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House on Fire

Finding Resilience, Hope, and Purpose in the Ashes

Jenn T. Grace

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PUBLISH YOUR PURPOSE® PRESS

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to:

My parents. I now understand they were both doing the best that they could in the circumstances they were given.

All families who are struggling with mental health issues that consume your lives. Don't give up and don't be afraid to speak up. The world needs to hear your unique and invisible stories.

To those who are feeling alone, abandoned, orphaned, or isolated. My wish is that this will show you a path forward and give you a glimpse of hope in an otherwise dark time.

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A Letter from the Author

Dear Reader,

While writing this memoir, I have attempted to relay all the events portrayed to the best of my memory. It has been cobbled together with assistance from journals, photos, and "remember when …" family tales told over holiday dinners and special occasions.

Obviously, it is written from my own perspective, which quite likely is different from how others in and out of my life would re-tell the same stories. Certain incidents are more vivid, yet entire blocks of time are missing. And, for many of us, we may often have only one small snippet of a memory from a particular year of our past. That's because of a dear friend I've come to know so well: Dissociation.

Like many people, I recollect and share my stories as vignettes. My life—like yours, I'm sure—involved coping strategies, arguments, laughter, challenges, and many, many obstacles. The details of my story are likely different than yours, but the fact that we struggle is universal.

I have changed the names of people, towns, locations, and other identifying details to offer as much respect, anonymity, and privacy as I could to those involved, while still being able to share my story authentically.

It has taken a great deal of courage for me to come to a place of healing and forgiveness in my life so that I can share my story with the world. It is not without deep fears of exposing myself in very vulnerable ways. My life has

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been one of trauma, loss, obstacles, and triumph, and I did my best to remain as fair to everyone I included in this book. What we know to be true is that bad things happen to good people and good people make bad decisions. It is what we do after those decisions that matters.

There will be people who may not feel good about how they are written about and to them I would like to share a quote by Anne Lamott:

> *You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.*

I invite you to join this ride with me, learn, laugh, cope, and come out on the other side a little better than when you started this book.

With love, gratitude, and deep empathy for what you are going through,

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Wreckage from the Fire

Age 18

Going through black muck and household rubble after everything was over and the embers had cooled in the morning, I could see that almost everything I owned was gone. Head down, hugging my coat to my body on a gray, cold, late fall day, I shuffled through the ashes, kicking away clumps of mystery items, on the hunt for some remnant of my 18 years of life that would bring me joy. My eyes misted as I found every hard-earned softball and sports trophy melted beyond recognition. My lucky softball glove that helped me win all of those trophies, gone. All my clothes, every championship-winning sports jacket of mine in the hallway closet, gone. My entire bedroom—all soggy from fire hose spray and permanently smoke-darkened—gone forever.

My cat Pumpkin died while our three other cats miraculously survived. It felt like every single place in the house where *my* items were was burnt to ashes. Our house was destroyed; the frame of our family ruined—charred beyond recognition.

My sister, Amanda, and my mother had been in the house when the fire started. My mom's official story was that Amanda was playing alone in the family room, tried to light a candle, and "accidentally" set the recliner on fire, which then caught the bookcase behind it on fire, and, subsequently, the rest of that room, and then the house. I directed my fury over the loss

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of my things and dreams for the future at my sister for the destruction she had caused.

Tears rolled silently down my cheeks as I uncovered my tattered, melted, and singed E.T. doll. From a very early age, I had declared that E.T. would be my wedding bouquet. That hope remained until I was 18 and standing in those ashes. Now that vision of my future wedding was also destroyed. A smoldering ember remained in my soul as I carried E.T.'s charred remains out of the gutted house. It was as if his plastic and fabric stuffed body—wrapped in a towel—was equal to that of my deceased cat.

As I got in my red Jeep Wrangler—the car I inherited when my father passed away a few years prior—to leave the wreckage, I took comfort knowing that only two weeks before, I happened to have cleared out my bedroom. Many important treasures, including family photographs and a few of possessions of my dad's that I had to remember him by, were sealed in plastic bins. The contents of these bins were preserved because they fortuitously had been moved down into the cement basement and were now safely stowed in the back of my Jeep.

While the bin preserved good childhood memories and reassured me that I could refer back to these items whenever I missed my dad or wanted to remember my happiest youthful days, the burnt house felt like a message from the Universe that it was time to move on—something I had already felt.

I wonder now, how do we let certain things go? When we realize that we don't need to be what others expect us to be, that we don't have to do what others tell us to do, that we have choices … how does the journey change? How do our relationships change?

Where I would go after the fire, I had not yet figured out. I shifted out of park and into drive and moved toward whatever the Universe had planned for me.

