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THE GLASS LEDGE

HOW TO BREAK THROUGH SELF-SABOTAGE,
EMBRACE YOUR POWER, AND
CREATE YOUR SUCCESS

 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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Prologue

It was the first day of summer in 2018, and I will remember it as one of the most gut-wrenching, yet life-altering, days of my life.

I was sitting in a WeWork conference room about to break the bad news to my team. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find the right words to communicate that the company might be shutting down and that I needed to let everybody go, effective immediately.

Just a few days before, a potential investor I had been actively pitching since launch had agreed to invest the capital we needed for growth and monetization. However, he'd just informed me that his investment committee no longer wanted to move forward with the deal.

I had been working on overdrive to secure our next round of funding. We were down to our last dollar and could no longer afford to pay the team or the office rent. We had just recruited a new cohort of excited summer interns, and we had to let them go as well.

After I finally made the announcement, I found myself alone in what was left of our office packing my belongings into a large, black trash bag (yep, a trash bag!), which I had to drag into the elevator in front of hundreds of fellow startup warriors.

It was the ultimate walk of shame . . . and I wasn't even in heels.

At home, I rushed into the bathroom. I spent the evening vomiting and at one point lifted up my blouse to reveal a massive rash on the left side of my abdomen. That night I could barely sleep from the discomfort, though my eyes were begging for a break from all the crying.

I suddenly found myself unemployed, unfulfilled, and unwell. Instead of unlocking more of my potential and taking my career and life to the next level, my entrepreneurial journey had hit rock bottom—again! *How do I come back from this? Where do I go from here?*

In the past, when things hadn't worked out or when situations or environments felt too stressful, I would chase the next opportunity. But this time, I couldn't just walk away. It was my business. It was my mission.

I had to rebuild it all, myself included. I had to break the cycle. And that's when it clicked.

All these years, I'd strived to break glass ceilings, but I didn't realize I was also teetering on a glass ledge.

If you haven't heard of the symbolic ledge, it's where physical and emotional exhaustion meet—where we are tempted to damage and distort our self-perspective, blame anyone and everyone for our hard times, internalize rejections, lash out at the ones we love, burn bridges, and ultimately self-sabotage. It leads to a narrow chasm of self-inflicted bitterness, isolation, guilt, and spiraling doubt—where we undermine our own stories and discount our capabilities. The ledge is easy to fall off, and too many of us have stood before it, wondering how to balance or climb down.

I spent years listening to and interviewing some of the most impressive women. These women seem to all have natural talents that change the world. And while I still aspire to reach their levels of success one day, my kind of success has been more modest and accessible. One could say that I am only marginally qualified to be giving advice. My handshake is still not firm enough. My eye-contact game needs work. I still buy a week's worth of fresh vegetables and don't eat any of them. I'm just now learning how to budget my personal expenses properly. And I often ignore emails for weeks because I can be easily overwhelmed, then I write back "somehow this ended up in my spam folder." So yes, I don't have it all figured out. I did, however, fulfill my dream of building and growing my own business and creating financial freedom while living a meaningful and purposeful life.

I write this book now because of my diverse set of pivots and the self-knowledge I acquired along the way. It took me years to recognize that while external barriers do exist, my biggest barrier has been my own flawed self-worth. I wore down, I burned out, I failed, I went broke, my mascara ran and ran out, but ultimately I came out the other side with a different perspective on success, one that aligns me with living my own truth rather than falling victim to expectations set by the outside world.

I stopped allowing a dysfunctional society to turn me into a dysfunctional woman. And my hope is that this book will help you acquire the necessary self-knowledge to stop too.

Introduction

BALANCING ON THE GLASS LEDGE

I've always felt unclaimed. Like every woman who picks up this book, I am multidimensional. We women carry many complexities that make up who we are, and we intend to embrace them all. Ideally, we're open to evolving and accepting all parts of ourselves, no matter how different they may seem.

