one day and break us down the next. We lived under his complete control (except for the times Mom covered for us), and it was his mission for his daughters to be both respected and respectable. Because he'd created us, he felt that he owned us. He tried to protect us from the dysfunctions of the world, yet he actively cultivated dysfunction in our own home through his own fits of rage and his alcoholism, combined with lavish gift giving—all of which existed behind the exterior of a wonderful family man. I was proud of being my father's daughter—I did feel protected—but what I didn't realize was that my protector was also my abuser. I wasn't yet able to see that sometimes our most

important influences are also our worst oppressors, and that is why we should never depend solely on any one else to help us define ourselves.

My mother was the perfect wife, in the way that most macho Latino men consider “perfect,” which means, for one thing, that she stayed quietly at home, while he ran around having mistresses all over the country. He had numerous illegitimate children with many different women, yet he consistently denied their existence to my mother, my sisters and me. We were the chosen ones. He took pride in us, his primary family. He obviously instilled fear in those other women, because no phone call ever came in the night from a strange, desperate woman in another state. I somehow knew that my father had other women, but I didn’t dare question him, for fear of what he would do to me for being disrespectful. Respect was a very twisted concept for him. I remember my maternal grandmother would tell my mother, “Let him be. He’s a man, and men are of the streets. After all, you have all you need.” That was my first impression of marriage. Once we reached a certain age, we girls were allowed to talk only to other girls. We were punished if seen anywhere near boys. Dad believed that all men wanted just one thing and no man was going to get it from one of his daughters. Instead, he promised and delivered the reward of any material items we wanted, so that no man would ever be able to impress us with money. Ironically, at the same time, he was luring countless women with his own money, power, and status. I didn’t realize it then, but now I see that my father knew what he was doing. He was preparing us for men like himself. He saw how money and power wooed

women and he blamed woman's wily nature. Most women just wanted the easy way out, he believed. I happily accepted my rewards, and I behaved like a good and loyal daughter.

A FAMILY SHATTERED

When I was 14 years old everything changed. Our world as we knew it collapsed, and during the next few years all I had been brought up to believe in, everything I thought I knew about family—responsibility, loyalty, and honesty—was turned on its head.

I was a freshman in high school at the time and my 16-year old older sister, Judy, was a junior. One day, after having endured our father's ongoing sexual abuse, she reported him to our school's authorities. They sent a social worker to our home and my father had to move out.

The picture-book American family was no more.

After my mother and father officially separated, my father warned us that although he would no longer be living with us, he would continue to command and direct our every move. And for the next six years he did. I was attending San Diego State University when Judy, who was then 22, called me one night. Infuriated by what he perceived as a threat to his indomitable presence, Dad had threatened Judy's boyfriend with violence. Although she

was conditioned to be frightened by my father's rage, she also allowed herself to be angry this time. She had had enough of the violence. Dad had always been a tyrant when it came to our dating lives. Doling out threats directed at any potential date and at us, he rationalized his behavior by claiming, again, that he was only trying to protect us. Behind his back, and with the consent of our mother, we managed to meet and date boys, and we honestly thought that eventually he would realize we were growing up and he would relinquish his control on us.

Instead, though, he turned on us after this particular incident and vowed to disown the family. He stopped taking our phone calls. My mother and I couldn't understand why he refused to speak to us; we thought the trouble had been between him and Judy. We were wrong. I tried to contact him on a daily basis, but his employees had been instructed to tell us that he had nothing to say. Even my younger sister, Karina, who was 12, tried to call him, only to be disappointed. He shoved the proverbial knife in deeper when he completely stopped providing for us financially. We'd always depended on him, and his abrupt actions left us in financial as well as emotional, chaos. We were threatened with the loss of our home, our cars, and our dignity in one fell swoop.

Within the next three weeks, my mother was hospitalized after suffering a nervous breakdown, and Karina was notified by the private school she was attending that unless the past due tuition was paid, she would not be

able to return. Judy, the only one of us with a steady income, gave every last penny trying to save our home. My own part-time job funded my food and utility expenses, but not my rent or tuition. Our situation seemed totally hopeless. Then, as the weeks went by and we gathered what was left of our emotional strength, in a miracle of spirit we decided to fight back. The contract my parents had drawn up upon their separation stated that if, at any time, my father stopped providing for us financially, his businesses would automatically be transferred back to my mother. We knew that Dad was breaking the law, and Judy knew it was imperative that we hire an attorney and take Dad to court, a difficult mission without any money. We found an attorney who was willing to accept the case, with the provision that his fees be paid immediately upon the sale of our house.

On Christmas Eve of 1991, one of the most frightening days of our lives, we took legal action against the man we had always counted on, always trusted to protect us, and—although it was often difficult—always loved. We never thought we'd have found the courage, but with our very survival at stake, there was no other choice. Of the three sisters, the judge asked only Judy to enter the courtroom to testify. She walked straight to the witness stand, focused on Mom's face, and never glancing at Dad, she answered questions about the burden of instant and unexpected financial responsibility. When Dad took the stand, Judy dared to look at him and, she said later, sadness swept over her. He had allowed his pride and machismo to take things too far.

When Mom walked out and shakily declared that the judge had ruled in our favor, we were ecstatic. We were temporarily granted 70 percent of the family businesses until a future court hearing. Dad was given two hours on the 24th of December and two hours on the 25th to remove his personal belongings from the business sites awarded to us.

We spent that Christmas Eve in the main shop, protecting the merchandise still left. Judy's boyfriend Conrad, and mine, Joe, were there with us for moral and physical support. We feared that my father would return for some sort of vengeance. He had vowed to kill us if we ever antagonized him; taking him to court seemed far beyond that threshold. The next morning, Christmas Day, he came with one of his mistresses and illegitimate children to collect his personal belongings. With tensions as high as they were, it was no surprise that a fight erupted between Dad and Judy's boyfriend, and they beat each other brutally in the back alley. My father's business partner suddenly appeared with a gun, and in order to protect my father, he shot bullets in our direction. I jumped to cover up Karina, and we all rushed inside the store where my boyfriend grabbed the business gun and ran back out, looking for Dad and his partner.

