

The Other Side Of The Couch

A Memoir of Falling Apart and Finding My Way Back

A Book Proposal

By Dr. Tiffany A. Stewart

Author Bio

My name is Tiffany Stewart, though professionally I am known as Dr. Tiffany A. Stewart, LPC. I am an Associate Professor of Counseling and a Licensed Professional Counselor with over 20 years of experience in the counseling field and 16 years in higher education. At my core, I have always been deeply curious about people—how we think, how we make decisions, and how we become who we are.

Becoming a clinician was always the plan. Becoming a professor was not.

I entered my doctoral program at the University of Akron with a very clear vision: earn my

degree, return home to New Orleans, and build the life I had always known. But life had other plans. On the exact day I began my program, Hurricane Katrina devastated my city. In an instant, the option of returning home as I had imagined it was gone. I found myself in a new place, a divorced single mother of a five year old, navigating uncertainty with no real backup plan. The only option I gave myself was to keep going.

During my doctoral program, I was given the opportunity to teach master's level counseling courses. What started as an assignment quickly became something more. I began to see the impact I could have not just with clients, but with future counselors. I also understood the stability that this path could provide for me and my daughter. Over time, what I stumbled into became my purpose.

Earning tenure required discipline, sacrifice, and an unwavering commitment to my work. I dedicated myself fully to the profession through teaching, publishing, and service. I have served in multiple leadership roles within the counseling profession, including Regional Director, Senator, and Editorial Board Member. I have presented at numerous professional conferences and have been honored with several awards, including the Distinguished Service Award from the Texas Counseling Association, the Emerging Leader Award from the Texas Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, the 'Ohana Honors Award from Counselors for Social Justice, and recognition as a Fellow of Chi Sigma Iota.

In addition to my academic and clinical work, I created The H.E.R. Experience, a women's retreat focused on honoring self, enlightenment, and renewal. This work allows me to connect with women in a different, more personal way and create space for reflection, growth, and realignment.

Everything I do is grounded in my belief that people are capable of growth, even in the most unexpected and challenging moments. My work, both professionally and personally, reflects that journey.

COMPARATIVE TITLES

Below are some of the books that are similar in tone as my book, from individuals who are in the same field and me and/or have experienced some of the same challenges that I speak about in my book. I hope to be amongst them as peers.

Maybe You Should Talk To Someone: A Therapist, HER Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed

Lori Gottlieb (Harper, 2019); Over 1 million copies in total sold

This memoir follows a psychotherapist navigating her own personal crisis after a failed relationship, which ultimately leads her into therapy while she continues working with her own clients. It offers a deeply human look at the intersection of professional identity and personal struggle.

I relate closely to this work. Like Lori Gottlieb, I am a therapist who is actively doing the work in my own life while supporting clients through theirs. My story also explores what it means to hold space for others while trying to make sense of your own pain. I write with honesty, vulnerability, and moments of humor, allowing readers to see both the professional and the person behind the role.

Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search For Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia
Elizabeth Gilbert (Penguin Random House, 2006); Over 18 million copies sold

This memoir captures a woman's journey of self discovery after realizing the life she was living was no longer aligned with who she was becoming. Through travel and reflection, she searches for meaning, fulfillment, and peace.

What resonates with me in this work is the courage to step away from what is familiar in order to pursue something more authentic. Like Elizabeth Gilbert, my journey too takes place across different countries and is just as internal, emotional, and transformative. Similarly, I aim to create a narrative that is honest, reflective, and engaging, one that allows readers to see themselves in the story and feel less alone in their own search for clarity, healing, and identity.

What My Bones Know

Stephanie Foo (Penguin Random House, 2022); Up to 30 million copies sold

This memoir explores complex trauma through both a personal and investigative lens, blending lived experience with psychological insight.

This aligns well with my work because it reflects the intersection of personal healing and professional understanding. Like Stephanie Foo, I am not just telling a story of what happened to me, but also making meaning of it through the lens of my training and experience. My book similarly invites readers into both the emotional experience and the deeper understanding of how we process pain, attachment, and identity.

Untamed

Glenn Doyle (Penguin Random House, 2020); Over 3 million copies sold

This memoir that chronicles Glenn Doyle's journey of freeing herself from the societal expectations of family roles, religious conditioning, and cultural messages about what women "should" be.

My book parallels Untamed as they both explore what happens when a woman reaches a point where the life she has been living no longer fits the person she is becoming. Both books are also

deeply reflective and invite readers to examine their own lives while following the author's story. Readers are not simply witnessing events, they are encouraged to question their own beliefs about love, family, identity, and self-worth.

Broken Open

Elizabeth Lesser (Penguin Random House, 2005)

This book explores how life's painful disruptions can become catalysts for profound personal transformation. In the book, Elizabeth Lesser took from her own experiences, including divorce, family challenges, aging, parenting struggles, and existential questioning. She argues that many people spend years trying to avoid pain, only to discover that growth often emerges from the very experiences they most wanted to escape.

In both *Broken Open* and my book is the idea that life's most painful experiences become the doorway to personal growth. Like Elizabeth Lesser, I did not set out to be transformed. I was living my life, pursuing relationships, maintaining family connections, and moving forward professionally when several major losses collided at once causing me to reevaluate everything I once thought I knew.

Target Audience

The readers who will connect most deeply with my work are high achieving, thoughtful, and self aware individuals who have done everything they believed they were supposed to do to build a successful life. On the outside, they are accomplished, capable, and often admired. On the inside, many are beginning to question whether the life they created truly reflects who they are.

My audience is made up largely of middle aged women, though my work also resonates with men. Many are in the 45 to 55 age range, but I

also attract readers as young as their twenties and as seasoned as their eighties. What connects them is not age, but experience. They are individuals who have spent much of their lives performing, achieving, and surviving, often at the expense of fully knowing themselves.

They see themselves in my story. My voice reflects what they have felt but have not always been able to articulate. They are drawn to honesty, vulnerability, and truth, especially when it challenges the narratives they have been living by. These are individuals who are not afraid of depth. They are curious about what has been holding them back, and more importantly, they are ready to do something about it.

This audience is not looking for surface level inspiration. They are ready to do the work. They want to understand their patterns, their choices, and the roles they have played in their own lives. They are seeking clarity, alignment, and permission to step into a more authentic version of themselves.

Platform

I am actively building a platform that reflects both my professional expertise and my personal voice. My audience engages with me because I speak directly, honestly, and in a way that feels both relatable and insightful.

Instagram: Approximately 25,000 followers, with strong potential for re- engagement through consistent content and storytelling.

Facebook: Personal page with an established network of approximately 1,200 followers.

TikTok: Platform in development, with a focus on short form, high impact content designed to expand reach and visibility.

In addition to social media, I have a built in audience through my work as a professor, therapist, and speaker. I also host women's retreats

through The H.E.R. Experience, which provides a direct and meaningful way to connect with my target audience in real life spaces.

My platform is not just about numbers. It is built on trust, credibility, and the ability to create conversations that resonate. I am committed to growing this platform intentionally and leveraging it to support the success of this book.

Marketing and Publicity

I will execute a multi-platform, audience-centered marketing strategy that leverages my professional credibility as a therapist and professor, my lived experiences, and my ability to create meaningful, emotionally resonant conversations. This plan is designed not only to generate visibility, but to build sustained engagement and word-of-mouth momentum before and after publication.

My approach is rooted in consistency, intentional messaging, and strategic partnerships. While my current social media following is growing, my strength lies in my ability to connect deeply with audiences, mobilize professional networks, and create content that sparks reflection, dialogue, and shareability. I am fully committed to prioritizing the success of this book and executing a high-impact campaign.

PRE-ORDER STRATEGY: Approximately three months prior to release, I will launch a targeted pre-order campaign designed to build anticipation and emotional investment in the book. This will include a coordinated rollout across Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok featuring:

- Short-form video content introducing themes and personal insights from the book
- Teaser excerpts and storytelling moments that invite curiosity
- Clear and consistent calls-to-action driving pre-orders
- This phase will focus on creating a sense of urgency, connection, and early community around the book.

BOOK WEBSITE: I will develop a dedicated, professionally designed book website that serves as a central hub for:

- Sample chapters and excerpts
- Media features and speaking engagements
- Direct purchase links
- Email list sign-ups for ongoing engagement
- My existing website (tiffanystewartphd.com) will strategically direct traffic to this platform through prominent banner placement and integrated content.

BANNER ADS: My website tiffanystewartphd.com will include banner advertising to direct people to the book's dedicated website.

BUSINESS MEDIA OUTREACH: I will leverage my established network within the counseling and academic communities to expand reach and credibility. This includes:

- Collaborations with therapists, educators, and thought leaders who have established online platforms
- Guest appearances on podcasts, webinars, and professional panels
- Partnerships that encourage discussion-based promotion and cross-audience visibility

ONLINE MEDIA OUTREACH: I will implement a consistent content strategy across platforms that blends personal narrative, clinical insight, and relatable themes. This will position the book not just as a product, but as part of a larger conversation around identity, healing, and personal growth.

Content will include:

- Thought-provoking posts tied to key themes in the book
- Behind-the-scenes writing journey insights
- Audience engagement prompts to foster discussion and sharing

PRESS KIT: A comprehensive press kit will be developed to support all media outreach efforts. This will include:

- Press releases and media pitches
- Author biography and professional credentials

- Key talking points and story angles
- High-quality images and book information

This ensures that media professionals have immediate access to compelling, ready-to-use content.

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT: I will develop clear, consistent messaging that will be woven throughout all promotional efforts. This includes:

- Core themes and positioning statements that differentiate the book
- Memorable, quotable lines tailored for interviews and media use
- A cohesive narrative that connects my personal story, professional expertise, and the reader's experience

This strategy ensures that every touchpoint reinforces the book's impact and relevance.

Book Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter 1: The Day It All Collapsed Breakup

Chapter 2: Melissa

Chapter 3: Abandonment

Chapter 4: Melissa and Todd

Chapter 5: The Price of Getting Out

Chapter 6: Melisa

Chapter 7: Shedding Season

Chapter 8: Melissa and Todd

Chapter 9: Psychic

Chapter 10: Todd

Chapter 11: Impact Does Not Care About Intent

Chapter 12: Melissa and Todd

Chapter 13: Invisible Strings

Chapter 14: Melissa

Chapter 15: The 5 O’Clock Hour

Chapter 16: Fifty Days

Chapter 17: Sunlight

Chapter 18: Transformation, healing, and growth

Overview

I built a life that looked right on paper. I was successful, educated, and accomplished by the definition of society. A therapist who helped others navigate their pain, relationships, and identities. I knew how to guide people through heartbreak, uncertainty, the moments that shake them to their core. What I did not expect was to find myself in the middle of my own unraveling.

This book begins with a moment that changed everything. A relationship I believed in, invested in, and trusted was exposed as something I did not fully understand. In a single phone call, the life I thought I was building collapsed, forcing me to confront not just the betrayal in front of me, but the deeper patterns that led me there.

As a therapist, I had the language. I understood attachment, boundaries, and emotional patterns. But understanding something intellectually is very different from living it in real time.

This story is about how a therapist heals herself through grief and heartbreak while also helping her clients navigate their own struggles. It is about what happens when the roles we have relied on for safety, love, and identity begin to fall apart. It is about the tension between who we have been and who we are becoming. It is about the discomfort of no longer fitting into a life that once made sense.

Through deeply personal storytelling, I take readers inside that process. I explore the emotional impact of betrayal, the quiet ways we abandon ourselves, and the courage it takes to begin again. Along the way, I weave in insight from my work as a therapist, offering reflection

without removing the humanity from the experience.

This is a book about asking better questions. It is for the person who has done everything “right” and still finds themselves wondering why something feels off. It is for the person who is successful on the outside but quietly questioning their life on the inside. And let’s be honest, that’s most of us. It is for the person who is ready to stop performing and start becoming.

At its core, this book invites readers to examine the roles they have been living, understand where those roles came from, and decide whether they are still willing to carry them. Because sometimes the life you worked so hard to build is not the life you are meant to keep. Yet before we really step into the life that is fully ours we must first go through a shedding process where all things familiar need to be dropped.