Some people may know me as a former beauty queen, and others might know me as “a beauty queen with a PowerPoint and a dream.” But there are many facets to me: I'm an immigrant, a scientist, a medical missionary, a businesswoman, and a women's advocate. And this is a story of how I created a distinct narrative that shows I am more than just an archipelago of identities.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

When I was a teenager, my parents—accomplished executives in Morocco—decided to sacrifice our comfortable lives and their established careers to move across the ocean in pursuit of their children's American Dream.

I find it interesting that most people think of immigrants only as people who are struggling in their home countries and migrate to better

provide for their families. We did the opposite. I had to watch my parents completely level down their lives and start over.

It wasn't long after that move that, at fifteen, I began struggling with depression. I'd been forced to adapt to a new lifestyle. A new culture, a new language, and even a new way of learning. A sense of belonging is crucial for adolescents as it is often associated with being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged—and I no longer had that. I struggled to adapt to a new lifestyle in a different culture. I felt trapped in a new and sudden reality, and the worst part was having no one to talk to about it. I felt misunderstood and lost.

Along with depression, I developed insecurities around my self-image, shame for not speaking perfect English, and guilt for seeing my parents' career downgrades and sacrifices. Isolation was my coping mechanism and journaling my only escape. Journaling helped me realize that my new environment was not the issue. In fact, my reality was mostly positive. It was how I was defining myself in that reality—fueled by my own self-esteem, or lack thereof—that was the problem.

I needed to revise myself from a struggling outsider who didn't belong and was never going to be as good as the other American students. With the help of counselors and the support of my aunt who had gone through the same transition years ago when she, too, moved from Morocco, I learned to normalize my new life, accept responsibility, and harness the restorative power of self-enhancing life choices.

I finished high school and received a college scholarship to study biochemistry and molecular biology. I hoped to fulfill my childhood dream of curing cancer. (Spoiler Alert: I did not end up curing cancer!) After college, I was selected from seven hundred applicants to intern for one of Munich's best emerging biotech startups. This was a stepping-stone to an exciting career as a cancer research scientist.

On the outside it might have looked like I was breaking through obstacle after obstacle. But inside I was riddled with anxiety, as the internalized voice of my new American culture whispered the limits of who I could be. I applied to only two colleges, both in my home state of Colorado, because I didn't think I'd be good enough to get into the Ivy League schools. I followed my friends wherever they were going and did whatever they were doing because I didn't have the confidence to make my own decisions otherwise. I resisted leaving home because I feared I couldn't make it on my own.

TRYING ON THE CROWN FOR SIZE

While I was claiming my place as a research scientist in the male-dominated health-care sector, my mother was encouraging me to “get more in touch with my feminine side.”

So she signed me up for a beauty pageant.

Why did I agree to this? I idolized my mother. Growing up, I saw her as the epitome of a woman who truly had it all. She is a confident businesswoman, always dressed to perfection, and she is also a loving wife and a firm yet supportive parent. A fearless risk-taker, my mother has always been the backbone of our family. She left her own family at the age of thirteen to pursue her dreams of becoming an independent and accomplished woman. You could feel her energy just by being in the same room with her. And I am so grateful to have her as a role model.

Although I tended to follow my mother’s advice, a beauty pageant was a big ask. I was terrified of being on stage, of public speaking, and frankly, I couldn’t handle the thought of putting myself out there for others to deliberately judge. I never thought of myself as a girly girl. I’d avoided joining sororities in college because I was intimidated and insecure around beautiful and accomplished women. And pageants were full of them!

As I’ll talk about later, to my surprise, I not only fell in love with pageants but also became obsessed with the preparation process. I think it’s because I shifted my focus to the self-development lessons that were there for the taking: poise, communication, confidence, resilience, strength, and courage. To top it off, the unexpectedly supportive pageant community introduced me to a new world in which women encouraged one another to become their best selves.

After several attempts at the Miss Colorado USA pageant, making it as far as a first runner-up, I moved to New York and won the title of Miss New York United States in 2015 on my first attempt. I then went on to place second runner-up at Miss United States 2015 and to serve on the first all-women panel of judges at the 2018 Miss Universe competition in Thailand. I have since judged multiple other state and national pageants, including Miss Teen USA in 2020 and Miss Earth USA in 2022.