Not long afterward, a police helicopter began hovering over the scene, and the crime unit arrived by the truckload. Six streets were blocked off while they searched for Dad. Within an hour, he was found hiding behind a house and was arrested. As he stood there waiting for the officer to open the back

door of the car, he looked over at my mother, sisters, and me—the family he had created—with nothing less than hate in his eyes. Although we were surrounded by 50 police officers, we were terrified, certain that he would explode, knowing that as soon as he had the chance, he would kill us all. We had to be prepared to fight back.

The court charged my father as an accessory to attempted murder, but later dropped the charges because of a lack of evidence. After being released, Dad had the police drop him off right in front of our shop. He wanted us to see him and for us to know that we hadn't won.

MIRACLE AT ROCKY BOTTOM

From the day Dad disowned us until January 1992, I felt numb. I needed to be strong, though, not only for myself but also for the emotional and physical benefit of my family. We had survived months of what seemed like torture, and I thought I was ready to start my life again. Unfortunately, I was mistaken. I still had many hurdles to overcome.

One day in February, I woke up early for school, but when I tried to get out of bed, I felt paralyzed. My body wouldn't move. I had absolutely no physical strength. When I tried to lift my head, it hurt. I tried to raise my leg, and pain shot through it. I began to lift my arm, but it felt so heavy that it fell back down onto the bed. I lay there terrified. I used bit of energy I had to sit up as feelings of desperation washed over me. I wanted to scream for help, but

to whom would I scream to? I knew I wasn't paralyzed; my muscles would grudgingly respond if I tried hard enough.

It took me three hours to leave the house that morning, when it usually took me 30 minutes. I cried in frustration and pain. Getting through the next few days was miserable. I dragged myself out of bed in the morning and I cried in the shower. I cried because I hurt; I cried because the only time I didn't hurt was when I was sleeping. A few days later, anxiety and panic descended on me. I was so physically exhausted I had trouble making it to class. I had no interest in socializing with my friends or attending parties and events. No one seemed to understand me and I can't count the times I heard, "Just get up! Stop being so lazy!"

Lazy! I wish I had been just lazy. I couldn't even walk around school without crying, my body hurt so much. I decided to seek help and went to a university psychologist. I spilled my guts about the events of the past few months and was immediately diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Everything I had experienced had wreaked havoc on my mind and body. The doctor told me there was nothing I could do but let it play itself out, and with time the effects would go away. I wish I'd known then to find a better doctor.

For five months I lived in misery. When I was alone in my apartment, I turned off all of the lights, disconnected the phone, and cried for hours. I didn't know why I was crying, really, but I remember the pain of feeling as

though my heart were being ripped apart. My friends began to worry about me and would visit just to cheer me up, but I had no interest. I felt as if my soul had been shattered. I couldn't find the physical or mental strength to pick up the pieces and put them back together again. As summer came, my depression worsened, seriously compromising my full-time summer job. I needed to work to survive, but physically I could no longer function.

All of my life I had been against drugs. Friends of mine used them, but they knew not to offer me any. But on July 3, 1992 (I'll never forget that date), I was lying in bed, feeling as though I couldn't handle another day. I had attempted to see doctors, but without insurance I couldn't afford the endless \$60 office visits, let alone the prescription costs. Although I felt severely depressed, collapsing was not an option. My mother had just been released from the hospital, and Judy had finally reached the end of her rope as well, taking off from work for emotional distress. Meanwhile, Karina was desperately in need of the mothering that our mother could no longer provide.

I gave myself two options. I could either lie in bed and hope to die, or I could do whatever it took to make myself get up, go to work, and function as a sister, daughter, employee, and student. I chose the latter and began to take methamphetamine, also known as speed, in order to medicate myself.

"Since when do you use speed?" my friend Michelle asked when I begged her to go with me to a former classmate's house to make my first purchase.

I was adamant, “Don’t ask, don’t advise, don’t lecture. I have to do this. Please just come and get me and we’ll go.”

When we arrived at a bungalow, a woman shook out what looked like a teeny amount of white crystalline powder on a mirror and lined it up with a credit card. I looked at the line and knew I needed it. I wanted it to survive. I took the straw, snorted the line, and within seconds, I felt something amazing. I felt as if I were coming out of a haze, as if I’d had shock treatment. I was on top of the world. I felt all-powerful, ready to take on anything, anyone. I convinced myself that I was going to use speed only to get over these tough times. Little did I know then that speed would nearly destroy my life. In no time, I was hooked. I did it in the morning, afternoon, and evening. I did it to go to work, and I did it to stay up at night. I knew it was wrong, but it gave me the false sense that I had control over my life and that was exactly what I craved.

Before the ordeal of the past few months had begun, I had applied as a transfer student to the University of Southern California (USC). I received a letter from USC granting admission, along with a full financial-aid package consisting of grants and loans. There was no way that I could pass up the opportunity to attend one of the most prestigious universities in the country. Although I knew I was in no shape emotionally to take on this new challenge, in my eyes, education meant salvation.

In September of 1992, I began my new life at USC. Only Judy and a few friends knew that I was using speed. It wasn't difficult for me to play it off, because to the outside world I had everything together. Anyone involved in my drug use was completely dissociated from campus life. My roommate, George, had transferred with me from San Diego State—we had been friends for years. Despite our closeness, however, he didn't suspect for a minute that I was on drugs. My room was connected to a bathroom, so every morning it was easy for me to privately do a line of speed to numb my feelings of worthlessness. Then I'd walk out of my room, meet George at the front door, and walk to school to our first class. George knew that I had gone through serious family problems and admired me for staying so strong. To him, I was the same Yasmin he had known for years. I'd head home after classes and do another line so that I'd have the energy to study, staying up until three or four o'clock in the morning, reading things over and over, and often forgetting what I had just read.

