Just a tragic story and a tragic ending.
It's hard to say if it's a regret,
but is there anything different we could have done?
Nicola Kilner.
Co-founder and CEO of Desium and the Ordinary.
This is the unthinkable inspirational and tragic story
of how she built a $2.2 billion empire.
I always just had this feeling that the only way
to achieve financial freedom is entrepreneurship.
And then I met Brandon.
Brandon Truax.
Founder of Desium and the Ordinary.
One of the fastest growing skincare companies in the world.
A success story.
The minute it launched, we couldn't keep it in stock,
producing 400,000 units every single day.
It valued at $2.2 billion.
It truly happened what felt like overnight.
And this is really where Brandon's behavior
started to change.
He'd gone from someone who there was just so much warmth
to just this coldness in his eyes.
I was suddenly pushed out of everything.
And then I got fired.
Use of emails were being sent, firing people
and copying the whole company in.
Everything was played out on Instagram,
saying he was shutting down the entire company.
The shareholders had to step in.
But then things just seemed to keep spiraling.
And I don't watch you to help him.
We've got breaking news right now
of the founder of Desium has died.
What would you do if the person closest to you,
your best friend, your partner,
the person you've built your life with,
seemingly lost their sanity overnight
and went from working with you to turning against you?
This story is as profound as it is heartbreaking.
It is as haunting as it is heroic.
Of all the stories we've shared on this podcast,
this is the most touching story I've ever seen.

This is the most chilling.
It is the most hard to believe.
And right at the end of this conversation,
there is a twist that I did not see coming.
When you learn in the most tragic way,
that history is just repeating itself.
An incredible business story.
An unthinkable tragedy.
And a formidable entrepreneur that stood tall
when most would fall.
And a genius lost to the world too soon.
So pause.
Take a deep breath.
Because what comes next is not ordinary.
It is certainly extraordinary.
Nicola, paint a picture for me.
Paint a picture for me of where you have come from.
So I think quite a traditional,
you know, because mom stayed at home
so she did do the cooking, the cleaning
and just a very caring, you know,
I just do this with my children today
and it makes me so happy because I know
what kind of mom she was
and just knowing that that love that they're gonna have.
My father was very great sense of humor,
always very playful, very inspiring,
very charismatic, always had kind of big ideas,
kind of high energy.
My mom was much more reserved, more of an introvert.
My dad was kind of always the people person,
always kind of very busy socially.
Mom was very calm.
Dad would have a temper sometimes,
but you know, nothing too much.
And at that age, at that young age,
sort of like around that 10, 11, 12 age,
what were your aspirations and hopes for your future?
If I'd asked you, where did you think you were gonna end up?
It's actually a combination of kind of almost two,
what I don't think these two extremes anymore,
but kind of I think originally would have been seen as two.

One was actually a stay at home mom,
because I think I'd seen my mom, obviously, just in that role
and I've always been very maternal.
I'd always dreamt of having children,
except I always wanted freedom.
I never wanted to rely on anyone else.
And I think I'd always kind of been interested
in entrepreneurship, watched dragons then
from, you know, quite a young age.
I always just had this feeling that actually,
the only way to really achieve financial freedom
is probably through entrepreneurship in some way.
So I always kind of had this dream of almost
just doing something of my 20s,
kind of making all the sacrifices
to build up enough freedom
that then actually going on to have a family,
I could make the choices to really spend my time
where I wanted to.
Is that why you went and studied management studies?
Yeah, so it was actually interesting
because I never knew if I wanted to go to university or not,
because, you know, I believe in university very much
if you want to become a doctor, you want to become a lawyer,
you know, there are subjects that you really need to learn.
Business is one of those where it's always hard,
like, do you learn that at university
or do you learn that in doing?
So I came across this course,
which was business management in company,
which is quite a unique course,
which was at Nottingham Trent University.
So it's sponsored by different blue chip companies.
So Rolls Royce, Boots, Barclays, Tescos, companies like that.
They take on 40 people into this course.
We would work four and a half days a week
for which other company are sponsoring us.
And then the other half day was kind of our study time,
although obviously there was much more than that.
And actually we were then, we'd go, so I chose Boots.
Well, we went through interviews,
I have Boots was my first choice