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PART I

DECISIONS

Ages: 0–9

June 1981–September 1990

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Age 6

From the time I was adopted until I was six years old, my parents and I lived in a small ranch-style home in Concord, Rhode Island. We had a fenced-in backyard and our house was situated in front of a manufacturing plant of some kind. Its large black and yellow wooden sign was displayed in the corner of our front yard, facing the street. There was a steady amount of traffic in and out of the plant with cars and trucks kicking up dust all day long.

We lived in the suburbs, but I recall there being a jalopy helicopter residing in our backyard. Yes, a helicopter! I always grew up with strange and interesting things that most other homes did not have. To some, these could have been treasures—to others, this was junk. I'm certain that however my dad obtained these items, he didn't pay much, if anything, at all. My dad was the king of bartering. I remember him trading guns (often shotguns) in exchange for fixing someone's electrical issue (computers, radios—you name it, he could fix it).

Age 8

My hand was wrapped in gauze that covered a menacing smile of black stitches I had received just days before, after cutting my hand open on a ceramic pot. My parents led me up the walkway to a big, red barn-style house. There was clutter everywhere on the lawn as we approached the door. I could hear the sounds of talking, yelling, frenetic activity coming from inside the house as we rang the bell. Later, I surmised that this must have been a foster home.

The scratched and faded red wooden door creaked as it was pulled open and we were ushered inside. I don't remember the person who welcomed us because my senses were overpowered by the rambunctious children all around, the well-worn environment, and the smell of the home. What was it that made my nose tingle? Before I could place it, my attention was suddenly focused on the almost-three-year-old girl who was being brought into the

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room and directed toward my parents. As all eyes attached to all size bodies were focused on us, peeking around chairs and doorways, my mother turned to me and announced, "This is your new sister."

I knew that I was adopted but I had been an only child for eight years. What was going on? What was happening to my life? My parents were adopting another girl? I struggled to process this new information in that moment.

The very tall woman who had let us in placed both hands on the shoulders of this brown-haired girl standing in front of us. The girl's wide, frightened, dark eyes were darting back and forth between my parents and me as this stranger urged (even pushing a bit) the little girl toward my mother. "This is May," she said by way of introduction.

May was olive-toned, skinny, and fragile. With my ginger hair and blue eyes, we looked nothing alike. But May looked like my parents. My mom had a Mediterranean look—despite her French-Canadian roots—standing medium height with short, tightly permed brown hair, laughing brown eyes, and the kind of skin that tanned easily. My father was tall, with an outdoorsy build and weathered skin. It didn't occur to me then, but later I was constantly aware of how little I looked like my adoptive parents and how much my adopted sister did. Did I wonder then if they would love her more because she looked like them? Did I wonder if they wanted a new child because of something I'd done or didn't do? I don't remember. Did I eventually wish they would send her back? Absolutely.

With May's hand tucked firmly into my mother's, and me tagging along behind wondering what the heck just happened, off we went to start our big happy family life together. At least I assume that was the plan—if only that had been the case.

In addition to all the bartered clutter, our home was often surrounded by stray dogs and cats—and we just took care of them. At one point, we had

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rescued a blind raccoon that was hit by a car and nursed it back to health. That's how it felt to me as a child; that we rescued May the way a person rescues a dog (or raccoon). But maybe, just like my father enjoyed rescuing and repurposing mechanical things, my mother liked the concept of rescuing a child and doing good. Did she, like my dad, want a project to "fix" and "improve?"

When we got home with my new sister, my mother asked me to go for a walk. She explained, "May has 'failure to thrive.' You need to be really careful around your little sister."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"May's mother left her as a baby and didn't give her love or food. She didn't gain weight and she's not as strong as you are. She hasn't had a real family since she was born."

"So, she can break?" I wanted to know.

My mother, ever the hero and caregiver, soothed, "We are going to get your sister strong and help her; all of us together, as a family."

Then my mother informed me, "Your sister's name is Amanda. We are going to call her Amanda. Isn't that a pretty name?"

My mother simply informed May of her new name. And, with that announcement (and some paperwork, no doubt), my sister went from being May to Amanda. She went from a foster home to my home. And my life as an only child was completely altered.

I don't think anyone asked what was right or if a name change for a toddler was appropriate. However, this *was* the mid-1980s. No one questioned my parents' modification. After all, if we could change the name of a pet adopted from a shelter, why not change the name of a child? It never occurred to me that changing a three-year-old child's name didn't make any sense. Nor did I understand the possible psychological impact and identity issues that

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could arise later in life. In a recent conversation with my therapist, she commented on how unusual this is and how that kind of casual attitude toward the value of a child's identity reveals my parents' lack of awareness around the repercussions of this decision.