After a few days, I got a job in a career services office. Completely numb to my pain and desperation, I was able to deal with my new school, my new job, and my new life with what I mistook for relative ease. Nonetheless, despite the new job, my sense of self-worth was completely shattered. How had I become so weak? How could I, someone people admired for abstaining all these years, become reliant on illegal street drugs? This sense of vulnerability was so emotionally intolerable to me that I could not discuss my drug use with anyone except those who already knew. So I continued to live

my life as a closet user and convinced myself that I would stop using speed during Christmas vacation, when I didn't have to go to school and I could sleep it off. When December came along, I went to my mom's and was determined to rest and sleep and do whatever it took to stop using speed.

From December 21 through the 24th, I slept and slept, comforted by the idea that I had made it through the rough times and that my body and mind would be ready to go back to normal. On December 25, I woke up, sure that I had slept enough and that I would feel good, but I was wrong. All the feelings of insecurity and hopelessness that I had experienced before I started doing speed came back with a ferocious intensity. Once again I became utterly immobilized. It took less than 10 seconds for me to make the decision: I ran to the bathroom and did a line. This time was different, though. I was terrified, knowing now that I no longer controlled the drug; the drug controlled me. I wanted to stop. I really wanted to stop, but I couldn't. I had become an addict.

In January 1993, I returned to school in worse shape than ever. Feeling out of control only made me want to do more speed. I figured that the more I did, the better I would feel. But the more I did, the worse I felt. As much as I tried to get the powerful feeling back, I couldn't. I didn't know where to go; I didn't know who to turn to. I was so ashamed—I felt like a fake. Was I the strong, powerful woman who could handle it all? Or was I a weakling who couldn't even get out of bed in the morning to face the day?

By March, I was often too sick to go to work and I was missing more and more classes. Soon after, I told my boss I had to quit. I took some

diamond jewelry that my father had given me and pawned it for \$600. I figured that this money would serve as a substitute for my work income until the end of the semester. When the end of the semester came along, I did nothing but cry. I cried out of desperation, cried out of depression, cried because my life was worse than it had ever been. When it was time for finals, I couldn't make it to class without breaking down. On the day of my accounting final, I was so depressed and physically weak that I didn't even show up. The next day, I went to see my professor. He took one look at me and told me not to worry. He wasn't going to make me take the final—he would just assign a final grade on the work I had already done. He certainly didn't know that I had destroyed myself doing speed; he just took one long look at me and knew that something was terribly wrong

Between January and June of 1994, I secretly and frantically looked for professional help. But without health insurance, I couldn't afford anything but a free counseling session. I'd never been aware of how devastating life was for those who could not afford health insurance. I was crying out for help, but I couldn't get anyone to listen. "Can't you see?" I begged so often "I need help. I'm not asking for free help. I will pay you once I graduate. I only have eighteen months until I graduate with a business degree from USC, and I will start making payments with my first paycheck."

"Sorry," they'd all reply. "We don't have any loan programs. The only way you can go into rehabilitation is through private health insurance or state-provided MediCal." MediCal had never even occurred to me. Maybe there

was some hope after all. I would simply go to the State and ask them for temporary help with health insurance. How could they refuse someone in my position? I went to the Los Angeles County Social Services Center and filled out what seemed like two dozen forms. I sat there for most of the day waiting for them to call my name. Finally, six hours later, it was my turn.

“Are you pregnant?” the clerk asked, bored.

“No, no,” I said.

“Are you under the age of 18?”

“No.”

“Then there is nothing we can do for you.”

I was dumbstruck. “But I’m a student who desperately needs some help. Isn’t there any way the state can help me?”

“Only if you’re pregnant or a minor.” The clerk turned on her heel, done with me. I had been under the impression that it was a good thing to go to college and not get pregnant, but in my case, I would have been better off knocked up.

By the end of May, my depression had deepened and I had become manic. I remember watching Oprah’s show and desperately wanting to write her a letter because I honored and respected her for being a survivor. I related to her, and she brought me comfort. When she talked about her life, I truly felt her pain, and in the core of my soul, I believed that I still had some hope for survival—one day I could become the successful woman I had always wanted to be, too. I didn’t heed that soul tug then, though. Instead, in one of my very

frequent moments of cynicism and hopelessness, I thought about it again and decided not to write the letter. I knew there were probably thousands of people who wrote her letters asking for help. What made my situation any different?

By the time the semester ended, the drugs had overtaken my immune system, and it took me three times as long to do even the simplest tasks, like packing and moving out. The situation with my family had gotten worse. We'd lost our house and had only a few weeks to find somewhere to live. Because I was still maintaining impossibly high expectations for myself, I had applied for a summer internship at the McDonalds Corporation, was awarded the position, and was to begin my corporate training the first week of June. The night before my first day of work, I couldn't sleep. I was, understandably, nervous about being able to function normally at the job, and terrified that management would be able to tell I was high.

All night, I waited for the clock to read 5:00 a.m. so I could get up and get ready. I was so afraid that I might oversleep and be late my first day that I didn't sleep at all. At 6:30 a.m, I began driving up the freeway. I begged God to please just let me die: "Just let my car malfunction and wreck. I'm done. I can't take it any more," I prayed out loud. I didn't have the courage to take my own life, but I was telling God that I would rather die than continue living in misery. I had finally hit rock bottom. There was no more "pulling through" or overcoming anything. My life was no longer worth living. I was completely exhausted, physically, emotionally, spiritually.