and I was lucky to get there.
Boots for anyone that doesn't know the store
if you're overseas in America or something,
it's kind of like CVS or something, isn't it?
Pretty much that's the equivalent.
What's your, so if we just pause there then,
what's your opinion now on university?
When your children get to that age,
where they're about to make that decision,
you've got two young children,
when they get to 18 years old,
and if they said,
mommy, I want to be entrepreneur like you,
what advice would you give them based on your experience?
So I actually would always probably recommend
doing a few years in a corporate
because I have to say at Boots, I learned so much.
You know, you learn the things that they do really well.
You learn the things that they do not necessarily wrong,
but just the drawbacks of being such a big organization.
So I think, you know, more than going to university,
like those two, the two placement years I did at Boots,
I learned incredibly so much.
And depending on the kind of person you are, you know,
if you go to a big corporate,
it's so difficult to impart the culture there
because there's just so many people,
there's so much history.
And if you are someone who's kind of got this strong drive
to make your change,
then, you know, entrepreneurship,
I think is just an incredible area.
And even if it's not your idea,
but going to join a startup is just incredible energy.
I mean, it just would always be what I would recommend.
At that point, if there was a key skill
or a key set of skills that you took from your time,
working in a corporate at Boots,
that then proved to be incredibly valuable as you went on,
what were those skills?
So when I graduated, I then stayed on
and I was an assistant buyer to begin with,

and then I got promoted to be a buying manager for them,
which was really around relationships.
It was about collaboration.
It was about looking around the world,
seeing new technologies,
finding the innovation, new brands,
and then really hand-holding those,
which mainly were entrepreneurs,
to come into Boots, to actually show them,
look, this is how we could launch, you know,
we had a stand, it was called Latest Spines,
we would launch a new innovation
for a period of three months as a trial
to see if it would work, would Boots consumers like this?
If it did, they would get a listing with Boots,
kind of long-term.
And that just really suited my skill set
because it was a very entrepreneurial role
because actually, you know, I very much guided them
with PR agencies and actually how to build the plan.
And, you know, we used to have this saying
of like launch and love
because actually it's one thing to get a listing at Boots,
it's another thing for your product
to actually be picked and taken off the shelf.
Like the listing is just the first thing,
you know, you have to drive consumers,
you have to have that entire plan.
And I think it was just a really good way
of actually learning from working with supply chain,
working with finance, doing the checks,
with legal, can we do this, what can we say?
It was a really good sense of actually working
with so many different departments,
and actually starting to understand,
I think consumer goods, learning demand,
learning how to create it.
So I feel like that role was created,
which really just suited my skill set incredibly well
and I'm very fortunate for that.
And then that's also how I met Brandon.
So actually it had a huge impact

and obviously my next stage too.
And Brandon was a business you were maybe,
he had a business you were maybe looking at?
Yeah, so he was with his previous business,
which was called Indeed Labs,
and we launched a couple of their products
through this program, Latest Finds.
So I'd worked with him and I remember,
you know, and actually when I,
this sounds alien now so many years ago,
but you couldn't check your emails
when you left the office.
So often every morning I'd come in
and I was dealing with a lot of international entrepreneurs.
So I'd always come into like an inbox full of emails.
I always remember like looking for his name
because his email was always so full of energy.
He always signed off smiles, Brandon.
You know, just someone who's positivity,
his passion just kind of really shone through
that I'd always go straight to his emails, kind of open it.
And, you know, the launches that we did with Brandon,
Indeed Labs were some of the most successful
we did through the innovation program.
And he was just, you know,
when he used to come to the Boots head office
and nodding him just,
it was bouncing off the walls
with kind of this infectious energy.
And I remember just from the day I met him thinking,
gosh, I always want this person in my life
because he just had this Aurora and just someone who,
you knew wanted to actually also make the world a better place
and kind of really cared about doing good
and doing things differently.
And at some point you start having a conversation
with him privately about launching a business,
your own business,
and then he's launching his business, right?
Yeah, so I remember he suddenly left Indeed Labs.
Now, Indeed Labs, he founded it.
It was a rocket ship.

