

The
INDEFATIGABLE
ENTREPRENEUR

Built from Nothing

Norliza Pavlakos

A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN

I was sixteen years old when I left home with nothing. Bags and boxes in the back of a taxi, watching my street disappear through the rear window. I had no money, no education, no plan beyond the next twenty minutes. By every measure the world uses to evaluate a person's chances, I had nothing.

What took three decades of building and breaking and rebuilding to understand was that nothing is also a kind of freedom.

This book is the story of what I built from it. Five businesses. Five children. Stages around the world. A marriage that lasted twenty-one years and a platform for mental health that I rebuilt five times before it worked. It is a business book and a memoir and neither of those things fully, because I have never been able to separate the two. What happens in the boardroom and what happens in the body are the same story. This book does not pretend otherwise.

Some of what you are about to read is hard. There is violence in it, and grief, and the specific kind of loneliness that comes from carrying more than you should have had to carry. These pages are not written for your sympathy. They are written because the framework I built, the principles in this book, were forged inside those experiences. You cannot understand what I learned without understanding what it cost.

But this is not a book about suffering.

It is a book about what you build on the other side of it.

The word in the title – indefatigable – I didn't know it either the first time I heard it. I had to look it up. Incapable of being tired out. Persisting tirelessly. When someone told me that word described me, I sat with it for a long time. Not because I agreed.

Because I recognised what it meant to have lived it without knowing its name.

That is what I am offering you here. Not a shortcut. Not a formula. A mirror. The shape of what it looks like when someone refuses to stop, not because she is brave, not because she is strong, but because stopping was never an option she could afford.

You may find yourself in these pages. That is the point.

Norliza Pavlakos

INTRODUCTION

The Second Book

The psychologist didn't like me.

I could tell by the way he kept his eyes on his notepad instead of my face, the way he nodded just a fraction too slowly when my son spoke, the way the air in his office seemed to thicken every time I opened my mouth.

There was a desk between us. A barrier. He sat on one side, and my son and I sat side by side on the other, like we were being interviewed. Judged. Though maybe that was just my internal fears talking: the voice that always tells me I'm not doing enough, being enough, knowing enough.

My son was twenty-two, sitting next to me on those uncomfortable office chairs, going through one of those phases that all parents know. The phase where everything you do is wrong and everything you say is embarrassing, and your very existence is somehow both oppressive and negligent at the same time. I'd brought him to therapy because I wanted him to have a space to talk. What I didn't realise was that I'd also signed up to be the villain in someone else's narrative.

"She doesn't listen," my son was saying. "She thinks she knows everything."

The psychologist made a note. Nodded. "How does that make you feel?"

I sat there, my hands folded in my lap, trying to be the good parent who doesn't interrupt, who lets their child express himself, who models healthy communication, even when what I really wanted to do was lean across the desk and explain, in precise detail, that I had survived things that would have undone most

people, that I had raised five children while building businesses with no capital and no blueprint, that I had rebuilt myself after more failures than this man had probably seen in a decade of practice. That I was, at the very least, someone who had learned to listen the hard way.

But I didn't say any of that. I sat. I listened. I waited.

Until I couldn't anymore.

"Hang on a minute," I said, leaning forward. "I've written a book. I'm a keynote speaker. I've stood on stages around the world and spoken about the hardships I've gone through, the lessons I've learned. How can I be sitting here being talked about like I don't understand my own child?"

The psychologist looked up. Finally, he looked at me.

And then he said something that has stayed with me ever since.

"You might have written your first book," he said slowly, deliberately, "but the question is: what is your second book going to be about?"

He paused, let that land.

"Most people don't even know."

The room went quiet. My son shifted uncomfortably beside me. The clock on the wall ticked.

And I sat there, absolutely gutted, because he was right.

I didn't know.

The truth is, I hadn't even finished writing *Conviction* yet when he asked me that question. It wouldn't be published for some time after that. The manuscript was still sitting on my laptop, half-written, half-lived, waiting for me to be brave enough to finish it. But I'd already thought about a different book entirely. I'd sketched out chapters. Made lists. Titled it: *The Indefatigable Entrepreneur: Built from Nothing*.

But I wasn't ready then. Some books need you to live more life before you can write them. The psychologist's question wasn't just about writing. It was about whether I had truly examined what I'd built and why. It was also about whether I understood

the difference between the story I told on stages and the truth underneath it, whether I could sit with the parts that hadn't worked, the relationships, the losses, the decisions I'd dressed up in certainty when they were really just fear in disguise, and find something true inside them worth passing on.

That was five years ago. I didn't have the answer then. I have it now.

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Five years. Let me tell you what those five years looked like.

Before you read a single chapter, something needs naming about the kind of book this is, because it matters. This isn't a business book that happens to have a few personal stories in it. And it isn't a memoir that happens to have some business lessons tucked in. It's both, deliberately, because I believe those two things cannot be separated, not honestly. Every business decision I've ever made has been shaped by who I was when I made it, by what I was afraid of, by what I was trying to prove, by what I hadn't yet dealt with in the parts of my life that had nothing to do with revenue or strategy. The personal and the professional aren't parallel tracks. They're the same track. Most business books pretend otherwise. This one won't.

