CHAPTER 1

A Boy From Aptos

Before the gyms, before the competitions, before the titles, the businesses, and the podcast interviews—there was a young boy growing up in Aptos, California, trying to make sense of a world that often didn't make sense at all.

I was born in a small beach town tucked along the Monterey coast. Sounds picturesque, right? But beneath the salty air and laid-back surf culture was a home filled with financial stress, emotional tension, and unanswered questions. My father, though physically present at times, was emotionally absent and struggled with alcoholism. My mother, strong but stretched thin, did her best to raise five kids without the financial or emotional support she deserved.

We didn't have much growing up. Actually, that's an understatement—we were poor. I still remember the gut punch of having our electricity and phone cut off because the bills hadn't been paid. Even as a young boy, I felt the weight of that. Not just the inconvenience, but the shame.

And yet, something ignited in me during those moments. Something fierce and unrelenting. I made a silent vow: "This will not be my future. I will not repeat this cycle."

That promise became the first brick in a foundation I would build for the rest of my life.

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The Rise of a Young Hustler

By the age of eight, I wasn't just dreaming of a better future—I was working for it. I started my first business fixing bikes and selling candy out of my school locker. I landed a paper route and mowed lawns with an old push mower that made every yard feel like a battlefield. Every dollar I made was a small win. It was proof that I didn't have to stay stuck, that I could create something different.

This early hustle wasn't just about money. It was about independence. About building a life where I could rely on myself.

I wasn't the smartest kid in class. In fact, school and I had a rocky relationship. I struggled academically, felt out of place socially, and carried around the weight of low self-esteem. I was small, painfully shy, and constantly reminded—by classmates, teachers, and my own internal critic—that I didn't quite measure up.

But I had one thing going for me: I was good with my hands. I loved tinkering with bikes, engines, and anything mechanical. When my dad brought home a broken-down car and left it in the driveway, I took it apart piece by piece. Not because anyone asked me to, but because I was curious and determined to learn.

Looking back now, that car was more than a pile of parts. It was a metaphor for my life—broken in places, complicated, messy. And yet, with enough grit and effort, fixable.

Lessons in Absence

My father taught me a few things—some directly, but most by contrast. He taught me that showing up matters, that consistency builds trust, and that broken promises can cut deeper than words.

He often said he'd take me fishing, and I'd sit on the front porch waiting for him for hours. Sometimes he showed. Often, he didn't. And every time, a little piece of me learned how important it is to follow through.

When my parents eventually divorced, my father vanished completely from my life. And while the pain of that abandonment ran deep, it also reinforced a core belief I carry to this day:

Family comes first. Show up. Be present. Love unconditionally.

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A Glimmer Of Belief

As a sixth grader, I was asked to write a short reflection for class. I wasn't a confident writer, but I scribbled down something that still gives me chills when I think about it:

"Your mind has the power to make you who you are."

Even then—before the muscle, before the mindset work, before the gym—I knew there was something powerful in what we choose to believe. Something that could change the trajectory of our lives. I just didn't know yet how to harness it.

But that spark? It was there. And it was waiting to be ignited.

Looking Ahead

This chapter of my life wasn't filled with trophies or applause. It was filled with scraped knees, empty cupboards, awkward classroom presentations, and silent dreams scribbled in notebooks.

But it laid the groundwork for everything that followed.

It taught me what not to do.

It taught me what I never wanted to repeat.

And it planted the seed of a truth that I now live by:

You are not where you come from. You are who you choose to become.

The gym didn't come into my life until later.

But the lessons? They started here.

Key Takeaway

You are not defined by your circumstances. You are defined by your choices. Make the decision to rise above and become the person you were always meant to be.

Reflection Prompt

Think back to your earliest memories of challenge or adversity. What belief about yourself was born in those moments—and is that belief still serving you today?

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