Over the years, we found that Amanda turned out to have a lot of unexpected issues, most likely stemming from early childhood trauma, presumed abuse and neglect, subsequent separation and abandonment by her birth parents, and formative years spent in foster homes.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, I really didn't know I was living with a sister with severe mental health needs. Somewhere deep within my being, I knew she was acting her own version of "normal," but we never spoke of it. Anytime I would say anything to my parents, it did not matter how severe the situation was, "She's only a baby," would be the supplied justification for that behavior. No matter how old Amanda got, I was still hearing the same "baby" excuse.

Amanda and I had little in common and our five-year age gap seemed insurmountable. At first, I was happy to have a little sister to follow me around, but soon I realized we were just too different. I spent my time outdoors, playing sports, and on my own while Amanda craved attention and enjoyed more artsy and group activities. I imagine she was frustrated that I was out of the house most of the time. With all her extra energy, the older we got, my sister used the time that I was increasingly out of the house to intrude in my space, destroy my things, and engage in other not-so-passive aggressive behaviors. Perhaps to get my attention—perhaps just because that was who she was.

When making plans for adopting a new child, my parents decided we needed more space. When I was eight, shortly before Amanda's adoption, we moved to the opposite side of our town, where my dad built our large four-bedroom,

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two-and-a-half-bath colonial-style house. Previously, we had been located on a busy main street in town. The new house was built on a few acres of land at the bottom of a long and winding dirt road and surrounded by trees as far as the eye could see.

Before construction could begin on the house, they had to first clear the lot and knock down a forest of trees to make it happen. I believe my dad did the majority of this work on his own. We had backhoes, dump trucks, and all sorts of equipment on our new property for quite some time. My dad left plenty of nature around the perimeter of our property for privacy and for us to enjoy.

My parents decided they would save money building the new house by doing something unconventional. Typically, most people would use dirt or soil to smooth out land before building or landscaping, but we had truck-loads of filler from the dump brought in. It was used to level the terrain after trees and roots and underbrush were excavated. The dump material was then covered with soil, upon which my dad began to build.

The end result was a sloped 12-foot embankment running up to the left side of our house. You would pull off the main dirt road, drive up our dusty driveway, and the closer to the house you got, the farther you'd be from the land below. This embankment made for a great sledding hill growing up, as well as a place where adventures and rather dangerous youthful experiences took place.

Since this land came from the dump, all sorts of treasures could be found just beneath the dirt surface of our yard. Old coffee cans, metal toy cars, and just simple trash could easily be unearthed after a storm or with a simple trowel as we planted seasonal flowers. As a child, it was always an adventure what you might find just out the front door. Imagination could soar with wonder over where the objects came from, who owned them, or what kinds of things you could create with them.

I remember when I was around 10 years old, my cousin Julia and I were digging in the yard at the house. We were just digging to dig. Something to

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do because we knew we would find all sorts of fascinating items! How deep a hole could we make? Eventually, about 6 feet down, we hit the septic tank. We had gone so far down, we couldn't get ourselves out of the hole.

After our parents rescued us and gave us our strong verbal reprimands (a.k.a. "handed us our asses!") and punishment, I went back outside, found a cabinet door from the scrap heap that was the side of my house, and made a trapdoor cover over the gaping hole. We covered the door with dirt. Our family never filled in the hole—a recipe for disaster.

During construction of the house itself, as we toured the progress, I can remember the clean, fresh smell of recently cut wood and sawdust. Anytime I come across the smell of wood chips and sawdust it still signals newness, growth, and unfamiliar possibilities. It was one of the few clean childhood smells I had.

I don't remember the inside of our old ranch-style house ever being filthy, but I was also six, so that could explain the poor memory. But I do remember the yard always filled with tangled piles of metal pipes, copper wiring, and other debris. This all moved with us to the new home. My dad was big into satellite dishes. Metal pipes (sometimes 30 to 40 feet long) flanked the side of our house. To this day, I'm not sure what purpose they truly served, but I'm certain my dad had a use for it all. It was placed just off in the distance beside our hand-me-down above-ground swimming pool.

From kindergarten through fifth grade I went to a Catholic elementary school. When I was in the third grade, I was standing first in line to exit the classroom when the bishop (rarely present on campus) was visiting the school. I was at the threshold of the door to the hallway with my classmates lined up behind me when the bishop reached down and fondled my adolescent breast. Immediately, I knew it was wrong, but didn't know how to react. When I went home, I told my parents. I don't remember the outcome,

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but there was a meeting at the school about the incident. From that point forward, my hatred of the Church grew by the day. It was one of my first experiences of not having a "safe space"—before Amanda redefined that term for me.