Whether by the grace of God or by my own last unconscious wish to survive, I pulled off the freeway. Within feet was a pay phone. In a state of fogginess, I got out of the car, shaking. I had no idea what I was doing, but I got out and walked to the phone. The first thing I saw was a sticker with the number of a suicide hotline pasted to the metal casing. Barely readable—written over with graffiti and adorned with old chewing gum and other sticky substances—a suicide hotline number nevertheless jumped at me. I dialed it. “Disconnected,” a recording told me. “God help me, God help me, God help me”—I kept repeating. I rummaged through my wallet and found the number of a rehabilitation clinic. They kept me on hold for 20 minutes while I watched cars whizzing by, full of people who had a life, who had hope, who had a plan. Twenty minutes felt like 20 hours. I hung up and went back to my wallet, searching through business cards and numbers written on torn pieces of paper, resources that had all turned me down over and over again. Two-thirds of the way through my useless stack of so-called people to turn to, I found the home number of a therapist whom I had spoken with by phone at the Beverly Hills Women’s Clinic. After having been turned down so many times, I had regarded her kind words—like those of so many others—with cynicism. Oddly, though, I remembered that she had given me her home number that day, although it was against the rules. It was 6:55 in the morning when I called her.

“Who is it?” she answered.

“It’s Yasmin,” I said, shaky and feeling as if anything I said would come out like gibberish. “I spoke to you over the phone a while back. You gave me your home number in case of an emergency. . . . I’m sorry to bother you, but I don’t know who else to call. I need help so badly. . . . Please help me!” I was sobbing so hard, I could barely speak. “I don’t want to live like this anymore. I’d rather die. Please, Laura, help me.”

She was silent for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and told me, “For the past seven years I have been teaching yoga at 6:00 a.m. every morning, and I’ve never missed a class. But something strange happened this morning. My alarm clock didn’t go off. I know I set it last night. This morning I could not understand why my alarm didn’t ring, but now I do understand. If it had gone off as it always does, I would not have been here to answer your call.” I knew down deep in my heart that this was no coincidence. “Where are you? Stay put. I’ll be right there.”

I had never felt God’s presence as deeply as I had at that moment. For the first time in my life, I had experienced a true miracle. I did not know this woman. I had never even met her, but I knew God had intervened so that she could help me. She arrived within 15 minutes and took me back to the clinic. We searched through the clinic references for eight hours, calling many rehabilitation centers and asking them to take me in. “No insurance, no money, no service,” is what one clinician told us. Finally, we found a center that was willing to give me a \$5,000 loan.

THE WILL TO SURVIVE

On June 12, the day before I was to enter the recovery center, I was extremely anxious. I knew I was going to get better, but I was also terrified. That night, my family had a college graduation celebration for Judy. Although my friends and family surrounded me, I felt totally alone and detached. While they sat around the table, happily laughing and talking, I prayed to God that one day I could be happy again. My mother instinctively knew something was very wrong with me and would have been horrified by the truth. Before I went to bed, I went to her room and told her, “*Mami*, I need to go away for a while. I need to deal with what’s happened to me because of Dad. I’ll be back in a few weeks.” She didn’t really understand what I was talking about, but she comforted me and told me she loved me. She made me a chamomile tea and held me in her arms until I fell asleep.

The next morning, I awoke from a half-sleep at five. I packed my things and woke Judy, who had offered to drive me to the recovery center in Laguna Beach. I thought we had somehow made a mistake when we reached the address that I had written down. Instead of the cold, intimidating institution I had pictured in my mind, we were in the driveway of a beautiful mansion, surrounded by flowers and greenery and with a breathtaking view of the Pacific Ocean. First Step, which had only opened within the past few months, had been founded, and funded, by a wealthy businessman whose brother had died from a heroin overdose. I couldn’t believe how blessed I was

to have found Laura and this program. Judy checked me in and signed all of the loan papers, and I was admitted. Now, nothing mattered. All I wanted was to feel safe, nurtured, and taken care of. For so long I had played this nightmare of a game, and it was finally over. I slept 14 hours the first night there.

Rehabilitation was nothing like I thought it would be. There were only nine residents, in for a range of addictions from alcohol to heroin, speed to marijuana. A staff of doctors and counselors were on hand 24 hours a day. One patient was the CEO of a Fortune 500 company; another was a 16-year-old trying to kick a heroin habit. Some people truly wanted to be there; others had been forced to go by the court. It was immediately apparent that drugs cross all economic and ethnic lines and that the rich just do more expensive drugs, while the poor do whatever they can get. After I'd spent 40 days at First Step, my counselors and I felt that I was ready to go home and begin a new life. I started working two weeks after I left the center, and shortly after that, I began the fall semester at USC. My friends asked, "How was your summer?" And I could only answer, "Full of life-changing experiences."

THE WHOLE TEN YARDS

By the fall of 1999, my life was to take another big turn, fanfares and fireworks included. This time the turn was for the good, at least for a while.

Although I'd vowed, when I started college at the University of Southern California in 1992, that I would never date a football player, I met Norberto Garrido in 1993, when we both lived within a few blocks of the university. Later, thanks to mutual matchmaking friends, we ended up swapping phone numbers, and slowly but surely developed a relationship

In October 1994, my friends and I went to the Coliseum for the annual USC vs. Oregon State football game. All week, my friends had been calling to make sure I would attend, something that was a bit odd since I rarely missed a game. On game day, just after the end of the fourth quarter, with 60,000 people in the stands, the USC marching band began to play the wedding march. Someone told me to look over at the scoreboard where big, bright letters read, "Yasmin, I love you. Will you marry me?" Then actual fireworks started to burst above my head. My friends walked me down to the field where Norberto was waiting for me with my engagement ring. Security guided me to the center of the field; Norberto got down on one knee, told me how much he loved me, and asked me to spend the rest of my life with him. I was astonished. I looked up and saw thousands of people cheering us on, screaming, "Say yes! Say yes!" I looked over at the big stadium TV screens and saw my tear-streaked face. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that my marriage proposal would be like this. Norberto was too shy, or so I thought! I said yes, and he slipped the ring on my finger. We got married a few months later.

