

Chapter 1: Soul Mates

Growing up in South Philadelphia in the 1980s, when you were young and hanging out with your friends, all of your outdoor activities and socializing – whether it be riding your bikes or playing a game of street hockey, stick ball or hide and seek – would take place on the neighborhood blocks that you were most familiar with. Being that much of South Philly at the time was of Roman Catholic faith, the boundary lines were often set by which parish you belonged to. As you got older and into your teenage years, when pick-up games and bike riding were replaced with simply walking around the neighborhood in large groups while sometimes carrying a boom box blasting the latest tunes, the boundary lines would get blurred as you ventured into uncharted territory. Of course, this new territory could have only been a few blocks beyond your comfort zone and possibly just the next parish over, but as you wandered up and down newer and different streets that just so happened to be lined with continuous rowhomes just like the ones you were surrounded by in your safety zone, you would run into new faces from these unfamiliar neighborhoods doing the exact same thing as you and your friends.

In the winter of 1988, during our freshman year of high school, Daria and I crossed eyes for the first time. We were just two kids walking around our South Philly neighborhood with our own group of friends, bumping into each other occasionally and making casual conversations. During these cold and often snowy early months of the new year, the only thing we had to do other than hang out in our houses was wander the tight rowhome-lined streets of South Philly, hoping to run into other groups of friends to catch up on what was new and happening or head over to Dunkin' Donuts to warm up

over a cup of coffee or hot chocolate. I would intentionally time it so that we would run into Daria and her friends, only to find out that she was doing the same, hoping to meet up with me. Somehow, these casual meet-ups gradually led to a spark for both of us that we would carry together for many years to come.

Amidst the chilly winds and bustling streets of our neighborhood, something remarkable began to blossom. Perhaps it was the way our laughter harmonized or the twinkle in Daria's eyes that caught my attention. Slowly but surely, these chance encounters started to hold a special place in our hearts.

As the winter gave way to spring, our bond deepened. The chance meet-ups in the neighborhood were turning into planned date nights at the monthly school dance, catching the latest movie together at the local theater, or even just grabbing a milkshake together at the neighborhood ice cream parlor. We found our conversations transitioning from casual banter to meaningful exchanges. We shared stories, dreams, and secrets, and with each passing day, it became increasingly evident that there was a unique connection between us. Everything from what radio stations we listened to and the hottest new videos that were airing on MTV to talking about our favorite flavors of ice cream and what our dream car would be. These were simple and innocent conversations that allowed us to get to know and understand who we were and all that we had in common.

That spark, ignited during those frosty winter days, would turn into a flame that would warm us throughout high school and beyond. Our friendship evolved into a partnership that transcended time and distance. We supported each other through the ups and downs of life, celebrated victories, and comforted each other during hardships. Daria and I became inseparable, and the winter of 1988

marked the beginning of a lifelong journey, one filled with love, trust, and the enduring magic of a chance encounter that grew into a deep and enduring connection.

They say everything is meant for a reason. When we're young, it's hard to decipher its true meaning without feeling betrayed by the course of nature. We always want to know the reasons right away; we want to know the meaning behind seemingly ordinary events in our lives. But it's often when we see things in retrospect that we understand the true meaning of every connection, every specific event or circumstance, that changed our lives forever.

Daria was the reason I could believe in fate and destiny. The feeling of home and comfort with her was otherworldly. With love like that, one could believe in the concept of forever. Because while life takes away everything, the only thing that remains is the power of true love.

From very early on, the connection between us was palpable and yet entirely inexplicable. It was a mutual feeling that united us and drew us towards each other with no apparent explanation. It felt as if fate had connected us and created us solely for each other. We both knew that "high school sweethearts" was usually a term used in fantasy and young romance novels. Nevertheless, against the odds, it became our reality; we continued to evolve together, our understanding and respect for each other deepening with each step.

Through life's myriad challenges—personal tribulations, familial upheavals, the pressures of academia and employment—we stood unwaveringly by each other's side. Every obstacle became surmountable when faced together as a united front.

While beauty attracts us, we fall in love with hearts and souls. Daria was someone who had a unique beauty of her own. She was hardworking, passionate, and a joy to be around—but she had a soft,

loving, and tender soul. And that was the rarest quality about her. The list of beautiful qualities that I found in Daria is endless, from her sparkling blue eyes and her devilish grin to her infectious laugh and her wicked sense of humor. It was very easy to be attracted to her. But the real beauty that she carried, the true beautiful traits that made her so special and one of a kind, was her passionate soul, her deep caring for family and friends, and her compassion for all those who were part of her world. If you were fortunate enough to have known Daria, even on just a casual basis to say hello to her in passing, you knew almost immediately that there was something special about her. She carried a light within herself everywhere she went, and whoever encountered her could evidently witness it. I'll never understand how I was so lucky to be the one to have her as my soul mate, but I will forever be grateful for it.