WHEN FEMINISM MEETS HUSTLE

While experiencing pageant success and establishing myself as the fresh voice of a generation of millennial women through my emerging media brand SWAAY, I found myself subtly becoming part of a “resistance” culture in which feminism rebranded itself as what we now call Girlboss Capitalism. Amplified by the downfall of the first potential female president and the rise of a misogynist in national office, 2016 became the start of the golden age for women who dared to step out and speak up. And I was ready to rally.

Mass-media feminism took on a new sense of urgency. Women-only clubs popped up across the nation. Grassroots activism reached its peak. And in 2017, the #metoo movement showed men that the old ways of abusing power are no longer acceptable. At the forefront of all these movements were charismatic female founders and leaders who were brave enough to change the narrative by sharing their stories and gracing magazine covers as the new celebrated icons.

I felt so grateful and excited to have had a front-row seat to this historic shift, interviewing and taking in the raw accounts of these icons regarding their experiences as disruptive leaders, while trying to become one of them and navigating my own startup struggles as a female founder myself. The concept of Girlbossery became a representation for the pursuit of female ambition and success, and the women’s movement fueled a storm of rebellion against the injustices that made every woman’s life taxing. I felt proud to play even a small part in the change that was taking place. But fighting the patriarchy while sustaining a female-forward media startup that further exposed me to unexpected indignities was a double-edged sword. On one hand, I was part of an emerging generation of change agents who were collectively raising their voices and bringing vital issues to light. On the other hand, it felt like I was stuck in an echo chamber where feminism became obsessed with victimhood and where the rhetoric focused more on what we women can’t do instead of what we can. Subconsciously, I began to define myself by the wounds of gender-related adversities, which was ultimately disempowering.

The haunting belief that I might be less than others—especially counterparts who were men—hijacked my confidence and triggered my ego. At the time, I saw this dynamic as the foundation of my ambition. It fueled the already-big chip on my shoulder and gave me the

motivation to hustle for change, and without it I wouldn't have been able to achieve so many of my goals and transcend the odds.

But during the first years of building my business and navigating repeated rejections, I became defensive and reactive, anticipating rejections and failures before they even happened. And when they did happen, I easily blamed the unfair structural systems in place. Every time a man in power looked at me smugly and then closed the door in my face, I wanted desperately to show him that I was in fact good enough. As I repeated the same validation dance over and over, it became clear to me that my inner dialogue was more condescending than the venture capitalists in the conference rooms. At this point in my journey, I began to pay attention to these voices within me. The voices I'd internalized that trumpeted patriarchy, xenophobia, and women's inferiority. The voices that led me to see myself in ways detrimental to my self-actualization.

These voices were to be expected. After all, the feminist movement is all about exposing a system that isn't designed for our advancement—and we have the research to prove it.

- In 2015, 17 percent of women were in C-suite positions (the highest-ranking individuals in an organization); in 2021, at 21 percent, it's barely grown.
- Women in the US are paid 82 cents for every dollar paid to men, an annual gender wage gap of \$10,194. The wage gap is even larger for most women of color.
- Women are starting high-growth businesses more than ever before but are receiving only 2.8 percent of venture capital investments.
- Across all media platforms, men received 63 percent of bylines and credits while women received 37 percent.

These statistics paint a grim picture, one that leaves every woman feeling frustrated and disadvantaged but also motivated for change. I am still as passionate as ever about gender parity and women's rights; let it be known that I am and always will be a proud feminist. But to me feminism is also about encouraging and empowering women (and men) to feel a sense of autonomy and control in their lives while cultivating a sense of accountability. So as I continued to push through the

different barriers in my entrepreneurial journey, my perspective began to shift from “things should be different” to “what can I do differently for myself and to pay it forward?”

Galvanized by my personal experience and more research, I set out to create a safe space for women to own their stories and speak their truths, an outlet that would equip them with the guidance and tools to amplify their voices and elevate their credibility. With this hope of shaping a new societal narrative, I pivoted my company, SWAAY Media, from an aspirational feminist media brand to a self-publishing platform where underrepresented voices can build their authority and influence as thought leaders.