Chapter Summaries

CHAPTER 1: The Day It All Collapsed

Just as the title of the chapter states, this is the day my world shattered. I had met Kevin and quickly got into a committed relationship with him. He was tall, God-fearing, financially stable, and everything I had prayed for. I was all in hard and fast, agreeing to move in with him after just a few months together. But cracks appear early beginning when his adult daughter Jordan disrupts the move-in plan. The man practically lets become homeless rather than stand firm with his going no where fast daughter.

Then a birthday trip to Puerto Vallarta quietly reveals his quirks, his cheapness, and my own willingness to overlook red flags. Why, oh why do we overlook the red flags? Then the day after our return from my birthday trip, a stranger named Camille leaves a voicemail identifying herself as Kevin's girlfriend of three years, and the whole house of cards collapses, exposing lies that stretch back to the very beginning, including the revelation that the birthday trip was a vacation package he had originally purchased for Camille.

The chapter closes on a hard won truth that empathy without discernment is not love but self-destruction, and that no degree prepares you for the education of being someone's chosen target.

CHAPTER 2 : Melissa

This chapter begins upon meeting a new client being seen for therapy, Melissa, a strikingly beautiful and successful restaurateur who has spent a lifetime believing she was unworthy of real love, a belief rooted in an emotionally distant father, a mocking older brother, and a first marriage that left her with nothing but her children and her resilience. Now Melissa has found Todd, a polished, generous, God fearing man who wines and dines her, fills a closet with designer clothes, and quotes scripture beside her. He’s a man so perfectly constructed that even I, as a therapist, had a brief moment of wanting to slide Melissa out of the way and take her place.

Just kidding. But he appeared to be just that perfect.

However, beneath the grand gestures, my clinical ear picks up the drum rolls alerting danger long before Melissa does. I came in the form of hearing control dressed as care, hierarchy disguised as inspiration, and old wounds being quietly exploited by a man who knows exactly which buttons to press. As Melissa describes Todd's subtle comments about how she should look and present herself to be worthy of standing next to a man like him, I recognize something that stops me cold: I was not just sitting across from a client, I was sitting across from a mirror of my own experience with Kevin.

The chapter closes on a hard and humbling truth that even the most trained therapist becomes fully human when love enters the room, and that the view from inside your own heart comes with blind spots no degree can correct.

CHAPTER 3: Abandonment

This chapter opens by naming what broke me after my breakup with Kevin. It was not losing him, but losing the vision of partnership I had been carrying since my divorce 24 years prior, a vision made more urgent by the simultaneous collapse of my relationships with four of my five siblings who had quietly exiled me for the crime of growing beyond the role the family had assigned me.

To understand how I got here, I take the reader back to my childhood in New Orleans, shaped by a mother who was resourceful and free spirited, siblings who became my whole world, a father who was physically present but emotionally unreachable, and the man who eventually became my surrogate father, Mr. Green, who loved me so consistently I believed for years that I had no daddy issues at all.

The chapter traces the precise moments my anxious attachment style was born: the kindergarten classroom where being separated from my sister triggered a panic so complete my teachers had to retrieve her from another classroom just to calm me down, and my third grade year of school when my brothers left for college and Mr. Green disappeared without a word. It was then that every male presence I had counted on vanished in what felt like a single breath.

I watches those early losses echo forward through my adult life, through the way I loved without questioning, held on without protecting myself, and spent decades searching not just for love but for proof that I would not be abandoned.

The chapter closes with a tenderness and clarity that only hindsight can offer. The little girl sobbing in that kindergarten classroom was not throwing a tantrum, I was already learning that separation felt like danger, and that lesson would quietly run my life for years before she ever had a name for it.

Chapter 4: Melissa and Todd

Melissa and Todd arrive for their first couples session looking, at least on the surface, like a success story. Todd is attentive, polite, and eager to talk about the future. He speaks openly about his love for Melissa and his desire to marry her, and Melissa seems relieved to finally be with someone who appears stable, committed, and dependable. As a therapist, Tiffany initially understands why Melissa is drawn to him. After years of relational disappointments, Todd presents as the kind of man many women hope to find.

But as the session unfolds, subtle warning signs begin to emerge. Todd answers questions directed at Melissa, reframes her experiences through his own lens, and repeatedly positions himself as the reasonable one in the relationship. His charm is undeniable, yet something feels off. The more he speaks, the more Tiffany notices an undercurrent of control disguised as concern and selflessness that seems carefully curated rather than authentic.

The chapter explores the tension therapists often face when intuition collides with presentation. While Melissa sees a man eager to build a life with her, Tiffany finds herself paying attention to what is happening beneath the words. As the session ends, she cannot point to a single glaring red flag, but she leaves with an uneasy feeling that Todd's version of love may come with conditions Melissa has not yet recognized. The chapter closes with Tiffany wondering whether she is witnessing the beginning of a healthy partnership—or the early stages of a dynamic that could ultimately diminish the woman sitting across from him.

CHAPTER 5: The Price of Getting Out

Watching my brothers finally emerge from over two decades of addiction, I was proud and grieving simultaneously, recognizing that the men standing before me are new versions of the brothers I once adored. They were now unsteady and rebuilding from the ground up while I was quietly doing the same.

What began as a decoy, enrolling in college just to have something respectable to say to others after my unofficial job of partying accidentally became the thing that saved me from a life of poverty. I went on to earn a bachelor's degree in psychology, a master's degree as a single mother with a newborn baby, and eventually a PhD. While climbing the academic ladder after the collapse of my marriage, my family grew distant, and my internal voice told me daily that failure was simply not an option.

Building a life in Texas, I earn my place in the Ivory Tower (academia) as a Black woman from New Orleans who arrived without a map or a safety net, and quietly absorbed the weight of single motherhood, academia, and the growing sense that my growth had made me a stranger in my own family. What they saw as me outgoing them, I saw as survival.

Then what begins as an act of love towards my brother slowly unravels and begins a fracture in

my sibling relationships that never fully heals. The chapter closes on a truth as painful as it is clear: in the unspoken logic of my family system, my success was never fully mine alone. My boundaries read as betrayal and the little girl who was once everybody's solution had finally, at great cost, decided to stop solving.

Chapter 6: Melissa

Melissa returns to therapy alone, glowing with excitement about her future with Todd. Their relationship has accelerated at a breathtaking pace, and she eagerly shares plans for marriage, combining their lives, and selling her home so she can move in with him. She describes these milestones as evidence that she has finally found the secure, committed relationship she has always wanted. On the surface, her enthusiasm is contagious, but Tiffany cannot ignore how quickly everything is unfolding.

As the session continues, small cracks begin to appear in the story. Almost casually, Melissa mentions incidents involving Todd and other women—stories she quickly minimizes, explains away, or laughs off. Each disclosure raises new questions. Why does Todd need so much attention from other women? Why do his explanations always seem to leave Melissa questioning her own instincts? Tiffany notices the familiar pattern of a woman working harder to protect the image of a relationship than to examine what is actually happening inside it.

Listening to Melissa, Tiffany finds herself unexpectedly pulled into her own reflections about Kevin. She remembers the certainty she felt when she believed their future was taking shape, the compromises she made in service of the relationship, and the way hope can sometimes drown out warning signs. As Melissa describes her plans to sell her home and intertwine her future with Todd's, Tiffany quietly wrestles with questions she has been asking herself: When does commitment become surrender? How do intelligent, self-aware women convince themselves to move past things that should give them pause? And how can someone distinguish between trusting a relationship and ignoring what their intuition is trying to tell them?

The chapter explores the uncomfortable reality that insight does not provide immunity. While Tiffany helps Melissa examine her choices, she is simultaneously forced to confront her own vulnerabilities and the ways she, too, has struggled to separate love from longing. What begins as a counseling session about Melissa's future becomes a mirror reflecting Tiffany's own unresolved questions about Kevin, attachment, and the stories people tell themselves when they desperately want something to work. The chapter closes with both women standing at different points in the same emotional crossroads—each trying to determine whether the future they envision is built on reality or hope alone.

Chapter 7: Shedding Season

The family has now found a new sense of stability. My brother, Jimmy, remarries but years of

unspoken resentment toward me surface when his son, my nephew has suddenly risen to fame with his NFL success and shifts the family's dynamics drastically. My family, the people who I thought I knew better than anyone and the one who I thought knew me have now shunned me in a way where I am increasingly excluded and forgotten in most family functions.

Despite being dismissed and criticized, I continue to show up for the people I love, caring for my sister Normie through a breast cancer diagnosis and recovery in ways that are quiet, sacrificial, and largely unseen. A seemingly harmless joke eventually triggers a confrontation that exposes decades of buried grievances and forces me to question whether the relationships I treasured all of my life were ever as mutual as I believed. Was it all a lie? Has my whole life been a lie?

Already wounded by Kevin's betrayal, this fracture with the family members I loved most sends me into profound grief and forces me to confront the most painful reality that belonging in my family often required abandoning parts of myself.

Through that heartbreak emerges a hard-earned truth: authentic love cannot require self-erasure, and becoming whole may mean losing relationships that depended on me staying small. Living my life in shoes I had long outgrown was had become too unbearable to continue to walk in.

Chapter 8: Melissa and Todd

When Melissa and Todd return for their next couples session, the polished version of their relationship begins to crack. Gone is much of the excitement and certainty that had filled earlier sessions. Instead, Melissa arrives carrying questions she can no longer ignore. As the conversation unfolds, she begins revealing inconsistencies between the stories Todd told her at the beginning of their relationship and the facts she has since uncovered. What Todd initially presented as misunderstandings, bad luck, or the actions of jealous ex-partners now appears more complicated and far less innocent.

Todd responds defensively. Rather than acknowledging Melissa's concerns, he redirects, rationalizes, and challenges her interpretation of events. What begins as a discussion quickly devolves into an argument that consumes most of the session. Melissa repeatedly tries to gain clarity, while Todd seems more focused on winning the debate than understanding her hurt. For the first time, Tiffany witnesses the dynamic she had only sensed before: Todd's charm giving way to irritation when questioned and Melissa struggling to hold onto both her reality and the version of Todd she desperately wants to believe.

As the conflict escalates, Tiffany finds herself reflecting on her own experience with Kevin. She remembers the discomfort of holding two conflicting truths at once: who someone appears to be and who their actions reveal them to be. Watching Melissa wrestle with the gap between Todd's promises and his behavior forces Tiffany to revisit her own tendency to focus on potential rather than evidence. She wonders how often people stay attached not to the relationship they have, but to the relationship they believe is just around the corner.

The chapter explores the psychological tension of cognitive dissonance—the painful space where reality begins to challenge the story we have been telling ourselves. Melissa is no longer simply planning a wedding; she is beginning to question the foundation upon which those plans were built. By the end of the session, there is no resolution. Only a room filled with frustration, unanswered questions, and the growing realization that trust, once fractured, cannot be restored through explanations alone. As Melissa and Todd leave, Tiffany is left wondering whether this relationship can survive the truth—or whether the truth is only beginning to reveal itself.

Chapter 9 : The Psychic

With my family fractured, my identity in pieces, and Kevin's betrayal still fresh, I began the only kind of self discovery I had never actually done. The kind that requires emotional nudity, a mirror I can no longer turn away from, and questions I spent decades skillfully avoiding. I did what I would recommend to anyone in my situation. Find a therapist.

In my attempt to find a therapist, I was turned away by only one who responded because, apparently, being a therapist myself is now a contraindication for the other therapist. Of course it was. Such is my life. So I shifted gears and landed somewhere I never in my wildest dreams imagined. I went to a psychic. Her name was Eleanor. She was a slightly frail woman in her seventies who repeats herself often enough to make me quietly question what in the world could I be thinking? The woman clearly cannot see my future. She can barely remember what she said sixty seconds ago.

Eleanor proceeds to map my life with unsettling accuracy, predicting a book, a new certification, a hairstyle change, a group trip out of the country, and an eventual love with a man I hadn't met yet. All of which I haphazardly filed somewhere between skepticism and desperate hope.

Then one day while sitting in what had become the Twilight Zone of Normie's home while helping her during her breast cancer recovery, I opened an email about a small group retreat in Bali and I hit the deposit button like it was a slot machine in Vegas, without finishing the email, without consulting logic, and without asking anyone's permission.

The chapter closes on the quiet recognition that this was not just a travel decision but the first conscious act of shedding, the moment I stopped leaving places and began, for the first time, leaving an identity that no longer fit the woman I was being forced to become.