After supporting one another through the trials of high school and college, and as we forged our paths in our respective careers—I as a graphic designer and Daria as an IT programmer—we started talking seriously about marriage. We had often talked and joked about it way earlier than we ever planned to be serious about it. But now that we were becoming established in our careers and taking adult responsibilities head-on, we knew that we were getting ready for the next step. There were never any serious discussions other than Daria saying that she did not want to get engaged on a holiday. She wanted whatever day I chose to propose to her to be a day that was meant specifically for us. I understood her feelings on this and agreed with her. However, being that we first started going out on Valentine's Day, I felt that day was already carved out in history for us. So, on February 14, 1997, atop the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (aka the "Rocky" steps), I got down on one knee and asked her to be my bride. She looked at me in shock, started

laughing, and said, “Oh, I hate you!” Confused, I looked at her and asked, “Is that a yes?” And she responded, “YES, that’s a yes!”

As most engaged couples do, we were finding ourselves spending most of our time going to bridal shows, picking floral arrangements, visiting catering halls, and discussing honeymoon locations (we agreed on Aruba). There were moments of tension and disagreements...how could there not be? But at the end of the day, we always made sure to respect and honor each other’s thoughts and feelings, just as we always would with any situation requiring mutual involvement and agreement. That’s how we rolled. We took the monumental step of uniting our lives on September 11, 1999. Not only was this a long-awaited day of celebration for our united families, but it was also the first wedding celebration among our group of friends. Needless to say, this day was magical and memorable for Daria and me for a million different reasons. From that moment onward, we were bonded for life, soul mates until the end of time. And as each year went by in our marriage, through thick and thin, we continued to grow and become stronger together in our love, and our respect for one another was unconditional. One rule that we always stood by was to never air our dirty laundry or insult each other, even if it was meant to be humorous, in front of others. I could never understand how someone could insult their partner or use them as a punchline in front of others. Why would anyone want to disrespect the person that they love for a laugh? Sure, we had our moments and our battles. Nobody in this world is perfect, and quite honestly, I wouldn’t want to be with anyone who claims to be perfect. How can you grow and learn when you are with perfection? But what we did have was perfect for us.

Daria’s resilience shone brightly when faced with adversity, and her determination became a source of inspiration for me. In times

of trouble, her unwavering belief in our love served as an anchor, reminding us that no storm was insurmountable.

Fast forward a few years, and in 2004, our lives were graced with the arrival of our first daughter, Julianna. It was as though the universe had conspired to make our world even brighter and more beautiful. The birth of Jules drew us closer in love, happiness, and an overwhelming sense of bliss. We thought we knew everything about each other after all those years together, but parenthood was a whole new journey of self-discovery. After being together for so many years, becoming parents to this amazingly beautiful little girl taught us so many things about ourselves that we never knew. Compassion, dedication, love, respect, working as a team... it was all there, and we both embraced it completely. Four years later, we welcomed our second daughter, Ava, into the world, and our lives—our little family—seemed to be complete. Happiness, chaos, commotion, laughter, tears, frustration... it was all there, and we loved every single ounce of it.

As the years passed, our love remained an enduring flame that defied the march of time. We knew that our love story was extraordinary, a testament to the power of love in its purest form.

So, as I reflect on our journey from that chance meeting in 1988 to the present day, I'm filled with gratitude. I am grateful for the serendipity that brought us together, for the love that sustained us, and for the promise of countless tomorrows spent side by side, two souls forever intertwined in a love story for the ages.

The key to our relationship, especially after having kids and reconfiguring our lives and livelihood, was teamwork. Daria and I functioned as a harmonious unit, seamlessly shifting between the roles of Mom and Dad without ever labeling tasks as “mommy’s job” or “daddy’s job.” We simply did whatever was necessary as

parents. If one of us tackled the dishes, the other took charge of bath time. When one cleaned the kitchen, the other managed the laundry. Admittedly, the lawn care duties never fell to Daria, but she kept the girls entertained while I tended to the yard work. There was no room for animosity or frustration in our division of responsibilities. We approached it as a united front, owning every aspect of our parenting journey. We both worked on it together as a team, and we owned the shit out of it. Our relationship with each other and the respect that we gave to each other also set the standards that we wanted to instill in our girls. It was the blueprint for the values that we wanted to pass along. I am extremely proud to say that to this day, both Jules and Ava carry these values with honor, respect, and dignity.

Of everything that I have done in my life, seeing Jules and Ava continue the traditions that Daria and I introduced to them as a team will forever stay with me as our biggest achievement together.