

Author's Note

50,000 ... 60,000 ... 350,000 ... one million! Just a few days after my commencement speech video was shared online by the media company Goalcast, more than three million people around the world had listened to me openly share the darkest, most difficult times in my life. Day by day, minute by minute, the number of people who were moved by my message kept climbing. The amount of likes, comments and shares kept ticking upward, too.

I had to pick up my jaw from the floor. I couldn't believe this was happening. It was so bizarre to see *my story* on YouTube reaching more than 6.5 million people across the globe and having such a positive impact.

The social media notifications kept lighting up. I had messages on Facebook from women and men from all over the world — Australia, India, England, Canada, Jamaica, New Jersey, Texas — thanking me for courageously sharing my story of overcoming a painful divorce and custody battle and giving them a sense of hope. Their encouraging messages saying my speech was "incredibly powerful," "inspiring" and "motivating" lifted me up.

I had friend requests from complete strangers. Alyzabeth Paul from Houston, Texas, was one of them. She said she was compelled to connect with me on Facebook because she wanted me to know just how meaningful my words were for her. In a Facebook message, she wrote, "Thank you for being the one to push me when times get rough ... I was in a moment of being overwhelmed when I saw your speech! Needless to say, God spoke through you. Thank you!"

Her words instantly brought me to tears. I felt so much peace in that moment because I, too, felt like God was using me as a vessel. I thought to myself, "Wow! Maybe this has been God's plan all along. Maybe there is purpose for pain. Maybe I am right where I am supposed to be, sharing my journey to lift others up."

My cellphone wouldn't stop buzzing with text messages from friends and family:

"Are you seeing this? 6.5 million views. You are a viral superstar!"

"OMG, You are amazing. Can I have your autograph?"

"You are worldwide, cuz! Keep shining!"

I had experienced the power of storytelling many times before in my fourteen-plus years as an award-winning newspaper journalist. I saw firsthand how stories can magically connect, inspire and uplift people with all different beliefs and backgrounds. But January 27, 2018, was the first time in my life I had ever publicly shared a piece of my own story, not to mention on a stage in front of hundreds of people. I was graduating with my master's degree from Bellevue University. I was thirty-five years old,

but I was as nervous as a new kid on the first day of school when I hit that spotlight. My commencement speech marked the first time in my life I had dug up enough courage to be vulnerable and pour out my heart in hopes of inspiring just one person.

And it worked. Not with just one person, but millions. That was the evidence I needed that I could be brave and share my story, regardless of what people might think. That was proof that on the other side of my fear was something truly remarkable — the opportunity to inspire so many people to keep going.

That's exactly why I continue to open up. That's why I wrote this book. I believe I step into my power every time I find the courage to share a piece of my journey. I know it in my heart that God is using my story to show others what is possible when you believe in yourself, have faith and never give up.

By digging deep and being authentic, I was able to make an overwhelmingly positive impact on so many people — even complete strangers. I am hopeful *A Star for Stella* will do the same.

People related to my story because I wasn't afraid to show my messy side. For me, it was all about embracing my true self, the imperfectly perfect Chicana from Omaha, Nebraska, who wears her scars and flaws as badges of honor. The strong South Omaha girl who stays determined to fly even when her wings need work. Something truly magical happens when you're brave enough to own your shit. People flock to that.

So I'm bringing the realness with *A Star for Stella*. This book will take you through my journey to overcome a variety of personal battles. It's a story of self-discovery, shining a light on trauma, alcoholism and divorce. It's my fight to be the best version of me so I can be the best mother possible.

I never imagined in a million years that I would have to prove myself in a court of law that I am worthy to be a mother. But one tragic night sent my life spiraling out of control and my heart crashing into pieces.

And when a judge decided to take my daughter away from me — my beautiful, fun-loving, energetic Stella, I felt like my life was over. It was the most soul-crushing news I could ever receive. While this story will take you to my ultimate lows, it will also lift you so much higher with hope and resilience.

After my commencement speech went viral, I was sought out to speak at a variety of events and conferences. It was through some of the most difficult times in my life that I discovered my true passion for motivational speaking. I even landed a speaking gig at a women's leadership conference in London. I remember thinking, "How cool is this, I get paid to speak at events? What an awesome gig!"

At the same time, I still wasn't entirely proud of the life I was living because I was still struggling with a longtime addiction to alcohol. I was drinking to mask emotions I should have been working to heal. I know there are a lot of overwhelmed mamas and women — especially in this post-pandemic life — who can relate to this, so this book is for you. It's for anyone who needs an infusion of hope and to see how bad things can be used for good.

I believe this book will help you wherever you are in your journey and be the motivation you need to keep going. I hope it will lead you to the next step in your own journey of being the best version of you. When you have the courage to face whatever is holding you back, that's where you learn, grow and level up.

Even though I often fall short, my goal has always been to be the best role model for my daughter, and writing *A Star for Stella* is a part of that. I want Estella to see that life isn't about being flawless. It's about falling and rising stronger. It's about making mistakes and learning and growing from them. It's about accepting our battles and embracing the lessons they bring.

I'm also writing this book for my family, aka Los Baez, who have always loved me unconditionally and continuously lift me up when I need it most. I want my niece and nephews to see that anything is possible when you believe in your dreams. I want my parents to know they are my angels on Earth, and I am forever grateful for their unshakeable support. They are truly my BFFs.

I've learned to stop questioning why certain things happen in life. I've experienced how the most terrible things in our lives can actually redirect us to the best things that will ever happen to us. This book is a testimony to that. My darkest times brought me to some of my brightest days, and my most heartbreaking struggles forced me to heal and grow in unimaginable ways. I'm finally on my way to meeting the best version of me, and I couldn't be more excited — I deserve to know her. We all deserve to know our best selves. Embrace your journey and trust you are right where you are supposed to be.