Chapter 10 - Todd

After weeks of listening to Melissa and Todd argue in circles, Tiffany makes an unusual decision. Hoping to better understand the relationship dynamics, she asks Todd to come into session alone. She expects to hear his frustrations, his fears, and perhaps gain insight into why communication between the couple has become so strained. Instead, the session leaves her increasingly unsettled.

The more Todd talks, the less his story aligns with the future Melissa believes they are building together. In a matter-of-fact tone, he admits that he has no real intention of moving in with her and no plans to marry her anytime soon, despite encouraging conversations that led Melissa to believe otherwise. What Tiffany had suspected as mixed messages now appears to be something more troubling. Todd seems comfortable allowing Melissa to organize her life around promises he never intended to fulfill.

Then the conversation takes an even more disturbing turn. Todd proudly reveals that he has gained access to Melissa's private text messages without her knowledge. As if presenting evidence in a courtroom, he begins reading exchanges between Melissa and her ex-partner, expecting Tiffany to validate his outrage. Instead, she finds herself focused less on the content of the messages and more on what his actions reveal. There is no acknowledgment that he violated Melissa's privacy. No concern about trust or boundaries. Only a conviction that his behavior was justified because it produced information he wanted.

Sitting across from him, Tiffany experiences a growing sense of discomfort. The charming, attentive man who once presented himself as Melissa's devoted future husband is becoming harder to reconcile with the man now sitting in her office. What initially appeared to be commitment is beginning to look more like possession. What sounded like concern is beginning to resemble control.

The session forces Tiffany to confront an uncomfortable truth she has encountered both professionally and personally: people often reveal themselves most clearly when they believe they are justified. Todd is not confessing wrongdoing. He is defending it. As she listens, Tiffany thinks about Kevin and the ways people can construct narratives that allow them to avoid accountability while preserving their image as the good guy. By the end of the session, she realizes her concern is no longer about whether Melissa and Todd will get married. It is whether Melissa fully understands the relationship she is actually in. The chapter closes with Tiffany carrying knowledge that Melissa does not yet have—a widening gap between the future Todd has promised and the future he privately admits he never intends to give her.

Chapter 11: Impact Does Not Care About Intent

Still showing up for my clients while barely holding herself together, I discovered that inhabiting my own grief gives me a humility no textbook ever could. This realization gives me an understanding from the inside of what my clients experience when they walk through my door, including the uncomfortable realization that heartbreak does not move on a schedule. And having two major attachment ruptures colliding at once feel less like a lesson and more like emotional whiplash with no seatbelt.

During this time I stumbled across the Hoffman Institute during a mindless social media scroll and instantly signed up for their virtual introductory program called Hoffman Essentials. While the clinical language felt familiar and something I could grasp without much thought,

experiencing it as a participant rather than a professional was entirely different. The process forced me to feel the weight of my own patterns in her body rather than analyze them safely from a distance. The program holds up a mirror to something I had never fully seen. That the razor sharp verbal speed I developed as the baby of the family, the one everyone practiced on, had traveled with me out of childhood and into every relationship I ever had, operating on muscle memory long after the rooms and the people had changed. And that what once bonded me and my siblings had quietly become something they could no longer tolerate.

I began the painful work of separating impact from intent, understanding for the first time that the armor I built to survive in my family also kept connection at arm's length in every relationship that followed, and that the same siblings who trained me to stay razor sharp had changed in ways nobody announced or explained to me.

The chapter closes not on resolution but on a bird's eye view earned by lifting myself out of the center of the story, finally able to see my siblings not just as the people who hurt me, but as people shaped by their own unfinished wounds. This enlightenment did not erase the pain, but it loosens its grip just enough to make the next step possible.

Chapter 12: Melissa

When Melissa and Todd return for their next couples session, Tiffany finds herself facing a challenge she rarely encounters in the therapy room: remaining fully present while carrying information that has fundamentally changed the way she sees one of her clients. Just days earlier, Todd had sat across from her and admitted that he had no intention of moving in with Melissa or marrying her, despite allowing her to make plans based on those assumptions. Tiffany had strongly encouraged him to be honest with Melissa before their next session. Looking at the couple now, she immediately realizes he has done no such thing.

Melissa arrives hopeful, still speaking about their future as though it is a shared destination. Todd nods along, offering just enough agreement to keep the dream alive without ever fully committing to it. Every mention of wedding plans, housing decisions, and long-term goals lands differently now that Tiffany knows what he privately disclosed. She finds herself working harder than usual to maintain a neutral expression, aware that her role is not to expose Todd but to create space for truth to emerge.

As the session progresses, the disconnect between them becomes impossible to ignore. Melissa speaks from a place of trust and assumption, while Todd responds with vague statements and carefully chosen words that allow him to avoid outright lying while still withholding the truth. The dynamic feels less like a partnership and more like a negotiation in which one person possesses information the other desperately needs but does not have.

The tension in the room is no longer fueled solely by arguments about past behavior. It is fueled by omission. Tiffany watches Melissa attempt to solve relationship problems without access to the full picture. The experience reminds her of times in her own life when she was trying to

make sense of a relationship while unknowingly working from incomplete information. She thinks about Kevin and how difficult it is to evaluate a relationship accurately when one person's words and intentions do not align.

The chapter explores the ethical and emotional complexity of sitting with secrets in the therapy room. Tiffany cannot disclose what Todd shared in his individual session, yet she also cannot ignore the impact his silence is having on Melissa's ability to make informed decisions about her future. As the session comes to a close, Todd remains unwilling to tell the truth, and Melissa remains committed to a vision of the relationship that may not exist. Tiffany leaves the session with a growing sense of inevitability, recognizing that relationships built on hidden intentions rarely collapse because of a single betrayal. More often, they unravel under the weight of truths that were withheld for far too long.

Chapter 13: The Invisible String

Before even leaving for Bali even, I had already begun shedding the layers that either I had outgrown had outgrown me. My confidence was shaken for the first time in my life and I now questioned my every thought and move. I needed to believe in myself again. It felt like I was rebuilding myself from the inside out. I did everything, from plastering sticky note affirmations across my bathroom mirror and saying the words out loud each morning and night, even though I wasn't sure if I yet believed them. I cut all of my hair off in a pixie, having nothing to do with style and everything to do with no longer having the energy to carry anything of my past.

She arrived in Bali for a seven day wellness retreat followed by a solo week after the retreat ended. While the external itinerary delivered everything the island is famous for including temples, rice terraces, a candlelit eleven course dinner in a cave, and a bathtub filled with flower petals, I understood almost immediately that the beauty of the island is just the setting. The real work was stirring beneath the surface.

A visit to one of Bali's traditional healers cracks something open I wasn't quite prepared for. The thing that was truly holding me back from everything I wanted was me deciding to truly forgive those who I believed had wronged me in the past. Words that were so small, it broke open what months of grief could not.

Chapter 14: Melissa

What initially appeared to be jealousy, possessiveness, and control by Todd now reveals itself as something more serious. Melissa discloses incidents she had previously minimized or dismissed. There were moments when Todd grabbed her arm too forcefully, blocked her from leaving during arguments, intimidated her with his anger, or used physical presence to make her feel small and afraid. None of these incidents had seemed significant enough on their own to convince her that she was in an abusive relationship. Yet as she recounts them aloud, she begins

hearing them differently herself.

The session takes a turn. Rather than focusing solely on Todd's behavior, I move toward a more difficult question. Why had she accepted it? Together, Melissa and I begin examining the patterns that have followed her throughout her relationships, tying it back to her relationship with her father and brother. We explore her deep desire to be chosen, her fear of starting over, and her tendency to interpret unhealthy behavior as evidence of love, passion, or commitment. Melissa slowly begins to recognize how often she has confused someone's willingness to pursue her with their capacity to truly care for her.

As we trace these patterns backward, we connect them to earlier experiences that shaped her understanding of relationships. The conversation becomes less about Todd and more about the vulnerabilities Todd exploited. For perhaps the first time, Melissa considers the possibility that her longing for partnership may have caused her to overlook behaviors she would have immediately recognized as unacceptable if they had happened to someone she loved.

Sitting with Melissa, I am struck by how familiar the process feels. I recognize the painful moment when hope begins colliding with reality, when the story someone desperately wants to believe can no longer survive the evidence in front of them. The session reminds me of my own struggle to separate who I hoped Kevin was from who he consistently showed himself to be. Both of us, in different ways, are confronting the same difficult truth: sometimes the greatest danger is not failing to see the red flags, but seeing them and convincing yourself they are not important.

The chapter explores the moment when awareness begins to replace denial. And better yet, what do you do once it is revealed. Melissa is not yet ready to leave Todd, but something has shifted. The relationship she once defended without question is now being examined under the light of reality.

By the end of the session, she leaves with more questions than answers, but also with something she has not had in a long time, a willingness to trust her own instincts. I watch her walk out knowing that change rarely begins when someone decides to leave. More often, it begins the moment they stop lying to themselves about what they are enduring.

Chapter 15: The 5 O'Clock Hour

On my last night in Bali, I get in a car alone after dark, headed to visit with one of Bali's top healers, Angus on a chance meeting. Angus is usually booked out for months, but I got on a his waiting list in case there was a cancellation. And as fate would have it, I got in to see him at the final hour of my visit to Bali. A man I had only heard great things about. I had never seen a photo of him, could not identify his location if my life depended on it, and spent the entire hour long drive cycling between excitement and the firm conviction that I was about to be sex trafficked as a 50 year old woman. Dramatic, yes, but I could not stop all the nerviness I was

feeling, but still, I was all in.

I spent 2 1/2 hours doing a ritual with Angus. Turns out, his findings were the same. I needed to work on forgiveness. I left him feeling like a ton of bricks had my lifted off of my shoulders. After months of grief and silence and stripping everything away, having someone look me in the eye and promise me that I was going to be okay proved to be the only this I truly needed to hear it. While this was something I innately knew, I just needed to hear it from someone other than spirit and took great comfort in it.

Chapter 16: Fifty Days

In the aftermath of devastating losses, I slowly continued the difficult work of healing, realizing that I could no longer avoid my pain through distraction or emotional numbing. Through a daily practice of active forgiveness, prayer, and journaling, I learned that forgiveness is not about excusing others' behavior but about freeing myself from the burden of resentment. I also came to appreciate the vital role of friendships, connection, and community in sustaining me through one of the most challenging periods of my life.

Then I began EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) Therapy training to expand my skills as a therapist to help clients work through trauma. One of the requirements of the training is to practice being a client going through EMDR Therapy. Unexpectedly I find myself stepping into the role of client rather than therapist. As the client, I chose to focus on the painful rupture with her family and beginning a deeper journey of self-exploration and healing. A process that felt like it cleansed any of the remaining remnants left inside of me leaving me unexpectedly feeling truly renewed.

Chapter 17 - Sunlight

After two years of heartbreak, family estrangement, and intense self-reflection, Tiffany realizes that healing cannot remain something she understands intellectually—it must change how she shows up in her relationships. Determined to practice the forgiveness, empathy, and detachment she has spent years teaching her clients, she reaches out to her oldest sister, Debbie, and risks rejection in hopes of repairing their fractured relationship. Their eventual reunion in New Orleans leads to hours of honest conversation and allows Tiffany to see Debbie beyond the role she has always occupied in the family, recognizing the childhood wounds and sacrifices that shaped her sister's life.

The reconciliation also unexpectedly opens the door to a conversation with her brother Jimmy. When Jimmy tells Tiffany that she has always appeared to have everything together, her spontaneous response—"nobody is coming to save me"—reveals something she had never fully understood about herself: much of what others saw as ambition, independence, and strength had actually been fueled by fear and survival. She realizes she has spent most of her life hyper-performing because she never believed she had the luxury of falling apart or depending on

someone else.

That realization ultimately brings Tiffany back to Kevin with a new understanding of why their relationship had affected her so deeply. His early acts of caretaking had offered more than romance; they represented the possibility that, for once, she might not have to carry everything alone. Tiffany recognizes that despite being a therapist who understands attachment, trauma, and family systems, there were still hidden parts of herself influencing whom she loved and what she needed from relationships. The chapter becomes a turning point in her journey, revealing that healing is not about finally having yourself figured out, but remaining willing to discover—and understand—the parts of yourself you never knew were there.