I got divorced from my twenty-one-year marriage. The road to where I am now was not clean or simple. Divorce never is. There were hard seasons, things left unsaid, and the particular grief of a love that changes shape without disappearing entirely. What I can tell you is that peace was chosen. For the children. For the twenty-one years built together. And for the understanding, arrived at slowly and at some cost, that the family does not have to end just because the marriage did. By the end of this book you will understand how that became possible. And why it is the hardest and most important thing in it.

Some chapters of a life end not with drama but with the quiet work of deciding who you're going to be on the other side of them. The morning the divorce was finalised, I went home and

made lunch for whoever was there, and the rice burned, and I stood over the stove and laughed because some things don't change. I had no idea what I was laughing at exactly. Relief, maybe. Grief wearing a different face. The absurdity of three decades of building things and ending up in a kitchen with burned rice and a new chapter with no title yet.

The children have grown up. My oldest is finding his own way now, building his own life with the same stubbornness I apparently gave him and then had to sit opposite in a therapist's office and pretend wasn't mine. The others are at different stages of becoming themselves, navigating that space between who they were as children and who they are deciding to be. I have no idea what any of them will build or who they'll eventually become. What I know is that they watched me not quit. Not once, not for a day, not through any of it. I hope that counts for something. I believe it does.

There was a morning when I sat at the kitchen table and counted everything I had. Not money. Not assets. Not any of the things that go into a balance sheet. There were five children who were alive and mostly okay. There was a business that had rebuilt itself so many times it had developed its own muscle memory for survival. There was a platform built from nothing, again, because something in the mental health system was broken and it couldn't be looked away from. There was a person who asked me, one evening in Malaysia over coffee, what I actually wanted. Not what looked good from a stage. What I wanted for the years ahead. I didn't have the answer ready then. By the end of this book, I do.

A decade of keynote speaking. Five continents. Fortune 500 boardrooms where I was the only woman who looked like me, delivering frameworks I built not in a classroom but in the middle of building businesses that had no right to survive. The stages got bigger. The audiences changed. But the thing being said stayed the same. Which means either I found something true

early, or I've been telling the same story for too long. I'll let this book be the test of that.

The Support Pages exists because I refused to accept that the mental health system couldn't be navigated by ordinary people. Not a therapy practice, not a clinic. A directory. A place where someone in crisis at two in the morning can search and find, in minutes, a practitioner who speaks their language, takes their insurance, and has availability this week. No tech background. No investors. Just the same stubbornness that once turned a lounge room into a tailoring business. Today it's a mental health directory that works: used by GPs for patient referrals, by families who don't know where to start, by people who have been on a waiting list for months and can't wait anymore.

At the time of writing, Melbourne Luxury Tailoring is still running, the business that rose from the ashes of Finest Alterations after the pandemic took everything and forced a rebuild from scratch, again. Whether it outlasts this book is not something that can be controlled, and that is the honest truth of any business. The Liza Pavlakos Foundation continues quietly, its original principle intact: put resources directly in people's hands, not into operating costs. A domestic worker in Malaysia with undiagnosed cancer, sent home to access surgery. Girls in a Philippine shelter handed something real: art supplies, a conversation, an hour of being seen, rather than a donation that never reached them. I handle the tailoring business from the backend now. I show up in person for the Foundation when I can. Peace has been made with the fact that some things were built to last, and some things were built to be useful, and the distinction matters.

I build daily resets into my day. Moments to stop, breathe, come back to what matters. Some days I manage all of them. Some days I manage one. Some days that single pause is the only thing I do that I'm proud of. I still cook for my children when I'm home. Still burn the rice.

I've been a woman without credentials, an immigrant without

a blueprint, a single mother without a safety net, and a founder without capital. Every one of those identities was supposed to be a reason to stop. Every one of them turned out to be a reason to keep going, because when you have nothing to lose, you also have nothing holding you back. Being underestimated gives you room to build without scrutiny. Needing to provide for five children removes the luxury of waiting for perfect timing. Daily practice builds the discipline to reset when everything's falling apart.

The obstacles weren't obstacles. They were the framework.

And the businesses weren't the point. They were the method. What was being built, across three decades of starting and losing and rebuilding, was myself. I just didn't know that until I was nearly finished.

I know that can sound like a reframe. Like something you'd put on a motivational poster. I've stood on enough stages to know how those phrases land: one person nods hard, the next rolls their eyes, and the one in the back is already on their phone. So let me be more precise. What I mean is this: the specific circumstances that should have stopped me, no capital, no formal training, no connections in any of the industries I entered, a home situation that most people would have correctly identified as incompatible with starting a business, turned out to be the exact conditions that developed the specific capabilities this book is about. Negotiating from a position of no leverage. Making decisions without the comfort of data. Building a brand without a budget. Staying grounded when the ground keeps shifting. Those aren't abstract skills. I learned them because I had no choice, and I am passing them on to you because they work regardless of whether you learned them the hard way.

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So here it is. The second book.