The one positive thing I recall about my Catholic school experience was the janitor. Mary was older, very friendly, with big blonde 1980's hair. My parents couldn't always get me after school at the same time as the rest of the kids; no doubt due to my parents' overlapping work schedules. This necessitated me following Mary around the practically empty school watching her clean. Mary would let me walk with her from classroom to classroom as she worked, often giving me apples she found. She seemed like the only rational adult in my life who didn't expect anything of me. I needed that. She was perfectly content to have my company and I hers.

My love for softball blossomed when I was about eight years old. As I got older, softball was a great way to pass time because we had practices nearly every night and games on the weekends, sometimes multiple games in a single day. This kind of organized activity precluded me from spending much time in the house. I found myself playing on more than one team at a time, fueling my increasing need to be out of the house. I often took care of Amanda after school and I had dinner with the family (which was some combination of the four of us, but rarely all at once) if I wasn't at practice or a game.

My mother worked second shift (3 p.m. to 11 p.m.) at the hospital as a licensed practical nurse. When it was softball season, she would arrange her schedule so she could attend my softball games as often as possible. She was prone to embarrassing me with her all-out cackle of a laugh that could be heard across the entire field and random I-don't-care-what-anyone-else-thinks-or-does behaviors. I can still picture so clearly one game in high-school

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where my mother was trying to carry her resin lawn chair down the hill to the field to watch me play and, finally, instead of carrying it, she just threw it on the ground, gave it a push and let it roll down the hill by itself. I was on the mound about to pitch and this rolling chair and my mother's effusive arm movements totally distracted me, the spectators, and all the players. Everyone laughed. I was mortified. But that was my mother. She supported my efforts at sports whether I wanted her to or not—that's what moms do.

My mother would bring my sister sometimes. Other times, my sister would attend with my dad while my mom was at work.

When I was trying out for the 12-and-under all-star team for softball, my mother supported my sports goals by helping me practice. We were outside in our front yard where, gloveless, she was pitching me some balls. I hit a line drive straight to her face and she was knocked flat to the ground. For half a second, I was proud of the power in my hit, but then I transitioned into panic, raced over to see how my mom was, and found her covered in blood. I sped into the house to get ice and towels. The radio was playing the Top 40s, and I heard, "I'm looking in your big brown eyes." "Sweat," performed by UB40, came through the speakers before I turned around and headed back out to put ice on her eye.

I gave my mother—still lying in the grass—the ice and towel and ran to get our neighbor Donna. By the time she and I reached my mother, her face was purple, swollen, and covered in blood. Donna was visibly aghast by my mom's appearance. Refusing our neighbor's offer to help, my mother got herself into our minivan, managed to drop me off at my all-star tryouts, and then drove her bloodied self to the walk-in clinic to get looked at. My mom was tough!

Although I was still shaken at the tryouts, I made the team, despite worrying about my mom the entire time. The end result was that my mother's glasses saved her eye, but also lacerated the entire space under her eye,

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which needed over 20 stiches. She looked awful for months after. Every time I looked at the scar on her face, I relived that day, well into my adult years.

Age 9

When the weather cooled and the softball gear was packed away, I would physically carry large pieces of wood, loading them in a trailer to be driven to our basement window. We had a wood-burning stove and chopped down our own trees to heat our home. Sometimes I hated it, but most times I relished being out of the house and away from my screaming sister and mother. I got to spend time with my father. He didn't talk much. He was a man of activity, so I was a girl of activity.

I remember spending much of my youth riding my mini-bike, shooting guns, or doing an array of other physical activities—like shooting a bow with real arrows, riding in a go-cart we borrowed from my dad's friend, and then deciding to build our own go-cart that oddly resembled a coffin. I was always outside and so was my dad. I certainly was not a delicate girl, more like the epitome of a tomboy.

In 1990 I had my first crush. Miss Parante was my fourth-grade science teacher. At the time I didn't know it was a crush. I loved everything about being around her and being in her class—perhaps it was more of an infatuation.

Despite my normal distaste for school and studying, for Miss Parante, I worked hard. I was awarded with some kind of recognition in Miss Parante's class during the winter semester. My mom wanted to get me a special gift to celebrate this school-based accomplishment (as they were rare), so off we went on a mother/daughter trip to Kmart. I normally hated shopping, but this was a chance to get my mother to myself and I was promised that we

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would not be shopping for clothing, thankfully (I hated clothes shopping and, admittedly, still do). The closest Kmart was a solid 30-minute drive from where we lived, so going two towns over to Walden was often a production, even though it was the city where my mom worked.