Chapter 18 - Transformation

The book closes with Tiffany recognizing the humility of healing. Despite being a therapist who understands attachment, trauma, family systems, and human behavior, she is still discovering parts of herself she never knew existed. Her professional knowledge did not make her immune to heartbreak or unconscious patterns; instead, her personal journey taught her the difference between knowing the work and living the work. She ends not as a woman who has finally figured everything out, but as one who is no longer afraid of what she might discover about herself next.

Sample Chapters

Chapter 1

The Day Everything Collapsed

I remember the light that warm, indifferent, golden day. It was October in Dallas, that strange season where summer refuses to leave gracefully. The kind of sunlight that kisses your skin like a summer afternoon but dares you to believe it's fall. I was standing in my kitchen, making coffee the way I always do. A small ritual that starts my mornings. My favorite blue Howard University mug sat on the counter, the one my niece gave me after she graduated. It's a little chipped now, but it feels like home in my hands. I had just hung up the phone with my boyfriend, Kevin. He was having a rough day. The kind of day that could make even a saint lose patience. His daughter, Morgan, was getting married that very day in Durham, North Carolina.

He'd paid for the entire wedding, including the venue, the flowers, the dress, probably even the grooms' tux — only for her to drop a bombshell: she didn't want him there.

Why? Because she wasn't particularly fond of me. Apparently, my presence might cause "problems" on her special day, and she didn't want her mother, whom he had been divorced from for over 7 years, to be uncomfortable. Kevin, bless his heart, decided that if his daughter couldn't accept me, he wouldn't go at all. "Wow," I thought. "He really does care about me." What a sweet, grand gesture! And yet, I felt terrible. No one should miss their daughter's wedding. And especially not because of me. So, I decided to do something special. A little "thank you" for standing by me. I bought a Hallmark card (the tear-jerker kind), a chocolate-covered fruit basket, and drumroll... the key to my home. Now, that key was a big deal. Kevin had been asking for one since I moved in, but I'd always said no. I mean, I'd only ever given a house key to my ex-husband, and that was more of a legal requirement than a romantic gesture. But after what Kevin did, I thought it was time to show I was just as committed.

When I told him I had something for him, he said he was volunteering at a local school to keep his mind off the wedding, which, honestly, was a wholesome coping mechanism. I told him I'd leave the gift on his doorstep. He thanked me and said we would speak later. After dropping it off, I drove home, about 10 minutes from Kevin's home, parked my white Lexus in the garage, kicked off my shoes (as always), and was just about to unwind when my phone rang. Unknown number. I usually don't answer those. I like to think it's part of my self-care routine. Then came the voicemail: "Tiffany, this is Camille, Kevin's girlfriend of three years. Can you give me a call please?" Everything froze. Therapist mode: on. Autopilot: engaged. Breathe. It's fine. Just call her back. And so, I did.

Prior to receiving this phone call, Kevin and I had just gotten back from Puerto Vallarta the day before, celebrating my 49th birthday. The trip was... fine. Not amazing, not terrible. Just fine, which, honestly, is not my love language. Now, don't get me wrong, I was grateful. It was our first trip together, and he paid for everything. Within the year we'd been together, this trip marked the longest stretch of uninterrupted us-time and let me tell you, that's a milestone worth noting. I have a theory about dating and traveling. When you start dating someone new, take a trip together as soon as you possibly can. Don't wait until you're "ready." Nothing fast-tracks emotional honesty like sharing a rental car, a bathroom sink, and one very questionable hotel breakfast. You'll see who they really are and, more terrifyingly, who you are under pressure. Travel is like relationship boot camp. Forget candlelit dinners; this is where you discover how your partner handles stress, exhaustion, and the delicate art of navigating Google Maps without declaring war.

Like the time I went on a trip with an ex — who shall remain nameless, mostly because I've worked hard to erase his name from my vocabulary. We'd only been dating a short while when we decided to take a quick trip to San Diego and L.A. A little getaway, a little sunshine, a little "let's see how we travel together." Spoiler alert: it was a disaster from the moment we stepped off the plane. I should've known I was in trouble when, mid-flight, he asked if we had to buy the soda and pretzels. Now, mind you — this was before the Spirit and Frontier Airlines era when

you really do have to pay for air and elbow room. Back then, complimentary snacks were still part of civilized society.

Turns out, this man had never flown before. Never even really traveled outside his neighborhood. And that became painfully clear. He spent the trip oscillating between two emotional extremes: arguing with me over my refusal to use a paper map as if I were a 1970s detective named Columbo... and crying. Like, full-on sobbing, complete with tears and snot. To this day, I have no earthly idea. All I knew was that I was trapped on a five-day trip with a grown man who seemed to have the emotional regulation of a toddler denied his favorite juice box. His emotional intelligence was, let's just say, under construction with no permits pulled. By day five, I was done. Spiritually, emotionally, cellularly done.

Finally, we got to the end of our trip. On the car ride to LAX and the nearly four hour flight back to Dallas, I said absolutely nothing. Not a word. I just stared straight ahead like a woman escaping a crime scene she couldn't yet talk about, thinking to myself he will never see me again. When he gets home, he will think this was all a dream. Once we landed in Dallas, I spoke to him for the first and last time, to ask for directions to his place since we had parked my car at the airport and I didn't know Dallas well at the time. I drove him home, saying nothing else to him, left the car running while he grabbed his bags, and as soon as that door shut behind him, I exhaled the longest breath of my life. "Goodbye," I said, though what I really meant was good riddance. And that was that. I never saw or spoke to him again. Honestly, I think that's where the phrase "kicking someone to the curb" must've originated. Because I did it, literally and figuratively, with the precision of a woman reclaiming her peace.

And this trip with Kevin? While not as bad as Mr. No Name, it was quite revealing. The quirks, the habits, the unfiltered moods that don't show up during date nights. Somewhere between packing our bags and unpacking our patience, I realized this wasn't just a getaway. It was a preview of our future. The trip revealed a few things about Kevin I hadn't quite noticed before. For starters, he was quirky. Like, capital Q quirky and socially awkward in ways that could make a mime uncomfortable. Take, for example, our banana boat excursion. There we were, bumping along the waves with a group of strangers, when Kevin somehow managed to sit behind a woman we'd just happened to be on the banana boat with. Never met this person before in our lives. To keep his balance, he decided the best course of action was to plant his feet directly on top of hers. Not near, not beside... on top. I watched as the woman's smile slowly froze into the universal expression for "I am trapped in a social nightmare." She clearly didn't know how to address it, and I didn't know how to save her without creating an even bigger scene. So, I did what any self-respecting woman trying not to implode from secondhand embarrassment would do. I turned my head and pretended to admire the horizon. Inside, though, my mind was screaming, This cannot be my life.

Also, the trip wasn't exactly the kind of travel that makes your soul exhale. I'm a boutique hotel, ocean-view, candlelit-dinner, wine list longer than the menu kind of woman. Kevin, bless his heart, was more of a "this package came with two free nights and a continental breakfast" type of traveler. Apparently, he'd gotten some discount vacation deal that dictated where we stayed. Not exactly the luxury I envisioned for my birthday, but I kept reminding myself, be grateful,

Tiffany. Don't be that person. The food at the hotel was, to put it kindly, was tragic. Between my dietary restrictions and their creative interpretation of "edible," there was almost nothing I could eat. Kevin, on the other hand, was thriving. This man, a self-proclaimed connoisseur of chitterlings (yes, chitterlings... I gag just saying it) happily devoured everything in sight.

I couldn't help but think, Can I really be with someone who treats his body like a human trash can? But, of course, I smiled and told myself to let it go. That's what we do, isn't it? Especially women. We convince ourselves the red flags are just festive decorations. We downplay our discomfort, bend until we almost break, and call it "being understanding." So, onward I went, fork in hand, appetite gone, dignity intact... barely. I wasn't about to waste a perfectly good vacation over a few questionable menu choices, was I?

Things were moving fast. We were already talking about me moving in with him in a few months. After twenty-three years of being divorced, that was no small thing. When he asked me to be exclusive, I was ecstatic. Finally, a man who sees me, my worth, my value. A man who knows what he wants. I thought, Okay God, you really did it this time. You finally answered my prayers. He was everything I thought I wanted — tall (6'3" to my 5'6", which meant I could wear my highest heels and still look up at him), confident, professional, grounded. Slim build with a touch of "dad bod". Not quite gym-sculpted, but solid in the way that says "I can fix a leaky faucet, which I was absolutely head over heels about because I love a good fix it man, and grill a good steak, or fish for me because I don't eat beef or pork."

He owned his own home, complete with a backyard pool that looked like an oasis. Two cars, a truck, and a motorbike. All older models, but in great shape. That told me he was smart with money, which is important to me. I mean, someone in the relationship had to spend responsibly, and I preferred it be him. He was God-fearing, you know, the kind that went to church every Sunday and bible study on Wednesday. He was family-oriented, which is extremely important to me. Especially during this time in particular because I was in the mist of navigating my own family relationships what were extremely challenging for me at the time. He was also kind and generous. Never let me touch a door and never hesitated to do anything I asked. I remember thinking, Wow. Could this really be it? Did God finally send me my person? When he asked me to move in, I hesitated. I hadn't shared a home with a man since my divorce. My independence had become my armor and, if I'm honest, my comfort zone. But my self-talk that day sounded like a chorus of motivational clichés: "Girl, it's been twenty-three years. It's time." "You've got to let someone love you."

"Put your big girl panties on and take the leap." So, I did what any hopeful, mildly terrified woman does when life hands her a new chapter. I said yes. We met in September, and the plan was to move in together by January 1st. It felt symbolic, like a fresh start in the new year. At the time, everything felt like it was falling into place.

I gave my landlord my thirty-day notice on December 1st. I remember hitting "send" on that email with equal parts excitement and anxiety, the kind of anxiety that tastes like adrenaline and faith mixed together. It was official: I was moving in with Kevin. I remember telling him, "you're stuck with me now!" But about a week before Christmas, I noticed something. A subtle

shift in the air between us. Kevin was quieter, slower to respond to my questions about the move. Normally, he'd reply to my texts within minutes. "Yes, babe," "I got it covered," or my favorite, "Don't you worry about a thing." But as we got closer to the move-in date, my messages lingered in that gray, unread zone. The digital equivalent of being ghosted, but politely. I told myself not to overthink it. As a therapist, I always tell my clients, "Don't let anxiety write the story before the facts arrive." So I took my own advice. Or at least I tried to. Still, that little knot in my stomach wouldn't untie itself. See, part of the tension had always been his daughter, Jordan. The thirty-one year old who still lived at home with him. If I'm being honest, she and I didn't exactly braid each other's hair and swap recipes, to put it lightly.

Most of my discomfort stemmed from what Kevin had shared about things she supposedly said about me. Things like I was trying to "replace her," and that I was "taking her daddy away." When we first discussed me moving in, I asked the logical question: "Will Jordan still be living there?" He said yes, but added, "It's temporary. She's just finding her way." Finding her way, sure — except she couldn't keep a job because apparently working took away from her "creativity", smoked marijuana all day long (and when Kevin asked what that smell was, she told him she was burning sage), and had her "friends", male ones, spending the night. I remember thinking, if this is what life in that house looks like, I might need to sage myself before I even move in.

Jordan and I had spent time together only once, at her suggestion. A "let's break the ice" dinner. When in fact, she had other plans. She insisted on bringing a male friend and showed up wearing those old-school flip-up shades Dwayne Wayne used to wear on *A Different World*. The entire night, she sat across from me with the shaded part of her glasses flipped up, simply staring at me whenever she did look in my direction, like a silent judge on a reality show, opening her mouth to speak only to her dad and her friend. I half-expected a scorecard to appear at the end of dinner. That night told me everything I needed to know. This was not intended to be a break the ice dinner, but more of a "who the heck are you and why are you with me daddy" dinner.