In 1996, the USC football team won the division championship and clobbered Northwestern University at the Rose Bowl. Having graduated the previous year, I was working for Philip Morris and Norberto and I were very happy. Everything seemed perfect! Life was full of promises. Norberto was drafted by the National Football League; his dream had finally come true and we happily anticipated a new life of fame, fortune, and unforgettable moments.

However, it didn't take me long to find out that although the NFL does offer all of the above, it comes at a very high price, a price I was not willing to pay. Instead of taking me forward in time, life as an NFL wife took me back to situations and ways of thinking that I had worked very hard to avoid. I was expected to devote every moment of my time and every iota of my energy to my husband. I had never lived in anyone's shadow! Instead, I had struggled to overcome the difficulties that life threw in my path. I thought I was now free to live the life I chose, but in the NFL there are no choices—either you're in or you're out. Players and their wives must play by team rules and by those rules alone. The fact is, if you don't like the rules, there is always someone dying to take your place. My husband needed my support, and I knew how much this meant to him, so I had two choices: learn to play the role of an NFL wife or create a role for myself in which I could offer support to Norberto without sacrificing my soul doing it.

The expectations of an NFL wife and the expectations of a traditional Latina wife mirror each other in an uncanny way. Wives in both arenas are expected to be very traditional. Contrary to what most people think, NFL wives rarely have nannies to take care of their children or a cleaning staff to take care of their home. It's not that the wives can't afford help; it's that, in the world of the NFL, value is placed on a wife who takes care of her own children and home

In April 1996, Norberto was drafted by the Carolina Panthers and we moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, that summer. The first thing I noticed when I arrived was that there were no Latinos in sight. Fortunately, since my husband was in football camp, I had brought my mother and a friend along to help me get settled. The second thing I noticed: There were no corn tortillas anywhere, and my mother couldn't find her favorite newspaper, *La Opinión*.

Two weeks later, my mother and friend left, and my husband came home. From that day forward, everything changed. He seemed different—distant and detached. I had no idea at the time that this was the norm for many NFL players. Just as Latina mothers told their daughters, “Don't bother your dad; he's tired from work,” NFL wives were not supposed to “bother” their husbands during football season. I tried to blow off his behavior as stress from the demands of professional football.

The more time that went by, however, the more distant my husband became. I tried to adjust to the lifestyle, going to the Panthers' Wives

Association meetings and to all the charity events the wives attended. The problem was, I felt empty and objectified. I was no longer perceived as Yasmin—the young woman with immense goals and aspirations. I was just a “Panther wife.” No one seemed to be interested in my life and dreams; all they wanted to talk about was my husband and football. When I tried to reach out and create my own identity in this new town, I was ostracized and told that I wanted too much in life, that I just needed to have babies, and then all that energy I had for life would diminish. The more I tried to find commonalities between the other wives and myself, the more I realized how different we were. When we all got together, talk revolved only around our husbands. In fact, I got to know more about these women’s husbands than about them!

As the season continued, my husband became more and more arrogant. The whole town praised these guys as if they were gods. I began to understand why so many young NFL players get themselves into serious trouble; when you take a 21-year-old boy who hasn’t yet established his own identity and give him a few million dollars and treat him like a god, sooner or later he starts to believe he is somewhat like a God.

It wasn’t long before I felt completely confused and alone. I couldn’t find anyone to turn to for support, because everyone thought I had it so good. When I tried to discuss my situation with friends and family, they just did not seem to understand. “Problems? You don’t have problems. I wish I had your problems instead of mine,” is what one friend told me. No one could see the

situation through my eyes. It wasn't about the money; it was about my soul dying a little bit each day. I always had the choice to leave North Carolina, but I believed that the man I had fallen in love with still existed, and I would get him back. Clearly, though, the price I was paying was taking an emotional toll on me. I had survived so much, and I had obtained a good education in order to have a great career and live my dreams, but that didn't seem to matter anymore; there was no room for my dreams in the NFL. I supported my husband's decision to join the NFL, and I loved him for who he was, but if he was no longer going to be the man I'd known before he entered the NFL, then he was no longer going to be my husband.

Although my husband was very *verbally* supportive, he was becoming less and less emotionally available to our marriage. Back in Los Angeles during the off-season, we saw a marriage counselor who tried to help us work through our problems. Norberto learned that a marriage is not something you can check-in and check-out of. He learned that constant communication and emotional availability are crucial if you want your marriage to work. He began to communicate with me more effectively and finally after two years of emotional turmoil, I found new hope.

The new found but, as it turns out, temporary, harmony in our marriage came to wonderful fruition with the birth of our daughter, Divina, on September 8, 1999. Shortly thereafter, I began work on my first book.

Eventually, despite our attempts to make things work, it became clear that our relationship was beyond repair. My husband and I had grown apart emotionally. I had spent the eight years we'd been together seeking personal growth, he hadn't. We were on different emotional levels and could no longer relate to each other. I had learned that unless both parties in a marriage grow together, one will be left behind. We had reached a point where we were truly in different worlds. I craved and needed an emotional connection with my husband—a connection that was no longer possible.

Although it was my decision to end the marriage, there was emptiness inside my soul. The end of my marriage was not only the end of an institutionalized union; it was the end of a dream, a dream I'd had for most of my life: to marry a man I loved deeply and wanted to be with for ever. My divorce represented a loss of myself; the self that had chosen Norberto as the man I wanted to be with for the rest of my life. I felt betrayed by my own self. How could my love for my husband have changed so much? Could I even trust my own instincts anymore? I felt as if I had lost the trust of my heart and feared that I might never be able to love one man forever.