Despite the constant struggles in fundraising and growing a sustainable business, in five years SWAAY has become a leading platform and community for female thought leadership and storytelling. The company currently reaches more than two million women and is uplifting thousands of voices. And most importantly, it has become a network of powerful women from all walks of life who mentor and champion one another by sharing stories of resilience, vulnerability, and autonomy.

In the same way that my background and experience aren't easily summarized or labeled, today's women are also a diverse multi-hyphenated, and rich group of individuals. But many face a common obstacle: internalized oppression.

Women face judgment issues in career progression, communication, and appearance, and as a result, we often adopt strategies that hold us further back.

This book explores self-inflicted barriers (internalized oppression) often shaped by preconceived societal expectations and outdated gender stereotypes (external oppression) in a way that doesn't blame women or society. It focuses instead on our individual actions and provides tools to change ourselves faster than the outside world will change for us. I will prompt you to ask yourself tough questions and uncover

uncomfortable answers. And rather than asking what society needs to do differently or blaming it for what it hasn't done for us, we will help each other hold sway over our circumstances by asking ourselves,

What can I do differently?

We want to change the narrative for ourselves and pay it forward.

Everyone has heard of “the glass ceiling.” Decades ago, this term came into being to describe the invisible barriers to women’s workplace advancement. It has since become a rallying cry of corporate feminism that everyone #LovesToHate. And while we’ve come a long way in breaking through many barriers, many successful women face the same formidable obstacle I have faced: unconscious self-sabotage fueled by internalized oppression. When women affirm negative self-stereotypes and give in to external expectations, I call it “tumbling off the glass ledge.”

The **glass ceiling** has become a mainstream idea to describe invisible external oppression and has been at the forefront of conversations around women’s empowerment. But it’s time we explore the **glass ledge**, a metaphor that represents women adapting thinking and behavior that does not serve them. **Tumbling off the glass ledge** is when we have lost control over our own paths and fallen prey to fear, panic, and hopelessness because of our self-sabotaging thoughts and behavior (often driven by external pressures and standards), which ultimately hinders our growth potential.

Balancing on the glass ledge or stepping gently off the glass ledge happens when we understand the nuances of why we feel the way we do and act from a place of self-awareness and self-assurance. It involves breaking free from our self-deprecating ways, shattering the poor self-image we’ve been carrying, and rising above internal and external biases to achieve our rightfully earned success.

This book will explore the ten themes that are most likely to derail us when we least expect it. These themes aren’t good or bad in and of themselves. What we will learn are productive strategies for working through potential issues on our own terms. The ten themes are organized as stand-alone chapters:

- Power
- Likability
- Presentation
- Authenticity
- Conflict
- Confidence
- Balance
- Competition
- Expertise
- Belonging

Each chapter begins with examples of sabotaging inner dialogue that will help you identify those voices within yourself. Then I offer stories from my journey to help you unpack how that theme might be showing up in your life. Each chapter also includes advice from accomplished women in my network, credible third-party research, lessons and tips to prevent slipping off the ledge and/or for getting back on the right track, as well as exercises that will help you put the content to work right away. I highly recommend you keep a journal to reflect on the stories shared, to track your answers to the exercises, and to make the most of the information you find throughout the book. You are welcome to share your reflections with me and other women at SWAAY.com or through social media by tagging me (@imanoubou) or using the hashtag #theglassledge.

Although I've written this book from the point of view of a cisgender, heterosexual woman—which might make my perspective and ideas more familiar to others in this same camp—I hope that no matter how you identify and what ideals you aspire to, you will find some inspiration that resonates and works for you.

It has never been a perfect world. While many social norms may have shifted when it comes to the gender dynamic, both workplace and societal gender polarities remain ingrained. Though we may not have the power as individuals to change this at scale, we women do have the power to control the decisions and behaviors that lead to a story we don't want. We can change our own stories and pay it forward at the same time. We don't have to settle for being labeled, and we don't have to adhere to expectations that are driven by other people's validation.

I hope this book will help women at all stages of life learn to “sway” the narrative, as they approach the glass ledge with balance and clarity. May you grow through your own definition of what it means to be a womxn. But more importantly, may you gain the advantage that will catapult you to the next level personally and professionally.