So now, as I stood in a house filled with half-packed boxes, it was Christmas Eve, and Kevin still hadn't confirmed the movers or my move-in date. Not a single plan for the holidays either. Just silence and vagueness. When I asked him about plans for Christmas, he said, "Morgan, his other daughter) flew in from North Carolina. The girls wanted to have a sit-down with me." A sit-down? About what? He sighed. "They just want to understand why I'm moving so quickly with you." I blinked, waiting for the rest. He hesitated, then added, "They think maybe you've... influenced me." "Influenced you?" I asked, half laughing, half trying not to lose my mind. "Yeah, like maybe you've put some kind of spell on me," he said. "You know... you being from New Orleans and all." I stared at him, speechless. "A spell?" He nodded, completely serious. Really, I thought to myself. Did any of them stop to think that if I really had those powers that I would have just put a spell on her to get her out of that house?

So there I was, a licensed therapist, standing in my kitchen on Christmas Eve, trying to process the fact that my boyfriend's grown daughters were convinced I was a voodoo priestess using black magic to make their daddy love me. Happy holidays to me! The therapist in me wanted to

unpack the family dynamics. Let's talk about the enmeshment, boundaries, or lack thereof, emotional dependency and enablement happening here. But the woman in me? She was confused and filled with anxiety about what she would do if this didn't work out? Finally, I suggested to Kevin that maybe we should put the move on hold until he figured things out with his daughter. He immediately agreed. Honestly, I expected him to say, "Absolutely not! You're moving here, end of discussion." But he didn't. He just agreed. I sat there, staring at the phone in disbelief. What? Are you serious right now? Panic hit like a freight train. I texted my landlord to see if I could extend my move-out date, and as luck would have it, she said the lease could not be extended. And suddenly, I couldn't breathe. Three days from being homeless. Was this man really going to let that happen? Yes. Yes, he was.

I ended up moving into a 700-square-foot one-bedroom apartment with my daughter and her two dogs — a pit bull and a Yorkie. (An unlikely duo, by the way.) I remember sitting on the floor surrounded by boxes, thinking, There's no way this is my life. Here I was a successful, professional woman with money in the bank, a credit score north of 800, and the ability to do anything I set my mind to and yet I'd landed myself in this mess because of a man. I was equal parts furious and embarrassed. And Kevin? Completely unbothered. Like this was some sort of game. I couldn't believe it. What kind of person could sit back and let this happen? I told myself I was done. That this was the final straw. But then came the begging. The pleading. He swore it was only temporary. "Just give me 90 days," he said. And against my better judgment, I agreed. We kept dating, though something in me had shifted. I couldn't unsee who he really was.

Then, sixty days into his 90-day plan, he hit me with another bombshell: Jordan was pregnant. Not by her boyfriend. Oh no. But by her male friend, who happened to already have a girlfriend. And not he or Jordan wanted the baby. You have got to be kidding me. To make things worse, Kevin told Jordan she would not terminate the pregnancy and that we, as in me and him, would raise the baby. Like hell we would! That was the moment I mentally packed up and walked out. Two weeks later, I physically did and moved into my own place.

Now, back to my birthday trip, which was in September. Yes, I still stayed with Kevin after all of that because of his extremely convincing promises and literal begging. As one can imagine, our relationship was hanging by a very thin emotional thread by this point. After booking our hotel, I kept getting these persistent calls and emails from the discount vacation company reminding us to "complete our booking." Kevin, in his usual fashion, ignored them. I finally called myself, thinking maybe they needed some missing information. When I gave the agent my name, she read back a number that wasn't mine. I corrected her. Then she said, "Okay, Ms. Williams, thank you!" Ms. Who? "My name is Tiffany Stewart," I corrected. She apologized, but something felt off. Later, after the trip, I found out why.

When I spoke to Camille, yes, that Camille, she told me the vacation package was one Kevin had purchased for them. The purchase agreement was under both his and her name. The terms stated that only the names listed could utilize the package, or else there'd be a penalty fee. So when the company realized I wasn't Ms. Williams, they charged her credit card that they had on file. Naturally, Camille called to dispute the charge and that's when she got my information, which

led her to call me. We talked for hours. She was surprisingly calm considering the situation. That's when I learned that Kevin wasn't "volunteering" that day after all. He was in North Carolina at his daughter's wedding, without either of us. I was speechless. Completely floored. I felt like I was being punked. The red flags I'd ignored could've filled both a circus and a parade. I mean a full on carnival if I'm being honest. The lies were too many to count. Honestly, if I hadn't seen his driver's license myself, I might not have believed "Kevin" was even his real name. Now, in my profession, I am trained to see people. To read patterns, spot red flags, analyze behavior. But this? This was a masterclass in manipulation. A real-life narcissist, textbook edition. I have studied people like him for years, but being up close and personal with one was an entirely different kind of terrifying.

In the weeks that followed, I oscillated between disbelief and self-reflection. Part of me wanted to scream, throw every red flag he'd waved back in his face, and demand an explanation that would never come. The other part, the therapist part, needed to understand why. How did I, a woman trained to help others recognize toxic patterns, get caught in one myself? The answer, I realized, was painfully simple: even therapists are human. We can analyze, diagnose, and dissect behavior all day, but when love, or the illusion of it enters the picture, logic tends to leave the chat.

Kevin was charming in that deceptive, rehearsed way only a narcissist can master. According to the DSM 5, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Narcissistic Personality Disorder is defined by a pattern of grandiosity, a constant need for admiration, and a profound lack of empathy, all wrapped in dramatic, emotional, and erratic behaviors. People with NPD inflate their importance, exaggerate accomplishments, and expect to be admired without earning it. They are preoccupied with fantasies of success, power, beauty, or ideal love, and believe they are special and should only associate with other special or high-status people. They demand excessive admiration, feel entitled to preferential treatment, exploit others for personal gain, lack empathy, envy others, and often carry themselves with an arrogant and superior attitude.

When I stepped back and assessed the entire relationship, I realized Kevin was not simply like a narcissist, he was the perfect example of one. Honestly, I am convinced the DSM committee must have met him when they wrote the criteria. He embodied every trait with precision: the grandiosity, the entitlement, the hunger for admiration, the manipulation, the chilling lack of empathy, all hidden behind his carefully constructed nice guy persona. He mirrored everything I wanted by asking the deep and intentional questions that make you believe someone is truly trying to know your soul. Then he shaped himself into the exact man he knew I would fall for. He said all the right things at the right moment, especially when he sensed I was upset. It gave me the illusion of being seen and valued. But in truth, I was simply another target. I was a woman who came with success, stability, and a certain presence that enhanced the image he wanted the world to see in him. With narcissists, it is never about the partner, it is always about how the partner enhances their image. And once you are in, the breaking down begins, quietly, slowly, bit by bit, until your worth, intuition, and identity begin to feel uncertain. Narcissists cannot tolerate their partner having confidence, power, or emotional clarity. They must maintain

control in every dynamic.

What I know now is that Kevin did not choose me by accident. There was nothing random about it. His interest was deliberate, strategic, almost predatory in its precision. Men like him do not wander into your life, they select you. And he selected me for one reason: I am an empath. Narcissists are drawn to empathetic partners because empathy is a resource they cannot produce themselves. Empaths naturally offer compassion, patience, forgiveness, and emotional warmth, qualities that narcissists depend on to maintain their fragile sense of self. An empathetic person gives the benefit of the doubt, assumes good intentions, and tries to understand behavior rather than judge it, which makes them more tolerant of manipulation, excuses, and inconsistent behavior. Narcissists also target empaths because empathetic individuals tend to see potential rather than patterns, often confusing who someone could become with who they actually show themselves to be. This optimism makes empaths more likely to stay, even when the relationship becomes painful.

The part that shocked me the most about getting caught up with a person like Kevin, the part that completely threw me off balance, was that even though I am an empath, I am also deeply intolerant. It sounds contradictory, almost impossible, like two truths that should cancel each other out. But both exist in me, fully and unapologetically. I feel everything, I sense everything, I absorb the emotional climate in any room I walk into. I can read a person's pain before they ever speak it. That is the empath in me. But at the same time, I have very little tolerance for foolishness, chaos, disrespect, or anything that threatens my peace. I do not coddle grown adults who refuse to act like adults. I do not babysit emotions that come wrapped in manipulation. And I do not sit quietly while someone tries to feed me lies with a straight face. That is the intolerant part of me.

So imagine the emotional confusion when someone like Kevin enters your life. As an empath, every red flag becomes something to examine, to understand, to heal. But as someone who is naturally intolerant, every red flag also sets off an internal alarm that says, "Run now, before this becomes a disaster." I was living in that split. One part of me felt drawn to his brokenness, and the other part was ready to pack my things and never look back. That internal tug-of-war is what narcissists thrive on. They sense the empath's instinct to care just long enough for them to sink their hooks in. Kevin knew exactly what he was doing. And only later did I understand that the real battle was not between me and him, but between the two sides of myself I had never seen in conflict before.

Additionally, empaths often take responsibility for conflict, looking inward and asking what they can fix, which allows the narcissist to avoid accountability entirely. Because empaths love deeply and loyally, narcissists use that loyalty as leverage, counting on the empath's desire to heal, help, or understand them. Empaths also tend to see the wounded child or past trauma inside the narcissist and believe their love can inspire change. To a narcissist, this emotional generosity becomes a supply source, a steady stream of admiration, attention, and validation they cannot generate alone. The painful irony is that narcissists do not choose empathetic partners because they are weak. They choose them because they are strong, loving, intuitive, nurturing, and

spiritually abundant. Kevin was drawn to me for this very reason. My compassion, emotional depth, and desire to build a healthy partnership were qualities he knew he could absorb, manipulate, and feed from. He targeted my strengths, not my flaws, because narcissists seek out the brightest lights in the room, convinced they can dim them for their own benefit.

And Camille? I eventually learned I was the fifth woman she discovered him with during their three years together. Fifth. And still, just like her, I stayed longer than I should have. Not because I was blind to the truth, but because people like us want to believe we are the exception. That our patience, our loyalty, our goodness can somehow transform someone else's dysfunction. The truth is that it never works. And that belief, the belief that things might be different this time, is part of the narcissist's script for pulling you back in again and again.

It took losing my personal space, my peace, and nearly my sanity to realize that I was trying to rescue someone who wasn't drowning — he was swimming just fine in his own chaos. He just wanted company. But I'm not a lifeguard. I'm a woman with boundaries, self-worth, a mortgage-worthy credit score, and, apparently, a very expensive lesson in emotional fortitude. Looking back, I don't regret it. Not one bit. That relationship taught me a few things no degree ever could. First, that empathy without discernment isn't kindness; it's self-destruction dressed as compassion. Second, when someone enters your life with a speedy agenda, that's not your cue to match their pace. It's your signal to slow down. Take your time, watch, and listen. Give people a chance to show up as their true selves. Let their patterns reveal themselves. No one can keep up a performance forever and the inconsistencies always surface, often sooner than we expect.

Chapter 2

Melissa

Melissa was a new client who came to see me with her boyfriend, Todd. Their goal sounded simple: to strengthen their relationship in preparation for marriage. She was a striking woman, beautiful in every sense of the word. Her cheekbones seemed to lift her face toward the light, and her smile could disarm a room before she even spoke. She had that quiet magnetism that drew people in without her having to try.

Before I met them together, I saw Melissa individually. She spoke about her fairly new relationship with Todd, and from her description, he sounded like something out of a movie, a dream man come to life. She had known him for years but never imagined he would be interested in her. Todd stood six foot three, was very intellectual, successful in his own right as an IT professional, and owned multiple commercial real estate properties. On paper, he was a prize.

At the time Todd reentered her life, Melissa was thriving professionally. She owned a successful chain of restaurants and had become something of a local celebrity, well known, respected, and admired in her community. She was the woman everyone called when they needed a partnership, a sponsor, a keynote. But personally, she had been through hell.

Melissa talked openly about how she did not feel worthy of a man like Todd. Her history explained why. She had become a teenage mother after her very first sexual encounter with someone she barely knew, a man who walked out on her and their baby shortly after she gave birth. At the time, she was in college, having graduated high school early because of her advanced academic level. Shortly after the pregnancy, she dropped out of college; caring for her daughter suddenly became the priority.

Before leaving school, she met the man who would soon become her husband. He was ten years older, and she quickly became enamored with him. Part of that pull, she admitted, was because he did not judge her for being a mother at just seventeen. He accepted her in a way she did not yet know how to accept herself. They married quickly, despite her mother's disapproval, and she instantly became a mother of four; he already had three children. She loved children and took to them easily.

