

*Picking Up  
the Pieces*

*My Journey with  
Grief, Greatness,  
& God*

Dawn Ruggie



*DRI Publications*

Picking Up the Pieces  
My Journey with Grief, Greatness, & God  
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The events told in this book are the author's memories of events. Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.

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*To everyone struggling and picking up the pieces.  
I see you. Keep standing tall*





*Sun - Flow - er*

*Even on the darkest days I  
will stand tall and find the  
sunlight.*

*—Author unknown*



# *Chapter 1*

DID YOU EVER HAVE A MEMORY so wonderful it plays over and over again in your mind, so vivid you smile and actually laugh out loud? One of my favorite memories is of two of my six children, Michael and Brielle. Their personalities are completely different, but they come together so naturally.

Brie was born in 1997 in Puerto Rico to another woman, who at the time I had never met. She was given the name Catherine Marie. I can't really say how long Brie lived in Puerto Rico, but I know she was very young when she came to the United States and later moved to the Dominican Republic with family.

Her favorite memories of the Dominican Republic are being with her Abuela. She talked a lot about the time she spent helping her in the kitchen. Her Abuela, whom she lived with, had the best recipes, and had such a special way of loving her. I knew from her stories I could never compete with the bond they had. It was so

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pure and so innocent.

Unfortunately, when Brie was around nine years old, she and her siblings were sent back to the United States. They were put on a flight by themselves, with only the flight attendant to watch over them. Brie told me she would never forget how scared and confused they felt.

Unbeknown to her, life was about to change drastically, and it would have a lifelong effect on her.

After a few short years in the United States, the Department of Human Services stepped in and removed her and her siblings from their home. She spent a short time in a foster home before being permanently placed with us.

When she and Michael met, they were in that awkward teenage stage of life. The pressures from school and the transition were a lot for them, and I knew they needed to have some fun.

I had just bought Super Soakers for a Father's Day barbecue. I filled them with water, gave them to each one, and started squirting them. Their faces had a look of total shock! Brie was extremely shy and quiet; she would never initiate something so bold. I could tell by her reaction she wanted to just run and hide. But she quickly realized she had no choice but to join in. Eventually, I stood back and just observed the pure excitement of the evening. I don't think I had ever heard Brie laugh so hard in my life! Almost ten years have passed and still the sound of their laughter plays so magnificently in my mind. Memories like this one are what gets me through the hard times.

EVERYONE TALKS ABOUT 2020 being such a horrible year. For my family, 2019 was the year that changed us forever. The year started out so wonderfully. We had just moved into our dream home, and our first grandbaby was born. Life was perfect, too perfect, I suppose. They say when things go up, they must come down, and boy, were they right. Life came crashing down on us so hard and so unexpectedly.

You would think there would be a warning about events to come that will change your life forever and so profoundly—but there isn't. It just happens. You are left feeling broken, abused, and alone. Somehow you need to pick up the pieces and start rebuilding.

IT WAS A COLD SATURDAY NIGHT in January, but warmer than the Saturday before, which had been even colder. My youngest daughter, Ameyah, had a friend sleeping over, and the house was bumping with their music and giggles. We made several videos to share their infectious joy on social media. Even the dogs couldn't resist this spontaneous dance party! These are the moments you want to hold onto forever. The moments before a tragedy are so innocent and so beautiful.

Oftentimes one is not lucky enough to capture the exact moment, but, fortunately, we did share this evening on social media. Around 10 p.m. I realized the girls weren't going to settle down anytime soon, and I didn't want to ruin their fun. I'm glad now that I allowed them to enjoy those moments as long as possible. I made

up their beds, made sure they had everything they needed, and headed to bed myself.

That's when Adriana, Brie's roommate, called and said they were taking Brie to the ER to be evaluated for a fever. I had spoken to Brie earlier in the day and was under the impression they just wanted to check her since she had a baby three weeks ago.

At 10:30 p.m. Adriana's sister called from the hospital and said that a nurse requested I come right away. I was immediately terrified! I asked to speak with Brie.

"Hello," she said in a weak voice.

"Brie, are you ok?"

"Yes,"

"Do you want me to come?"

She paused for a moment, then said, "Yes, Mom, can you please come?"

"Absolutely I'll be there in one hour."

I had really just wanted to hear her voice; somehow that reassured me everything would be ok. I hung up the phone and went straight to my husband.

"Matt, I just spoke with Brie. Adriana took her to the hospital, and she wants me to come."

"Ok, you go. I'll stay home with the kids."

I hurried out the door and started the one-hour drive to the hospital. A million different scenarios played through my mind, but nothing came close to the reality I was about to face.

As I pulled into the parking lot, I prayed she would be ok. I dashed toward the front door where the security guard was waiting.

“Can I help you?”

“I’m here to see my daughter, Brielle Ruggie. She’s in the ER.”

It seemed to take him hours to look up her information. He was very patient with me as I’m sure I was very agitated. Finally, he stood up and said, “Follow me.”

As we walked down the never-ending row of numbered curtains, the sound of our footsteps echoed throughout the hall. I’m not sure if it was really that quiet or if I was so deep in my thoughts that I blocked everything out. Finally, I heard a familiar voice coming from behind one of the curtains at the same time the security guard said, “This is her room.”