It was kind of doing super well.
I remember getting this message from him
that he left and just being like,
shocked as in like, what has happened?
So then when he was next in London, I met up with him.
And obviously he told me about his reasons for leaving.
He was going to do this next thing.
And I'd always kind of had this viewpoint
of wanting to do my own business.
And ever since I worked in beauty,
I found that, you know, I always had friends, family,
everyone asking, what's the best mascara?
What's the best foundation?
And just how we'd go to TripAdvisor, you know,
to look at kind of ratings and reviews
for restaurants and hotels.
I wanted to create the same thing for beauty
that actually ranked the products.
So I told Brenda, my dear, I said, I want to do this.
Like, what do you think?
Do you have any advice?
He told me he wanted to start something called Deciem,
which was from the Latin word for the number 10.
It wasn't designed to be a beauty engineer at that time.
There was a beauty concept,
but there was a technology concept.
There was a food concept,
so kind of just lots of different ideas generating.
But with this viewpoint of doing 10 things at once.
So we said, why don't you come in,
help do Deciem with me,
and I'll help do the beauty,
we weren't on to call it beauty-wise with you.
So then obviously I made the decision to leave Boots,
which obviously I was at the age of 24, 23, 24.
And I remember telling mum and everyone's like,
oh, like you're in a really good business,
you've got a good, like you're already achieving things.
But I just knew that I wasn't meant to be there forever.
So yeah, I left 10 years ago,
and then it was the start of Deciem.
I've got to say this idea of doing 10 brands at once

seems like it's counter-intuitive to all,
anything you might read in a business book
that speaks to the importance of focus.
Was there any sense in that, in your view?
So in actually our office in Melbourne,
we used to have on the wall, focus is overrated,
because everyone does tell you
not to do 10 things at once.
And actually there were so many benefits
after doing 10 things at once.
So first of all, was this viewpoint
of trying to create this ecosystem of,
how do we have our own manufacturing?
Do our own comms in house?
Because, and again, it takes funds
to set up that ecosystem, but also,
so many entrepreneurs, which I understand
why they're in this situation,
but so many entrepreneurs have to outsource everything.
They go to the PR agency, they go to a lab,
they go to someone to do your R&D.
And then you're really just coordinating
all of those efforts.
Rather than, I mean, so it was a privilege
we could build this whole ecosystem,
because then at the table, everyone sat there,
everyone's generating ideas.
And again, if I think around like doing comms in house,
it's a lot for one brand to pay,
but if you've got 10 brands,
suddenly you can look at it as 10% of everyone's salary.
If I'm flying to Australia to meet a buyer,
well, do I want to present one brand
or do I present 10 brands?
And also just this, you know,
area of you don't know what's going to,
until if you're in consumer brand,
until it starts selling,
you don't really know what's going to be.
You can do all the research
and all the insights in the world.
Until something gets traction,

you don't really know what's going to work.
So it also just set up this incredible structure
that we could fail.
We could keep trying things.
We could fail relatively cheaply, quickly,
and kind of start the next thing.
What's the downside though of doing 10 brands?
So I'd say the downside in the later years
is because the ordinary has become such a huge success.
When the ordinary took off,
the other brands got pushed aside
because it's very difficult.
If you have one brand that's really driving
such a huge portion of your revenues,
when everyone is, you know, facing high workload,
that always gets prioritized.
So then you end up ignoring the other brands versus
if they had to dedicate a team in.
So that is something now we want to actually,
we start our incubator engine
and actually the only way we can do that
is by having a dedicated team to that.
So there are downsides.
I think the other thing that made a huge difference for us
because we didn't have much money as a startup
and we obviously wanted to hire all of these people,
we couldn't afford experience.
So everyone who was hired was pretty much straight out
of university, straight out of college,
just applied for their first job.
And actually that meant no one really had preconditioned ideas
about the beauty industry, about the way things should be.
Everyone was approaching it just with a,
almost a very practical viewpoint.
And I think that made a big difference too,
with actually this, how do we think differently?
How do we do what others aren't doing?
It was almost never something that had to be discussed
because people hadn't worked for the other conglomerates
for all the years.
Soon after you become co-ceos with Brandon,
I always think about co-founder relationships

and people being ying and yang
and what the right balance is for co-founders.
In your case, the way that you came together
was quite unique.
It wasn't necessarily, there wasn't an initial interest
in being co-founders.
You were both going to do two separate things.
You then kind of got drawn towards each other.
If I put your personality on this side and Brandon's here,
what are the differences?
How are they complementary, but also uncomplimentary?
So Brandon was eccentric.
Yeah, it sounds like you.
He was, I'd say we're both very passionate.
He was a lot more eccentric and I'm a lot more calm.
I think it would be a big difference.
But I guess also from a skill set,
he was so into the, like he was a genius
when it came to science.
He was a tech person originally.
So he came from things with a very,
he didn't understand gray.
It was black and white.
And actually that was quite a good way
to actually approach the science,
I think, behind beauty products.
He was, at times, short-tempered.
I'd be the kind of smoothing things out
and he would kind of be a little bit more hot-headed.
But again, I think it was, you know,
a startup culture is not for everyone,
but for me, those first few years were incredible.
But he also just had this amazing way
of making things fun.
Like when we would plan trips to go on meetings,
he would be prioritising which restaurants we were going to,
where's got the best ice cream,
what are we gonna go and do here?
And actually the work was something that came alongside it.
He also had this philosophy.
He wanted to build a family.
He'd had a troubled upbringing.