By the time she was twenty five, she had given birth to three more children with him. A family of nine. A home full of responsibilities and absolutely no time to figure out who she was as a person.

"I never had a chance to even learn myself," she said. "I became a wife and mother so early. And honestly, who else would want me and all my children?" She never differentiated between stepchildren and biological children; they were all hers. "I come with a lot of baggage. My body is no longer tight, and I do not look like an Instagram model."

"So you are a real woman," I replied, smiling, "one who does not walk around with an Instagram filter built into her DNA. That is what you are telling me."

She laughed, shaking her head. "Yes. Exactly. And I just feel like Todd's other wives were so much more beautiful than I am. I cannot believe he wants me."

When she finally gathered the courage to leave her marriage, she walked away with nothing more than her life and her children. For a while, that felt like just enough. She had no money, no home, and whatever remained of her self esteem had been scraped down to dust. After the divorce, she devoted every ounce of her energy to raising her children and building her business. Love felt like a luxury she could no longer afford. She told me she quietly accepted the belief that she was "damaged goods," and that romantic love simply was not in the cards for her anymore. It was easier, she said, to bury herself in work than to risk being broken again.

I asked, "Can you remember the first time you felt unworthy of love?"

These beliefs do not appear out of nowhere. They grow from the emotional soil of childhood, from caregivers, environment, and early attachment. It is in those formative years that we develop the internal messages we carry for decades, sometimes for life.

Melissa paused, thinking. She explained that her parents divorced early in her childhood. Her father, John, remarried quickly to a woman named Mrs. Evelyn. Mrs. Evelyn was like a second

mother to her: warm, loving, and attentive. When Melissa and her older brother visited their father, Mrs. Evelyn took wonderful care of them. Melissa never had to question her love and adored her deeply. Her father, on the other hand, was mostly distant. Present in body, absent in connection.

“Tell me about the relationships in the home you shared with your mother and brother,” I asked. Melissa’s face softened. “My mother is everything to me,” she said, her voice full and certain. “She taught me almost everything I know. She never judged me. I am the woman I am today because of her.”

But as soon as she shifted to talking about her brother, the energy changed. “We never really got along,” she admitted. “He teased me relentlessly. There was always something he had to say about me.”

She searched for a memory. “I do not remember much from my childhood in vivid detail, but there is one moment I will never forget. I was in sixth grade. Some kids at school were teasing me about my hair and my clothes. I remember feeling so embarrassed, so exposed. I ran home as fast as I could. I expected my brother to defend me, or at least tell them to stop. That is what big brothers are supposed to do, right?” She shook her head. “But he did not. He joined in and laughed with them. That moment has stayed with me. We get along better now as adults, but it is still a relationship I maneuver with caution.”

Melissa’s earliest relationships with the male figures in her life were defined by unsafety and emotional distance. The very people who should have offered protection and stability instead taught her to expect detachment, criticism, and inconsistency from the men closest to her. That is where her blueprint was written. That is where her self-worth took its earliest shape. There she learned, silently and subconsciously, to expect distance from men and warmth from women. Because those early experiences were never healed, they followed her into her first marriage, into her insecurities, and now into her fear that she was not enough for Todd.

Attachment styles start forming this early in life, in the quiet, everyday moments of childhood that seem ordinary at the time but shape how we connect, love, and trust for the rest of our lives. In psychology, an attachment style refers to the way we emotionally bond with others, especially in close relationships. It is how we seek comfort, handle conflict, and respond to intimacy or distance. Attachment styles can follow you well into adulthood.

The concept comes from attachment theory, first developed by John Bowlby and later expanded by Mary Ainsworth, who identified four main types: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. A securely attached child generally feels safe in the world. They trust that love will return when it leaves, that comfort will follow distress, and that they can both depend on others and be independent. Secure attachment usually develops when a caregiver is consistently responsive, when a child’s emotional needs are met with warmth, reliability, and care.

Anxious attachment forms when caregivers are inconsistent, sometimes nurturing and sometimes distant. Because comfort is unpredictable, the child becomes hyper aware of connection and rejection. As adults, individuals with this style often crave closeness yet worry about being

abandoned, overanalyze relationships, and depend heavily on reassurance to feel secure.

Avoidant attachment emerges when caregivers are emotionally distant or discourage emotional expression. To protect themselves, children in this environment learn to minimize their needs and rely primarily on themselves. Adults with avoidant patterns often value independence to the extent that vulnerability feels uncomfortable. They may suppress emotions, keep partners at a distance, and struggle with deep intimacy or depending on others.

Disorganized attachment occurs when caregivers are a source of both comfort and fear, which is often tied to trauma, chaos, or unpredictable behavior. Without a consistent way to get needs met, the child develops conflicting strategies that persist into adulthood. People with this style may desire closeness but simultaneously pull away, experience intense emotional reactions, and struggle with self regulation.

Over the many years she had known him, she had watched Todd move through different seasons of life, including two marriages that both ended in divorce. From her vantage point, Todd seemed flawless. He appeared to be a devoted father to his daughter, a loyal brother, deeply supportive of his parents both financially and emotionally, and the kind of friend who showed up before you even knew you needed him. To Melissa, he was the kind of man women fought over, the type whose attention could make another woman scratch someone's eyes out just for a chance to stand in his shadow. To an untrained eye, he looked like a catch: polished, attentive, reliable. The perfect on paper man people pray for.

But what Melissa described was not perfection. It was performance. From where I sat, the signs were not subtle. They were loud, bright, and flashing. It was like being at a Mardi Gras parade in New Orleans waiting for the first marching band and float to come around the corner. Long before you see them, you hear the drums. You see the lights bouncing off buildings from a mile away. You feel the rhythm in your chest before it arrives. That is what it is like for a therapist with a trained eye. We can see it coming. The charm. The control. The patterns. The storm disguised as sunshine. Melissa thought she had met a perfect man. All I could hear were the drums.

Todd stepped fully into her life at the exact moment her heart was most fragile. She had spent years convincing herself that love was something she no longer needed, that it was a luxury reserved for people who had not been bruised, betrayed, or broken. She was not looking for romance; she was looking for stability, predictability, and safety. But life has a curious way of presenting us with the very thing we have sworn off, wrapped in charm, dressed in confidence, and delivered right to the doorstep of our wounds.

One afternoon, Todd walked into one of her restaurants on a day Melissa was not there and asked an employee if she was seeing anyone. To his surprise, he was told she was very single. When he learned this, he did not waste time asking her out. His pursuit was cinematic, straight out of a Tyler Perry film. He wined and dined her at the finest restaurants in town, some she had never heard of despite her local fame. He sent enormous bouquets of flowers to her business, complete with handwritten notes that could melt even the most guarded heart.

One day he told her he had a surprise and invited her to his home. When she arrived, he led her to a spare bedroom. Hanging neatly on a rack was an entire wardrobe of designer dresses, shoes, and handbags, all new. These were things she would never have purchased for herself because she was far too careful with money. After the divorce, which left her with almost nothing, she had sworn she would never be in that position again. Todd told her that since she was becoming such a visible figure in the community and taking on more speaking engagements, she needed to look the part, especially if she was going to be on his arm. This, he said, was his way of supporting her success. He even joined her on a health journey. Together they set fitness goals and committed to becoming their best selves, and to help her stay motivated, he gifted her a brand new Apple Watch.

On the surface, everything looked perfect. It was romantic, supportive, and almost aspirational. Forget Barack and Michelle Obama. This was the real definition of couple goals, at least from the outside. Melissa glowed as she spoke. Her already broad smile grew wider and her eyes shone with hope. But underneath her words, there was a faint tremor, a softness, a hesitation so slight most people would have missed it.

I am trained to listen to the undertones, not just the story being told. As she described Todd's gestures, her tone did not fully match the fairytale she painted. The admiration was there, yes, but woven into it was something quieter, unsettled. That is when my therapist light flicked on. Something was not aligning. The story sounded rehearsed, almost like she was reading from a script someone else had written for her. For a moment, I wondered if she had embellished the fairytale in her mind, creating a narrative of perfect love from a place of longing and unhealed wounds. But she was not exaggerating. Every detail she described was real.

Melissa was also deeply religious, with God guiding every step she took. In her eyes, Todd was not just a good man; he was God sent. A blessing. A divine answer to years of heartbreak and uncertainty. She spoke about him with conviction, gratitude, and a glow that radiated straight from her spirit. They read the Bible together, prayed together, quoted their favorite scriptures to one another, and started attending church side by side. Todd was measuring up in every sense of the word.

She went on and on about his qualities: his kindness, attentiveness, support, affection. She described him with a kind of admiration that felt sincere yet slightly rehearsed, like someone reciting scripture they had memorized but not fully digested. At one point she even reminisced about the time they cried together after making love for the first time, the first time she had ever felt such a deep connection with someone. She beamed every time she said his name.

On the surface, Todd looked like the perfectly built dream partner, the kind of man you might see in a church testimony video under the caption, "Look what the Lord has done." I began to wonder if perhaps he was not the one who needed counseling at all. Maybe the real work needed to happen with Melissa. Because beneath her excitement, I could hear the pain. Beneath the joy, I could feel the wound. And beneath this God sent love story was a woman who did not yet believe she deserved anything better than the bare minimum wrapped in grand gestures. It was

clear she was carrying deep seated insecurities and scars from childhood, from marriage, from early motherhood that had never been tended to. Wounds that convinced her she had to earn love, perform for it, be grateful for it, even when it came with conditions and even when it required her to deny parts of her own values and beliefs.

When clients begin counseling, one of the first things I ask is for them to tell me, in their own words, what brings them in and what they would like us to focus on. It sounds simple, but it is a foundational step in creating a treatment plan that outlines their goals. Every seasoned therapist knows, however, that the issue presented at intake is rarely the real issue. There is a very high chance it is not. People do not walk into therapy ready to hand over their deepest wound on day one. They start with the cover story and the headlines.

As Melissa sat in front of me, smiling so brightly her eyes practically glistened, I began quietly composing the framework of her treatment plan in my head: help her strengthen her self esteem, rebuild her internal value, understand that she is fully deserving of a love that does not require losing herself, and learn that being chosen is not the same as being cherished. Treatment plan: done. At least that is what I would have thought if I were a novice. But I am not.

I knew there was much more to Melissa's story than what she was sharing. The glow in her eyes did not match the uncertainty in her voice. The fairytale she described did not match the uneasiness beneath it. And the God sent blessing she believed she had found did not match the patterns I could hear between her sentences and see in her closed off body language. Therapists do not just listen to what is said. We listen to what is missing. Melissa's story had too many missing pieces not to notice.

A few weeks into our individual work, she told me a story that made my internal antenna rise like a radio tower catching a distant signal. It was subtle, the kind of moment most women brush off, the kind that gets buried under bouquets, dinners, and the promise of finally being chosen. Red flags do not always arrive in bright red. Sometimes they show up in soft colors. Sometimes they look like romance. Sometimes they look like concern.

One evening Todd took her to a beautiful restaurant overlooking the water, the kind with white tablecloths, candles on every table, and menus without prices. You know what that usually means. If you have to ask, you probably cannot afford the lobster. The stories of his gestures kept getting grander. They were so spectacular that even I, a licensed therapist bound by ethics and professional dignity, had a brief moment where I thought, Now wait a minute, would it really be so wrong to slide Melissa aside and take her place? That is how convincing this fairytale sounded. For a fleeting second, I was ready to risk my credentials and every hour of graduate school. But I digress.

They had a lovely evening. Or at least, she thought they did. On the drive home, he made a comment so casual she did not know what to do with it. "You know," he said, "you really should dress more like the woman I know you can be." He was not harsh. He was not loud. Not even overtly critical. He just placed the comment there and left it, like a seed.

Melissa laughed it off at first, one of those polite giggles women master when something feels off but we are still trying to convince ourselves it is not. She told him she thought she looked nice that night.

He nodded and smiled. “You do. But we can get you looking even better. I have some ideas.” Some ideas. That phrase echoed in my mind long after she finished talking. Romantic gestures are one thing. Redesigning someone is another.

“Did that comment bother you?” I asked.

She hesitated, then shrugged. “A little. But honestly, I think he just wants the best for me. He says I am beautiful all the time and how much he loves everything about me. Maybe he just knows what looks good on me.”