I took a deep breath and pulled open the curtain. There she was, my beautiful Brie. Usually, her face was freshly made up and she wore a vibrant smile, but not this time. She looked sad, with dark shadows under her eyes and unusually pale skin. I went to her bedside and wanted to hold her hand. I was there to reassure her that everything was going to be okay. That's what moms do, right? When I moved the covers from her hands, I wasn't prepared for what I saw. They were swollen, pale, and covered in black sores. I instantly felt my legs get weak. I tried my hardest to hide my emotions because I didn't want her to know I was afraid.

The doctor was informed I had arrived and came to the room immediately. He pulled me out into the hallway to discuss her situation. He told me her condition was very serious and she was dealing with multiple complications. She had a large amount of fluid

around her heart, which needed to be addressed quickly. Also, she had been breastfeeding but since she was sick the last couple days, she had opted to give her baby formula. This had caused her breasts to quickly become engorged; they were worried about her milk ducts becoming infected. They told me she needed to be admitted and discussed a couple of different options with me. They could either transfer her to a facility that had a maternity unit or keep her at this location, which was a trauma center, and bring in maternity doctors. After much discussion and reassurance from the doctors, the decision was made to keep her at that location.

Sometime during the night Adriana and her sister left, and Brie was moved to the Cardiac Care Unit (CCU). As soon as we arrived the nurse came in and introduced herself; she told me that several tests had been ordered and would be done first thing in the morning. As the night went on, I convinced myself things were okay because she appeared to be resting comfortably. I sat there for hours just looking at her. I even took pictures to capture the beauty and strength that my girl radiated, even in her weakest moments. I wanted her to see what I saw: a strong, beautiful woman, not a young, broken child who had been abused. I looked forward to the day when this was over and I could sit with her and show her all the pictures I had taken. We would laugh and talk about her strength and her ability to conquer anything. I knew these would also be memories she could share with her daughter when the time was right.

Finally, as morning approached, a technician with a

large machine popped her head into the room and said she would like to come in to perform some requested tests. I sighed in relief. I curled up in a very awkward position on the hospital room chair and fell in and out of sleep; I could finally get some rest knowing someone was with her. I felt she was safe under the care of the technician. Every so often I would open my eyes and see the tech was still standing over her. I knew I had a lot of decisions to make. It felt like the weight of the world was on me, and it was exhausting.

At this point the doctors still couldn't tell me what type of illness was causing such a vibrant and healthy girl to be so sick. As the technician left the room, I forced myself out of the chair; my heart was racing and the hair on my arms stood up as I anxiously waited to hear from the doctors. I was sure the cardiologist would be in at any minute, but I was forced to wait and pace for hours until I heard from the doctor.

Various family members called several times to express their concern and inquire about Brie's condition. I reassured them that as soon as the cardiologist let me know what the test results showed, I would call and update them. I tried to explain the situation was far more serious than they understood, but how could I really convey that to them when I didn't fully understand the situation myself? Was I being overly dramatic? Was it all in my imagination, or was I just sleep-deprived? It couldn't be that bad, I thought—or at least hoped! She had just had a baby, after all! I was sure when the doctor talked to me again, he would give me the clarification we needed.

As it neared lunchtime, I received a much-needed call from my mom.

“Dawn, I'm on my way! Do you want coffee?”

“Oh my God, YES!”

I couldn't wait until she got there. I knew she would help me decipher the situation. As soon as she arrived, she embraced Brie with a big hug. Brie was relieved to see her, too. My mom had a million questions. Had the tests been read? What doctors had come in? Did we get any answers yet? Unfortunately, there were no updates available to answer her questions. I was feeling so overwhelmed at this point so it felt good to have someone there with me, someone who had had a good night's sleep and a fresh perspective.

Brie was feeling more uncomfortable, and her moans were almost constant. The pain that had started in her stomach and chest was now in her back and down her left arm. It appeared to me, from her complaints, that her cardiac situation was getting worse. Over the next couple of hours, I walked out to the nurses' station several times to share my concerns. After a while, when I again approached them, I could see by their expressions that I was becoming a nuisance, in their view.

I was told over and over again that Brie could not be given more pain meds. This response didn't seem appropriate to me, and at one point they suggested that Brie try pumping her breasts to see if that would help. I thought this seemed somewhat reasonable. Her pump from home was brought into the room, and we sat her up, pulled down her hospital gown, and attached the

pump. When we turned on the machine, she said it was working properly, but she immediately started vomiting. I could somehow feel her pain in the pit of my stomach. There was so much blood in the pan that it makes me sick to this day when I think about it. I live now with horrible feelings of regret over this painful attempt to help Brie. She was so weak that she collapsed back onto the bed. It was too much for her.

After more time went by and more discussions with the doctors, the decision was made to transfer her to a hospital that was rated for a higher level of care. The transfer request was called in to the receiving hospital for their approval, documents were signed, and the transfer team was sent to pick her up.

It took forever but once they arrived it felt too fast. I had to let my baby go. I hugged her, kissed her, and told her not to worry. I was going to make sure she was taken care of and that everything was going to be ok. I watched as they lifted her weak body with the bedsheet and moved her over to the stretcher. They strapped her in and started wheeling her out of the room. My heart sank. I couldn't wait to see her at the next hospital. My mind was racing the entire ride, with my thoughts of her past flashing before my eyes.