THE MILLENIUM APPROACHES

Since my last few years in graduate school at the end of the 1990s, I had been studying and researching the subject of Latinas and the cultural barriers we face, and solutions for overcoming them. I found very little that had been published on this topic, so I began to gather materials and interviewed

hundreds of Latinas willing to share their stories. From this amazing process, which was central to my own recovery, a book emerged: *Empowering Latinas—Breaking Boundaries, Freeing Lives*. It was published in October 2001.

I dedicated the book to my husband, thanking him for teaching me what a real man was all about. There was a picture of my husband, daughter, and me as a happy family in the beginning of the book. Yet at the time the book came out, of course, we were not a happy family. In fact, Norberto and I had officially separated two weeks before the book's debut. But he showed up at the first book signing and we played it off as if everything were fine. The last thing I needed was for the focus to be on my failing marriage.

The response to the book was phenomenal. From January through July, 2002, I was on a national book tour, trying to break new ground and find my new life as a single mother and a single woman. Although it was great, I was very lonely. I don't know what I wanted—maybe I didn't know what I was lonely about. Maybe I mourned for the loss of my marriage. But the success of the book, and the positive impact it was having on women I met along the way, centered my life, gave me new strength, and replenished my reservoir of hope.

Then the summer crashed into another family tragedy.

On August 11, Norberto, who by then was my ex-husband, pulled up into my driveway. He came in and said, "Yasmin, please sit down. I have something to tell you." At first I thought something had happened to Divina,

who had been spending the week-end with him. But he reassured me that she was fine at his parent's house. He sat next to me, looked straight into my eyes, and said, "There was an accident and Karina, your baby sister is gone."

"What are you talking about Karina is gone?" I asked in disbelief.

"She was hit by a drunk driver and she didn't make it," he said. "No, this is not true. There is no way!" I yelled. "No, I need to talk to my sister Judy, now....I need to talk to Judy now!" I pleaded.

Norberto picked up the phone, dialed Judy's number and gave me the phone.

"Please Judy, tell me it's not true, tell me it's not true" I cried.

"I'm sorry sister," she said, "Its true Karina is gone. She's gone."

I cried with the deepest anguish I had ever felt. "God, why? Haven't we been through enough?" I screamed. Judy had been at the scene of the accident; she had seen it all. She had been in the car with her boyfriend while my baby sister and her friend Garthea followed them. Judy was looking through the rearview mirror when she saw a van ram the side of Karina's car. Judy ran to save my sister, but when she approached the wreckage, Karina and Garthea were not alive. They had died on impact.

That was the worst day of my life. I tried to be strong. I told myself, "*Everything happens for a reason—no! Tragedies only make you stronger—no!*" None of the mantras that had helped me in the past weren't working. I didn't care about *why* this happened; I just wanted my sister back. I didn't

care about “the lesson” this was supposed to teach me, or that I’d be “a better person” because of it. Bullshit.

Bullshit or not, I kept trying to get my life together and forge ahead with my projects. I had to. My livelihood depended on it and so did my daughter’s. My career depended on it too. I was a single mother now, receiving only \$300 a month from my ex-husband. That realization gave me the kick in the pants I needed to pull myself together.

A few days later I had to fly to Dallas to negotiate a contract with Ramiro, a private investor I had met a few months earlier. He believed in my business and felt that I could help change the lives of Latinas all over the world.

My business relationship with Ramiro continued to develop after the successful meeting. He believed that it was time to bring more players into the game to fund the growth of his “soon-to-be-superstar”—so he said. He gathered several other investors and flew them into Los Angeles to meet me. They seemed to be intrigued and impressed by something I said because by the end of the night, they were offering me the moon and the stars. “We will give you anything you want Yasmin, if you sign an exclusivity contract with us” they told me.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means that we will make you the most happening thing since sliced bread, but we will be the exclusive company handling all operations for your

career. You just have to worry about being talented and we will take care of the rest.”

“I don’t know if I would want to do that,” I said. “But if I did, I would need a personal assistant; my sister Judy to come work with me as vice president or something; my own offices; and \$30,000 a month salary.” I was just throwing things out there, not thinking for a minute that they were going to buy it.

“Okay” they said; “It’s yours. Everything you asked for is yours in return for full control and operation of the Yasmin Davidds brand.”

“Brand? What do you mean by brand?” I asked.

“We are going to convert you into a best-selling brand. You do need to understand that your life will no longer be yours; you will no longer own your time. You need to do whatever we believe needs to be done in order to increase the market value of the Yasmin Davidds brand.”

“Oh no,” I said. “I’m sorry but my soul—or should I say “my brand”—is not for sale. My life is my own, and the only way I am going to make sure I keep it that way is for me to keep ownership of it. Therefore, I decline your offer.”

They were shocked! They could not believe that I was turning down what they considered to be the deal of a lifetime. For the next few days they continued to try and persuade me to take the deal but I was not going to budge. “Fine,” they said. “We will talk about the contract/deal later; let’s just get back to business.” So without my signing anything with them, they

willingly hired my sister as a vice president, got me a full-time personal assistant, gave me offices and began paying me \$30,000 a month.

The next six months were hideous . They hired supposed experts to “groom” me into becoming “a brand.” “No red lipstick” the supposed experts told me “We need to sell you to the white man, so we have to straighten your hair, give you a nude-color lipstick and dress you in some neutral colors.”

“But that does not represent who I am,” I told them.

“We are the experts Yasmin—let us do our job.” “You might be the experts for other people, but you are not the experts of me. I thought you were hired to take me to the next level of my career, not to change who I am,” I said. Little did I know that business deals were going on behind my back. These people had a vested interest in “creating a new me” because if they created me, then they believed they had a right to claim a certain percentage of my market worth. If they took who I was and took me to the next level, they would never be able to claim that they had “made” me, and therefore would make less money off of me. Well, thank God for my stubbornness, because I refused to give in to their suggestions of who I should become. What they were requesting of me did not feel right, and if it did not feel right then I wasn’t going to do it.