It was a classic response from someone who has been groomed by life, by trauma, by old wounds to take criticism as guidance and control as care.

Then she continued. “He said if I am going to be with a man like him, I should look a certain way. Present myself like the woman he knows I can become.”

A man like him.

That phrasing alone sent every clinical bell ringing in my mind. Hierarchy. Superiority. Conditional acceptance dressed up as inspiration.

“Melissa,” I asked gently, “how did that make you feel?”

This time she did not hesitate. “Like I was not enough.”

There it was. The truth. The crack. The beginning of the unraveling.

She quickly followed with, “But maybe he is right. Maybe I could be doing more.”

That was not truth speaking. That was shame. Old wounds whispering. Deep patterns repeating themselves. At the time, Melissa did not see it as a warning. She saw it as a challenge, as guidance, and above all, as love.

It is interesting to me that as a trained therapist, I can see these patterns coming from a mile away when I am sitting across from a client. I can spot a red flag before they finish their sentence. I can get right to the sore spot, peel back the emotional layers, and dig down to the preverbal infection that has taken root in someone’s mind. I can help them name it, understand it, and move past it.

But in my own personal life, when I found myself in a position parallel to Melissa, I was

standing in the exact place she stood. It is a funny thing how clear the path looks when it belongs to someone else, yet when it is your own heart on the line, everything becomes foggy and twisted, as if your rational mind suddenly develops selective blindness.

I like to believe this happens because I make a real effort to hang my therapist hat at the door when I leave my office. When I step out of the therapy space, I step out as Tiffany, not as the clinician trained to dissect behavior and diagnose dysfunction. I do not want to be in therapist mode all day. I have no desire to become my partner's therapist. That is not the kind of relationship I want. So when I ask myself how I could have missed signs that were plain as day in my relationship with Kevin, this is the explanation that makes the most sense to me. I was not looking at him the way a therapist looks at a client. I was looking at him the way a woman looks at a man she hopes she can build a life with. And that view comes with blind spots.

Sitting across from Melissa, quietly recognizing the mirror she held up to my own life, I understood something essential about healing. We do not struggle because we are untrained or unwise. We struggle because we are human. Even the therapist, the helper, the one with the tools and the language and the insight, becomes vulnerable when love is involved. That realization opened a new door for me, not only as a clinician but as a woman trying to make sense of her own heart. It marked the beginning of a deeper understanding that would shape the way I viewed myself, my relationships, and the work I did with Melissa from that day forward.

Chapter 3

Abandonment

Needless to say, I was not in the best emotional space after my breakup with Kevin. It was one of the most devastating endings I had ever experienced, second only to my divorce twenty-three years earlier. It was not devastating because I was so in love with him. In fact, if I am being completely honest, I do not think I was ever in love with Kevin at all. Strongly in like, yes, but love is not something I can claim with conviction. What broke me was not losing him. It was losing the idea of what I thought my life could finally become. Since my divorce, I had been doing life largely on my own. That reality did not start after the marriage ended. It existed long before the paperwork was signed. In many ways, it was a major contributor to the downfall of the marriage itself. Even while I was married, I felt as though everything rested squarely on my shoulders. I was carrying the weight, managing the details, and keeping the wheels turning, while my husband took ownership of very little beyond talking a really good game. He had plenty of words, big promises, and confident explanations. What he lacked was follow through. And eventually, no amount of good conversation can compensate for the exhaustion that comes from doing it all alone.

I had been so ready for partnership, for the feeling of being with a real man's man, someone who could fix things around the house, who took pride in providing for his family, and who showed up when life got messy. That family piece was everything to me. More than ever, I needed that sense of belonging, of being anchored, because at the time I was dealing with painful family

dynamics that had shaken me to my core. For the first time in my life, I felt truly alone. Not lonely in the casual, temporary sense, but alone in the kind of way that rearranges your internal landscape. The relationships I had always believed were immovable, my siblings, the people I assumed would be standing beside me no matter what life threw our way, were suddenly gone. Or perhaps more accurately, they were still there, just no longer with me.

I was no longer on speaking terms with four of my five siblings. It felt as though I had woken up one morning to discover an invisible line drawn in the sand. They were on one side. I was on the other. No explanation. No conversation. No warning. It was as if a family meeting had been called, decisions had been made, and I had somehow missed the invitation. By default, judgment had been passed, and I was quietly but firmly removed from the group.

I can see now what I could not see then. Families, especially ones shaped by trauma, scarcity, and survival, often maintain balance by assigning roles. When one person shifts, grows, or steps outside of the unspoken contract, the system reacts. I had become the identified “other.” The one whose independence disrupted the familiar rhythm. The one who no longer fit neatly into the roles everyone else had grown comfortable performing. And systems do not like disruption. They prefer predictability, even when it hurts.

I was no longer invited to family gatherings. When I did show up, the air felt heavy, conversations clipped, eye contact scarce. I was physically present but emotionally exiled. An outsider in my own family. That kind of rejection does not bruise you. It collapses you. It felt like a whale had taken up residence on my chest, pressing down day after day. Most days, all I could do was cry. Not because I wanted to, but because my body could not hold the grief quietly anymore. What made it even more disorienting was that I had no idea how much resentment had been building beneath the surface. I had been living my life, surviving, raising my child, working relentlessly, believing that distance was circumstantial, not emotional. I did not realize that my autonomy, my boundaries, and my refusal to play certain roles had been quietly cataloged as offenses.

The rupture became undeniable when my family was suddenly thrust into the spotlight after my nephew went to the NFL. In that moment, everything shifted. Visibility changes dynamics. Power rearranges alliances. And suddenly, it felt as though my family used that moment to make their position clear. I was no longer just distant. I was excluded. Deliberately. What hurt the most was not just the loss of connection, but the shock of it. I had no idea I had caused such contention. No idea that my growth, my independence, my refusal to carry what was never mine to hold had been interpreted as betrayal. But in family systems, the person who changes is often seen as the problem, not because they are wrong, but because their change exposes what the system has worked very hard not to confront. At the time, it felt like abandonment. Looking back now, I can see it more clearly. I was no longer willing to contort myself to keep the system comfortable. And the system responded exactly as systems do when someone stops playing their assigned role.

I am the youngest of six children, raised by my mother, Betty, in New Orleans, Louisiana. By the time she had me, she was desperately trying to escape her second marriage to my father, Ralph Stewart. Before I came along, there were my older siblings: Debbie, the oldest, and my brothers, Sydney and Jimmy, though no one ever called them that. To everyone, they were Manny (Sydney's nickname) and Jimmy, always said together as if they were one word, one heartbeat. Those three were from my mother's first marriage to Sydney Chase. When that ended, she remarried, this time to my father. That marriage produced my sister Toni, my father's firstborn and his mother's golden child, a title she won by default because my father was an only child. Four years later came my sister Normie, and then, surprise, I arrived just eleven months after her. Because Normie and I were so close in age, we were practically twins, inseparable and raised that way. My parents' marriage though, was volatile and violent. It left my mother scarred both physically and emotionally. By the time I was two or three, she had had enough. She divorced my father and raised us on her own. My mother did not remarry again until I was twenty years old. She struggled, but somehow, she always made it work. We did not have much, but we never went without. Every house we lived in, and there were many, was spotless, cozy, and felt like home. Our beds were soft, our meals were hot, and our needs were met. We did not have many extras, but my childhood was full and happy.

Like the time I made the homecoming court in tenth grade, my first real taste of being seen. The court required us to wear navy blue two piece skirt suits. My mother went out, bought that suit, tucked the tag neatly inside the jacket, and quietly returned it the day after homecoming. That was Betty Jo, as we lovingly refer to her. Resourceful, proud, and unstoppable. She never complained and always found a way. One of her favorite saying was we will find a way, by hook or crook. I still have no idea exactly what that means, but we still say it to this day.

Growing up with my siblings was a gift. Although I always had friends, I was happiest at home with them. We had fun together and spent nearly all our time together, especially when we were younger. Looking back now, both as an adult, I realize that once my mother divorced my father, she was finally able to experience life. She had become a mother to Debbie at the age of fifteen, a wife shortly after, and had never really known who she was. She went straight from being a child in her mother's home, helping raise her younger brothers while my grandmother was out living her own life, into two marriages that only deepened her sense of confinement. For the first time, in her early thirties, she was free. My mother always worked, sometimes two jobs. And when she was not working, she was out living. That was our norm. She was not a strict parent, which I loved. I remember hearing friends at school complain about their parents' rules and thinking, thank God my mom is not like that.

I never felt close to my father. Even though my sisters and I saw him from time to time, he was emotionally unavailable in every sense of the word. After my parents divorced, he moved in with his mother, and any visits we had were spent at my grandmothers home. She was the one who fed us, watched us, and oversaw our time there. Her cooking was phenomenal, honestly the only part I looked forward to because she never treated me warmly. While she adored my sisters, she was consistently cold toward me and we never formed any kind of bond. My father, meanwhile, was physically present but emotionally absent. I cannot recall a single meaningful conversation

with him. He sat in his designated chair every visit, watching television, waiting for meals, shuffling between his room and the bathroom, silent, detached, unreachable. The last time I saw him, I was in the eighth grade. That morning, I woke up to my grandmother complaining loudly about me not putting sheets on the bed the night before, saying in no uncertain terms that she liked Normie more than she liked me. I had always suspected this, but hearing it confirmed out loud stung in a way I was not prepared for. I called Jimmy, who was nearby at his then girlfriend's house, and asked him to come get me. He did. That was the last time I ever stepped foot in that house and the last time I saw both my father and my grandmother. I just never had a desire to see either of them again and my mother never forced me to.

Even though my father was absent, I did not feel the void of a father figure. At least not then because my brother Jimmy was a constant presence in my life. And then there was Mr. Green. My mother began dating him when I was about four or five years old. He became more of a father to me than my biological father ever was. He paid for our private school tuition, bought us Christmas gifts, and continuously showed me unconditional love. I adored him with my whole heart. Because of the love I received from him and my brother Jimmy, I grew up believing I did not have daddy issues. I never felt unloved. Not once.

Because my mother was often working or out enjoying herself, we kids learned to take care of ourselves and each other. We grew close, maybe closer than most siblings. My oldest sister, Debbie, was the unofficial second mother to all of us. Everyone, and I do mean everyone, loved Debbie. From my family to everyone in our neighborhood, and anyone who knew her enjoyed her company. She was extremely personable. When my mother was out doing her thing, whatever that was, Debbie stepped in seamlessly, no announcement required. She looked out for everyone, but I especially remember how she showed up for Normie and me. As the youngest, we were automatically adopted into her care, whether we asked for it or not. She took us everywhere, folded us into her life, and treated us less like siblings and more like her own children she never regretted having. Debbie taught us how to move through the world with kindness and quiet strength. Being with her always felt safe. Her care was steady, gentle, and never came with judgment attached. No lectures, no conditions, no emotional fine print. We knew, without question, that no matter what happened, Debbie would be there. She offered us a certainty that we could always count on.

My brother Manny was always physically present, but emotionally, he lived in his own orbit. He was there, yet somehow separate. I don't remember spending much focused time with him, not because he was unkind, but because he seemed content in his own world. Manny wasn't absent in the traditional sense; he just wasn't particularly engaged. He moved through the house like a familiar background character, someone you recognize and accept without really knowing all that much about them. He existed alongside us, but rarely with us.

My sister Toni was five years older than me, and Normie and I spent a lot of time with her. We had a special kind of bond, the easy kind that makes laughter come naturally and conversation feel endless. She was popular in high school and had a social confidence that fascinated us. When my mother was at work, Toni would host skip days at our house and let Normie and me

join in, making us feel included rather than tolerated. She never treated us like children. She talked to us as if we belonged in her world, and when we did not understand something, she took the time to explain it carefully, without condescension. Being around her made us feel grown, capable, and seen. We admired her deeply and wanted to be like her, not just because she was cool, but because she made us feel like we mattered.

I was especially bonded with my brother Jimmy and my sister Normie. Jimmy was my hero. There was absolutely nothing I would not have done for him. I adored him with every fiber of my being. I remember being about five years old; the moment my eyes opened each morning, I would run straight to his room, the one he shared with Manny, just to be near him. He never pushed me away. He always made time for me, always seemed happy I was there. If Jimmy had asked me to jump off a bridge, I probably would have, trusting he would be at the bottom to catch me. My eyes were not big enough to see him, nor my heart large enough to hold him.