Conviction told you how I survived. This book tells you what I learned by building five businesses with nothing but resource-

fulness and a refusal to accept that “nothing” meant “impossible.” It tells you what happened after the survival, which is the part nobody talks about enough.

The trauma, the violence, the moments that make people gasp when they hear them, those are in the first book. What is here is everything that came after. The work in the background that gets forgotten. The daily discipline. The unsexy persistence. The thousand decisions made in rooms no one photographed, that turned out to be the whole thing. The relentless grind of building something from nothing while managing five children and a business that might fail and a marriage that’s quietly ending and a body that’s exhausted and a mind that won’t stop cataloguing everything that could still go wrong.

This book isn’t about the big events. Those are in *Conviction*. This is about the work in the background that gets forgotten. The daily discipline. The unsexy persistence. The thousand small decisions that don’t make good stories but make all the difference. And underneath all of that: the relationships that held you, the grounding that saved you, the reasons that made it worth doing at all.

The indefatigable part isn’t surviving the basement or the bankruptcy or the betrayal.

It’s getting up the next morning and doing the work anyway.

Here’s what that actually looks like. There are mornings I can’t get out of bed. The trauma is still there, debilitating and relentless, refusing to stay in the past where it belongs. PTSD doesn’t care that you’ve built businesses or stood on stages or written books about resilience. But I move anyway. Not because I’m strong, but because I have five children who need to eat, a business that won’t run itself, and clients counting on me. The movement comes first. The strength comes later.

That’s what indefatigable actually means. Not that you never fall. That you get back up even when you don’t want to. Especially when you don’t want to.

I didn't sit down and plan a framework. I lived one. Three decades of starting businesses, losing businesses, rebuilding businesses – the same principles kept showing up, whether I was pitching a beauty pageant at twenty-three or rebuilding a tech platform in my late forties. I just didn't have names for them yet. This book gives them names. But the names aren't the point. The experiences they came from are the point.

INDEFATIGABLE is the framework for the journey. Each letter is a chapter. Each chapter is a story. And inside each story is something true about what it takes to build a life from nothing, not a shortcut, because there aren't any, but perhaps a mirror. A way of recognising, in someone else's experience, the shape of your own.

Some chapters are about the business decisions: the negotiations, the priorities, the brand built one unglamorous room at a time. Others are about what was happening underneath: the marriage that couldn't survive the ambition, the children raised inside the chaos, the grounding that either saves you or doesn't, the accountability that is the hardest kind of honesty you can give yourself. None of it is separate. That's the whole point. The business and the life are the same thing. What you build in one, you build in the other. What you avoid in one, you pay for in the other. The entrepreneur who hasn't done the personal work will find the same patterns showing up in every business. Different numbers, different partners, same wound running the show.

The thread that runs through all of it is something I didn't have a single word for until recently. When someone asked me to describe it in one sentence, I said: the willingness to begin with nothing, and mean it. Not as a strategy. Not as a story to tell later. As a genuine reckoning with the present moment: this is what I have, this is what I don't, and this is what I'm going to build anyway.

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This isn't a book you need to read in order, though the arc

rewards those who do. Each chapter stands on its own, a story, a lesson, something you can return to. Some chapters will meet you exactly where you are right now. Others will be waiting for you when you need them, six months from now, in a moment you can't yet imagine but will recognise immediately when it arrives.

Don't just read it. Let it land. When something in these pages sounds familiar, when a story echoes something you've lived or a principle names something you've always known but never quite had words for, stop and sit with it before moving on.

The work is in the sitting still.

This isn't a formula. It isn't a guarantee. I can't promise you that reading these pages will produce a specific outcome by a specific date, because that's not how building anything real has ever worked, not for me, not for anyone. What I can tell you is what I know from three decades in the field: every person I've watched build something lasting, across industries, across wildly different circumstances, shares the same quality. Not intelligence. Not timing. Not capital.

A refusal to stop.

That refusal looks different in everyone. In me it looked like a lounge room and a catering business with no licence and no margins and absolutely no reason to believe it would work. In you it might look like something quieter. Or something louder. Or something you're still trying to name. But if something in you is already leaning forward as you read this, not the polite version of interest but the kind that feels like recognition, then you already know what this book is going to ask of you.

This book is for the person who started with nothing and is still trying to make it mean something. The woman who left a situation she couldn't name and built a life from the wreckage of it. The mother who refuses to choose between her children and her ambition, and is exhausted by the fact that she has to keep justifying that refusal. The immigrant who was told her accent would hold her back. The man who showed up to work

the morning after losing half of what he built. The founder sitting on an idea they're too afraid to test, who has been told "not yet" so many times they've almost started to believe it. If any version of that is you, this book was written for you specifically.

That psychologist was right about one thing.

Most people don't know what their second book is going to be about.

But I do now.

My first book was about surviving what happened to me.

My second book is about creating what happens next.

For you. For me. For everyone who has ever been underestimated, and built something anyway.

END OF SAMPLE

Keep reading.

Read on for the story of what came next.

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The Indefatigable Entrepreneur by Norliza Pavlakos