It was August 2003 when Ramiro asked to meet with me for a private lunch. By now I was dedicating all of my time to this one project, fully depending on it financially. As I sat down for lunch with Ramiro, he handed me a document. “This is the contract we want you to sign. We need you to

sign it within 48 hours. If you don't, we will no longer pay you or your staff your salaries."

"But my attorney is not even in town," I told him.

"You don't need an attorney for this," he said. "Don't you trust us? We've been investing hundreds of thousands of dollars into you and you are questioning our loyalty?"

"I don't sign anything without my attorneys reviewing it first."

"Fine," he said, "but we need this signed within 48 hours. We cannot continue handing over money without a contract signed."

I went home, reviewed the contract and almost fell to the floor. Were these people serious? Did they really believe I was going to sign a contract that would give them ownership of me? The deal that I had refused to accept six months ago was now fully outlined in the contract. The worst part of all is that they wanted all rights to me and my name. When the contract ended five years from now, I would have to *pay them* to use my own name. There was no way I could sign this. I faxed it over to my attorney, who was in another state, and he quickly called me. "Don't you dare sign this contract, Yasmin," he told me. "This contract is so bad, I could not represent you if you chose to sign it." I informed Ramiro that I would not be able to sign the contract. Twenty-four hours later, all funds for the project had been pulled.

That quickly, my sister Judy; my personal assistant, Kathleen, and I were without income. I sat there and cried not knowing what to do. I knew I couldn't sign that contract, yet I felt responsible for my sister and Kathleen;

their livelihood depended on me. Not only that, I had gone from making \$30,000 a month to zero, and I had only a little money saved.

We needed to move forward without the investors, so that is what we did. We had to literally start all over. It was hard, very hard but we knew that some how we had to start building some business. None of us had enough money to tide us over until “real” money came in to the business again.

That same week, I received a letter from the investors’ attorneys telling me that unless I negotiated a deal with the investors or repaid the \$1-million they had invested in me, they were going to sue me. I hired a group of attorneys who agreed to be compensated at the end of the deal. We planned conference-call meetings between my investors in Miami, their attorneys in New York City and my attorneys and me in Los Angeles. The more conference calls we had, the farther away from a deal we got. As all of this was going on, my friend Genevive saw that I was really stressed. She came to me and said “Yasmin, I have an investor friend who I think could help you. He is an expert in big deal making. I want you to meet him”

WHEN I THOUGHT IT WAS SAFE TO GET BACK IN THE WATER...

With some reluctance I agreed to meet “Lionel.” He seemed like a very interesting, intelligent man. I explained the situation, and he immediately said, “I think I can help you.” Next thing I knew he was totally engulfed in making sure I was protected from the investors. I fired my attorneys and brought

Lionel on as the middle man to negotiate the deal between my investors and me. He was smart and quick-witted, and business tactics were impressive. One night, while having dinner at his home, Judy and I spoke about how much we missed our little sister. After Judy had gone home, Lionel came up to me and with the tender most caring eyes a man could possible have, he put his arms around me and said, “Don’t worry, I am going to take care of you and make sure nothing bad ever happens to you. If you need to cry for your sister, you can cry in my arms. I promise you I will never let you go.” For the first time in many years I felt safe, and it felt so good. Little did I know that another shark attack was about to take place.

Lionel and I became intimate. I needed love and understanding, and he provided that for me. I needed safety, and he gave that to me. I yearned to be nurtured and he provided that too. Until then, I had never understood why people went to extreme lengths to fulfill their most basic needs of love and safety. Now I was in that very same predicament.

At first, Lionel was my knight in shining armor. I thought he was an angel sent from Haven to help me. But as it turned out, he was a con artist. Over a period of three months he nearly destroyed my life. He preyed on my weaknesses and my need for love and safety. He was a brilliant man who was also deeply religious (in a very distorted way), giving as much as \$500,000 to his church. But he became an expert at using his apparent religious devotion to manipulate me.

At first, negotiations with the investors went great. Although my investors and I had been through a lot together, they trusted Lionel because I had brought him in to do business with us. But after a few meetings I noticed my investors pulling away. They knew something was not right with their dealings with Lionel. I knew it too—well I kind of knew it but would not admit it to myself. It's interesting how our psyches work. We lie to ourselves and convince ourselves that something is true even when the untruth of it is staring us in the face. And that is exactly what I did. I convinced myself of so many things to make the picture look right, yet everyday I felt more and more powerless. Within three months, the investors pulled out of the deal completely, I had no money left, and I was three months late with my mortgage payments. I was about to lose my home.

It was November of 2003, and I was an emotional mess. “God, I have no idea what is going on here. All I know is that if empowering people is not my purpose in life. I can live with that. You just need to show me that there is no way out this time, and I will switch careers. Only a miracle from you can make me keep going.” I went to sleep that night, not knowing what I was going to do or where I was going to live. The next morning I received a call from a dear friend, Robert. He knew the situation I was in and wanted to help me. “Yasmin,” he said, “you cannot lose your house. Why don't you put your house up for sale and live off the profit for a while?”

“ I wish I could do that but my house is already in foreclosure,” I said. “They will take it away before I can sell it.” Robert arranged things so that I

could acquire a \$20,000 loan that I could pay back once I had sold my home. The next morning, I picked up the \$20,000 cashier's check, ran to my bank, cashed the check, and went straight to the mortgage company to pay my past-due mortgage payments.

The next day, my house went up for sale, and within four days it was sold. On December 29, 2003, I moved out of my home in Chino Hills. I had made \$90,000 on the sale of my home and after paying all of the money I owed, I would have \$60,000 to work with. I didn't know exactly which way I was going to take my business, but I knew that I had a financial cushion to carry me through the next few months until I figured it out.