My relationship with Normie was different, softer, almost cellular. It was as if she and I shared one skin. From the moment I opened my eyes out of my mother's womb, she was there. We were us, Normie and Tiffany, never one without the other. We shared a bedroom until I moved out at twenty years old. We went everywhere together, and people said our names like a single word. Normieandtiffany. I remember the first time we were separated like it was yesterday. It was when we started "big school" – Normie in the first grade and me, kindergarten. Until then, we had attended Miss Billy's Nursery together, riding in the van every morning, sitting side by side all day. I did not care where we were going or what we were doing, as long as we were together.

I was so excited to be going to big school. We were enrolled at Epiphany, an all-Black Catholic school with crisp uniforms, polished shoes, and nuns who did not play. The thought of Sister Cecilia still scares me. When we arrived that morning for the first day of school, we stood together on the playground surrounded by kids laughing, yelling, and chasing each other. I did not know a single person there, but that did not bother me at all. I had my sister, and really, she was all I needed.

Then the bell rang. It was time to line up for class. Normie joined one line, and I was directed to another. I remember being a little confused, but I did not think much of it. We had always done everything together, so surely this was just a temporary mix up. Minor technicality. No problem. But I was sure to keep my eyes on my sister. When then the lines started moving, and I realized we were headed to different classrooms. That was it! I lost it!

Where is my sister? I remember crying at full volume as tears streamed down my face. I was inconsolable. There was absolutely no way I was staying in that room without her. Who were these strangers, and what had they done with my sister?

To me, this was not just the first day of school; it was the first day of feeling alone, on my own. And I couple not handle it. I had no idea how to move as a single unit without being attached to someone in my family. Of course, at five years old, I did not know that is what it was. All I knew was that my sister, my built in best friend, my other half, was suddenly gone. She was just down the hall, but to me she might as well have been a world away. That moment, the panic, the

crying, the refusal to let go, was not about school. It was about separation. It was the first time I felt what it meant to be on my own. I was experiencing separation anxiety.

Separation anxiety is a form of emotional distress that occurs when an individual is away from someone to whom they feel deeply attached, typically a primary caregiver or significant emotional anchor. While it is most commonly discussed in relation to children, separation anxiety can persist into adulthood and show up in romantic relationships, friendships, or even family dynamics. At its core, it reflects a fear of being left, abandoned, or unable to cope without the presence of the attachment figure. People experiencing separation anxiety often feel panic, worry, insecurity, or a sense of emotional destabilization when separated from the person who provides them comfort and safety. It is not merely missing someone — it is the internal belief that something bad will happen if the connection is disrupted. Separation anxiety develops early in life, shaped by attachment, consistency of care, and emotional security. When those early bonds feel unpredictable, distant, or unstable, the nervous system learns to equate distance with danger. As a result, even brief separations can feel overwhelming, triggering disproportionate emotional responses and a deep longing to stay close to the person who represents safety. And that day when they took my sister to that other classroom, my nervous system was shook-ed.

Normie was my constant. Up until that point in my early life, her presence was how I measured safety. If she was there, everything was okay. She was my person. If she was not, the world felt unstable. This went on for what seemed like hours, but I'm sure it was only a few minutes. It got so bad that my teachers, Ms. Lee and Mr. Washington, had to go to Normie's classroom and bring her to me just to calm me down. They spoke gently, explaining that I would see her again at recess and after school, but at that moment, logic meant nothing. I just needed her. Eventually, I calmed down enough for Normie to return to her classroom, and I somehow made it through the rest of the day. That is how close we were and remained well into adulthood.

Looking back now to my first day at Epiphany, I can see that it was not just my introduction to big school. It was my introduction to my anxious attachment style. I see how that moment began to shape me. At one point, I would have said that my early bonds with Jimmy and Normie created a secure attachment style for me and shaped how I loved, how I trusted, and how deeply I attached myself to people. With Jimmy, I learned loyalty, the kind that does not question, does not pause, does not protect itself. I followed his lead without hesitation. My love for him was blind, unwavering, absolute. In many ways, that is how I entered relationships later in life, heart first, logic last. I did not know any other way.

I grew up expecting connections to be constant, not just love, but the kind of closeness that feels like a guarantee.

With Normie, I learned connection. The comfort of knowing someone so completely that words are not always necessary. Our closeness was effortless, almost instinctive. But as I got older, I realized that kind of closeness, while beautiful, also made it easy for me to blur boundaries, to confuse familiarity with safety and proximity with partnership. In hindsight, I now see these relationships as the beginning of my anxious attachment style. My childhood experiences with the two people I felt closest to trained me to hold on tightly, maybe too tightly, to the people I

loved. When you grow up watching the adults around you leave, whether by choice or circumstance, you learn to become an emotional anchor. You think that if you love hard enough, stay loyal enough, you can hold everything together. But people are not meant to be held like that. They simply cannot be.

Things started to shift when I was in the third grade. Both of my brothers, Manny and Jimmy, graduated from high school that year and left home to attend Alcorn State University on football scholarships. Almost immediately after they moved away, my mother and Mr. Green ended their relationship, and he stopped coming around. Just like that, he was gone. No discussion. No explanation. No goodbye. One day he was a steady part of my world, and the next day he simply disappeared. In the span of what felt like minutes, every male relationship I had known to be consistent vanished. The people who had made me feel safe, loved, and protected were suddenly absent. And although I did not have the words for it then, it left me grasping for something familiar, hoping that life would return to what I had always known. But it did not. That abrupt shift created a quiet panic inside me, the kind that settles in the body long before the mind understands what is happening. It marked the beginning of the void I would spend years trying to fill.

Initially, I would have said that my early bonds with Mr. Green, Jimmy, and Normie created a secure attachment style for me. With Mr. Green, I felt loved and seen. I learned that consistency has a language of its own, and his spoke directly to my heart. With Jimmy, I learned loyalty without limits. With Normie, I learned a connection so deep it felt instinctual. But as life unfolded with its losses, disappointments, and emotional earthquakes, what once felt like security slowly shifted. My relationships became less about genuine connection and more about reassurance. While it felt like it, I was not always looking for love; I was looking for proof that I would not be left. That subtle but powerful difference shaped more decisions than I ever realized.

I did not recognize until much later in my adult life that what I once believed was a secure attachment style was anything but. When I look back now, my patterns align far more with anxious attachment. And when I trace it to its origin, it goes back even earlier than my relationships with Mr. Green, Jimmy, and Normie. It begins with my father. Even though I never felt his absence in a conscious way because I never sat around wishing he would show up or love me differently, I now understand that the emotional void he left created a space inside me that clung tightly to the people who were consistent. That childhood need for closeness, reassurance, and connection you can touch and feel, followed me into adulthood. It shaped the way I loved. It shaped the way I held on. And whenever those connections felt threatened, whenever someone I loved pulled away, shut down, or disappeared emotionally, the same childhood anxiety rose up again. That fear of being left. That sense that safety was something that could disappear without warning lived under everything. It explained why I held on so tightly, sometimes too tightly, to the people who I wanted to make me feel like home.

The anxiousness showed up in friendships, relationships, and especially in the way I loved men, deeply, loyally, often without questioning whether that love was being returned in equal measure. That first day of school at Epiphany was not just a tantrum; it was an early imprint. It

taught me how to hold on, and it also taught me how hard it was to let go. Maybe that is why, as a woman, I often confused attachment with love, because to me they had always been the same thing. But healing has a way of peeling back the layers of your story until you see the pattern. When I look at that little girl, the one sobbing in the classroom because her sister was in another room, I see where it erupted. The loyalty, the fear of being left, and the instinct to cling to anyone who made me feel safe were all born long before I ever had words for them. And although that moment in the classroom was quickly contained by bringing Normie to me, looking at it through my adult eyes, it revealed exactly what lived underneath the surface. The panic, the desperation, the immediate belief that separation meant abandonment and showed the emotional wiring already forming inside me. It was a small moment to the adults in the room, but for me, it was the beginning of what it felt like to fear losing the people who anchored me. And that feeling, as innocent as it seemed then, would echo throughout my life in ways I would not fully understand until well into adulthood.

As I grew up, life became more complicated, as it usually does, filled with loss, love, and the kind of betrayal that makes you rethink your entire emotional capacity. My relationships shifted right along with it. I was constantly seeking true connection like I had known while growing up, and more importantly I was seeking reassurance. I was no longer looking for love; I was looking for proof that I would not be left behind like a forgotten umbrella at someone else's house. My brothers never returned home to live. My mother had a quiet but unmistakable way of communicating that once you left her house, the door was not exactly locked, but it certainly was not swinging open either. As someone who had been raising children since she was fifteen, she had probably reached her lifetime quota of caregiving. But as a child waiting for her brothers to walk back through the door, it felt confusing and strangely disappointing. Their departure marked the beginning of a difficult chapter in their lives. Without guidance from a father figure and without any real structure, they drifted into choices that led to decades of drug abuse.

Whenever I saw my brothers, especially Jimmy, they were never quite the same. He, in particular carried a distance in his eyes that young me could never interpret but adult me now understands all too well. He was not the brother who let me crawl into his bed at dawn just to feel close to him. He was not the brother who made the world feel safe. Still, every time I looked at him, I loved him with the same intensity, hoping he still felt that bond. And occasionally, there would be a tiny glimpse of the Jimmy I knew, like a brief cameo appearance from a beloved character. But the full version of him never returned.

As the years passed, my relationships with Debbie and Toni shifted as well. With Debbie, the change felt more circumstantial than personal. At least at first it did. She married, had two children, and quite naturally redirected her energy toward the family she was building. When her marriage later ended, she did what the only thing she could do – move on. Life forced her forward, whether she was ready or not.

Toni's path, however, looked different. Life dealt her its share of hard blows some self-inflicted, some simply the unavoidable collisions of being human. And over time, something seemed to stall. Both of my sisters appeared to get stuck in the aftermath of what had gone wrong. They

struggled to move through their experiences rather than remain anchored to them. Life has an ebb and flow. Wins and losses arrive in rotation. No one gets dealt all wins and all losses. It's just not the natural order of life. But I began to notice how some people become tethered to the pain itself. They replay who hurt them, who failed them, who did not show up. The story becomes fixed, and the identity quietly shifts from survivor to victim. When that happens, growth feels threatening, because moving forward would require letting go of the narrative that explains everything. What I was witnessing was not weakness. It was stagnation. Things started to look like personal attacks against me because apparently my life looked "easier" than theirs. And slowly, subtly, my movement began to feel like a personal offense. My life looked "easier" to them, as if ease were something I'd been handed rather than something I'd clawed my way toward. I didn't realize then that in families, change is often mistaken for betrayal, and progress can feel like an accusation to those who feel left behind. And somehow that put us on opposite sides of the same family story.

Through all of this, Normie and I stayed close. She was my person. We were both experiencing the absence of our brothers. We talked about everything, from the profound to the ridiculous. We communicated in an unspoken language that only we could understand. Whenever someone in our family became frustrated with me, they would go straight to Normie and ask her to translate what they called "Tiffany language." And honestly, she was fluent. Even though we connected in a way that felt instinctive and almost spiritual, Normie and I were very different. I often describe myself as something like a porcupine: prickly on the outside but soft, loyal, and ridiculously loving on the inside. The porcupine exterior was my emotional protection, built out of necessity after losing Mr. Green and then Jimmy in a way that was not physical but still very real. I love deeply and sincerely, but because I do not know how to love any other way, I learned to protect the parts of myself that bruised easily. Normie, meanwhile, had a gentle and approachable presence that made people relax instantly. She let others in far more easily than I ever could, but she carried her fears and anxieties internally, tucked away where no one could see them. If you combined the two of us, you would have one fully balanced person: her softness and my armor, her openness and my loyalty, her calm and my fire.

Early relationships become emotional templates that shape how we connect later in life. My emotional world was built around the people who stayed, and then shaken by the same people who left. It is not surprising that I grew into a woman who loved intensely, held tightly, and sometimes confused emotional familiarity with emotional safety. The little girl in me learned early that closeness could vanish without warning. The woman I became spent years trying to make sure it never happened again.