At the Kmart, I got to select what I wanted. I requested a slushy in a cool Red Sox plastic cup and a mini-basketball (all the rage back then). On the drive home I stared out the window, envisioning the playing time I would have with the new basketball at home. We had a homemade basketball hoop on the back of our garage where I spent hours alone shooting hoops regardless of the weather.

It had been lightly snowing when we had set out but began to snow rather heavily as we were heading home. There were two main routes from Walden to our house, both of which required crossing Grayson's Pond. The pond spans a significant part of Concord. Regardless of which route you took, there were minor bridges to cross. My mom preferred the Route 9 way home, which was a much more winding road than the straight shot of Route 114.

As we drove down Route 9 and turned onto the small and twisting road toward the bridge, I could sense my mother starting to panic. At this point in our journey, we couldn't see anything ahead except pure white massive snow coming down. Our wipers were at full speed, but it didn't seem to improve our visibility. I was sitting up straight and gripping the door armrest. I became afraid of us driving off the bridge and ending up in the pond.

My fear of ending up in the pond was rational because my mother had a phobia about bridges. Every year, during our annual pilgrimage to my dad's family in Pennsylvania, my mother would shriek in panic crossing the Tappan Zee Bridge. I was acutely aware of my mom's fear; I could feel it invade the car as the snowstorm blanketed our car in whiteness. Our minivan slowed to a crawl. We did not have snow tires or chains installed despite being in New England and knowing better.

As we were creeping up the road to the narrow Grayson's Pond bridge, my mom, her voice trembling a little, asked me, "Jenn, what should we do?

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Should we cross this bridge or go the other way?" It almost sounded like she was talking to herself, but she directed it at me. I thought, "Why is she asking me? I'm nine years old!?" And yet, despite not having ever driven, somehow wise beyond my years about this, I offered my opinion, "If we turn around and go up Route 114, it will take longer but we would be on a shorter and wider bridge and I don't think we would have a problem."

"I agree. We'll go that way." My mother turned the car around cautiously. We straightened out and headed back toward the safer route, and it was in that moment that I realized I was already an adult in our relationship. I would bear the responsibility of decision-making for many choices our family needed to make in the future. Contemplating this new awareness—part proud, part nervous—I guided the car home with my mind as my mother white-knuckle gripped the steering wheel and leaned in toward the windshield to focus on getting us home safely.

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About Jenn

Jenn T. Grace is a nationally recognized business strategist, speaker, and author. Guided by the mantra, "Change happens in business," Jenn believes social change happens first in the workplace before spilling over into mainstream society. She has been featured in *Forbes*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and CNBC.

Passionate about helping people share their stories of adversity, Jenn is the Founder of Publish Your Purpose Press, a publishing company that includes the PYP Academy, with programs that teach aspiring authors how to publish their books. In addition to publishing 50+ books that share the stories of others, Jenn has written six.

You can follow Jenn on social media at—

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Hire Jenn to Speak

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She has spoken on a variety of topics ranging from LGBTQ+ inclusion in business and the workplace to leveraging the power of your personal brand by being uniquely you to how we can lead with empathy.

Jenn is a gifted storyteller and her speaking style has been described as funny, sharp, and bright—engaging the whole audience the entire way through.

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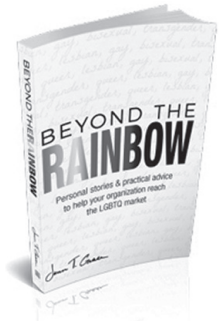

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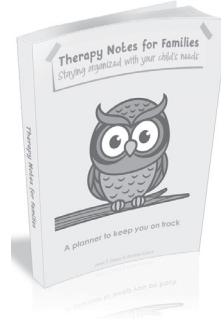

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I urge you to share your story with me. Email me at jgrace@publishyourpurposepress.com and maybe we'll include your story on our website. By sharing your story with the world, you can feel a sense of relief while helping others.

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About PYP

Our mission at *Publish Your Purpose Press (PYP)* is to discover and publish authors who are striving to make a difference in the world. We give marginalized voices power and a stage to share their stories, speak their truth, and impact their communities. Our purpose and mission is to elevate and amplify the voices of others.

At PYP, we are fully invested in, and committed to, the success of our authors. We are focused on building long-term author relationships, not just business transactions.

We understand that publishing a book can be difficult. We go to great lengths to not only ensure your book is on track and meeting its deadline, but we also do our very best to manage your emotional overwhelm. Our work will enable you to maintain a clear focus on your vision. We act as your compass to ensure you get to your end goal.

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