By this time, Lionel and I were on bad terms. I had started to figure out that he was only out to get whatever he could from people in vulnerable positions.

On Three Kings Day, January 6, 2004, the remaining \$60,000 from the sale of my home was wired into my business account. On January 7, 2004 I went to my bank to withdraw some money, "Sorry," the teller told me, "Your account is negative."

"Negative?" I said. "That can't be. I just had a \$60,000 wire transferred into my account yesterday."

"Yes" she said "I see that you did. But this morning, a Lionel Johnson cashed a check in the amount of \$60,000, leaving your account at a negative \$1.28. It says that Mr. Lionel Johnson is a secondary account holder and is authorized to approve transactions on this account." My heart dropped. When

Lionel and I started doing business together, we had opened a business account that allowed him to do business transactions, with my approval. He was my business partner, and that is what business partners do—they trust each other. I asked to see a copy of the check Lionel had cashed, and right there, in clear handwriting, was my signature—my forged signature. In the memo line of the check, he had written, “Joint investment funds”. He had set me up, and now I was left with nothing—not even a dollar to my name.

The next morning, I was awakened by a call from the FBI. I was dumbfounded to find out that Lionel had been under investigation by the FBI, who had just arrested him that morning. The investigators wanted me to give a deposition of my business relationship with Lionel. I gladly granted them the deposition and vowed never to have any interaction with him again.

What was I to do now? How was I going to continue to run a business without any money? “Okay, God, this is it. I am tired. Please help me.” A few days passed and I felt myself falling into a deep depression. I didn’t want to see or talk to anyone. I was ashamed, ashamed that I had allowed this bastard to come into my life and turn it upside down. I had surrendered my power to him, and I was humiliated. I decided that I was going to start looking for other employment opportunities rather than pursue my business. I did not feel empowered at the time and I was not going to pretend that I was.

But my blessing continued and a few days later I received an email from L’eggs, the hosiery company. Management had done their research and decided I was the best fit to be the company’s spokesperson for its Hispanic-

market campaign. The company offered me a significant amount of money just for the right to use my name, along with a one-year contract to travel around the country and represent L'eggs at top Latino events. I accepted the deal, and the launch of my new career began. The next 12 months were emotionally difficult because I had to come face-to-face with myself. It took me six months before I could truly talk about my experience. My close friends and family never judged me, always reminding me that I was human. Yet I believed that because I was an empowerment specialist, I had to be super human. It was when I faced my pain, my humanness, and my shame that I forgave myself and once again accepted myself—but this time with all my imperfections.

It was at that moment that I realized I had been asking God for the wrong thing. I had been asking God to bring back the old Yasmin, yet that was an impossible task. I realized that I had evolved to a whole new level, a whole new Yasmin. It was when I surrendered to myself and to God, accepting my faults and understanding that my imperfections were part of who I am that I began to feel alive again.

I continue to walk my path, taking all of the risks necessary to live my life to the fullest, and knowing that, whatever happens if I ever gave away my power again, I would always be able to reclaim it. Whether conscious or not, I gave my power away to life circumstances, yet when I was ready, I took it back. I am not an extraordinary woman with powerful gifts. I am a woman, just like you. A woman who has chosen to live her life with complete honesty,

never being anything less than truthful to herself. If you live this way, you will always own your power. It is when you lie to yourself that you give away your power.

I am a true believer that whether we have been wronged, mistreated, screwed, or deceived, nothing we experience in life is accidental. Each situation is there to move us to the next level of awareness, of our true self. Our task is to figure out how this is true in our lives and to discover the gift that each event brings to our life. We grow and heal when we find the blessing in every event.

I have taken every tragedy and challenge in my life and have made it mean something to me in order to make sense of it. My depression taught me never to be ashamed of what I have gone through in life—everyone has a story to tell. My drug addiction taught me that unless I am emotionally well, I cannot take care of others, and the greatest gift a mother can give her child is her happiness. My father's mental illness and abuse taught me that unless I heal my pains of the past, they will come back to haunt me. My mother's pain taught me the value of economic independence and never to rely on one thing or person for my happiness. My sister's death taught me that life is too short for regrets, too pure for facades and too deep for superficialities. It taught me that even if a part of me dies while I am alive, it is still possible to be reborn. My investors taught me that regardless of appearances, business is always business. My divorce taught me the value of being true to my spirit and living

from my core. The betrayal of my business partner taught me that although vulnerability can be dangerous it is never worth the closing of my heart.

Whether the meaning I have placed on these experiences is actually true, is irrelevant. One thing I do know is that I will never suffer in vain. I will make sure that for every sorrow in my life, there is 10 times the joy, and for every tear of grief I shed, there are 100 tears of happiness.

I do not accept part-time love or part-time friends. When I love, I love passionately, with all that I am. If you ask my friends, they will say the same thing: that I live life presently and passionately. My life is more important than my career, and my daughter is more important than anything life has to offer. My mom, my sister, and my niece are what nourish my heart when I need love, and my friends fulfill my soul when it is empty. But at the core of my life lives faith; for without God, nothing is possible.

I'M STILL HERE

All of these lessons have given me the strength to thrive beyond chaos and live my life on purpose. For 20 years I had dreamed of having my own television talk show, one that would empower women from a Latina perspective. In October 2005, my dream came true when I launched *The Latina Perspective*, my weekly show in Los Angeles.

What else the future holds for me, I do not know. What I do know is that if life grants me joy, I will pass it on and if it hands me grief, I will convert it into joy and then pass it on!

Meanwhile, I hope that the story of my life and the information in the next pages will help you live your own life to the fullest, without regrets. Just as no one can tell me how to live my life, I would never tell you how to live your life. I can only help to guide you to your own truth.

Until next time, *hermanas*. I love you all, sisters!