I think he'd always,
he'd actually had this pattern,
I think of always leaving a business
when it kind of just went on the verge of success.
Desi M was his fourth business.
He had a tech business
and he had two beauty businesses,
Yuoka than indeed before Desi M.
And each time what hurt him
was actually leaving the relationships
and the people behind.
So his viewpoint of Desi M was actually,
how do we build a family, like a work family?
But I think he, it was never work.
And I think that's what so many of us felt.
Weekends, evenings,
like we wanted to be doing Desi M
because we were all friends,
we were all eating together,
we were going to Niagara Falls on the weekend,
we were going to a theme park in Toronto,
like we were just having fun
whilst we were doing everything.
The part you said about,
he wanted to build a family
because he had a sort of troubled upbringing.
I'm trying to understand there,
how his upbringing,
you believe shaped his perspective
on how you assemble a company.
It sounds there like he was building the family
he might not have had
or there's clearly some attachment challenges there
if he wants to sell the brands, but not the people.
And again, the heartbreak associated
with leaving these companies
was all about losing relationships.
A lot of that speaks to something
that must have happened early.
Yeah, so I think it was around building a family of,
he never wanted anyone to leave him.
And he wanted Desi M to be a place of belonging.

And actually, even now we have belonging
as our kind of North Star,
the most important thing
anyone in our team should feel
is that they belong at Desi M.
Whoever they are,
whatever they believe in,
there is a place for them at Desi M.
And I think that really comes from this sense of family.
And I think, and again,
I even look at my husband's world,
I do think startups,
because you're working in a very intense environment.
It does build relationships far deeper
than, well, I ever experienced a boots
and that I think would exist in corporates.
So this sense of family,
I think we would have taken a bullet for each other.
And I think even now,
within Desi M, we're 1,500 people now,
but we still have so many of those early team members.
Sounds like a cult.
It is, but actually a very healthy one.
You can't say that, yeah.
This morning I did a talk and I said,
listen, I'm gonna say something here
which might get me in trouble.
I'm like, you've got to scale from a cult.
I was like, I always have to disclaimer it
and explain cults are really bad, of course.
But this is not what I mean.
It's that sense of dedication.
We're all in this together.
Inspirational founder, mission you all believe in
and you believe you're right,
regardless of what the outside world says.
You're on a mission.
You're sleeping under the tent, you know?
Yeah.
Well, they always say that,
you can complain about your parents,
but if anyone else says a bad word about your parents,

you're like, no,
even if they're saying the same thing you've said.
And Desi's like that,
you can complain like internally,
maybe there's not this process,
but if anyone says a bad word,
you come straight to the defense.
But I think it was just so much love and passion.
And again, Brandon cared for all of us.
Like he had so much love that you gave it back.
And that's where it was so difficult.
You know, when we went through the unthinkable
and things became so difficult
because it wasn't a colleague like you've just lived
this incredible journey of us all traveling together,
building something so special.
Like just such a sense of we're all in this together.
Like even when times are hard,
like we've got each other's backs
and things may not work out,
but actually let's just have fun, let's learn things.
And let's just keep trying.
Like let's never be afraid to fail.
And let's just do it together.
People hear that and they see the outcome.
So everything you've described there as the outcome,
you've got this great culture,
people are dedicated, they're loyal,
they're on this mission.
What people will be thinking,
because they'll be sat in their offices now working somewhere,
or they'll be building a company of their own.
In fact, this young lady came up to me this morning
and asked me this question when I was doing this talk.
She said, I've got this small team
and I'm trying to create exactly what you've described.
That kind of real dedicated kind of cult-like company culture
where everyone's in it.
How?
How does one create it?
It's actually quite difficult to explain
how it comes together,

because in many cases from what I've observed,
it's not necessarily intentional.
It wasn't like a strategic drawn up plan
to make people really care.
It was quite a natural thing
that resulted in that sort of deep sense of care
from the team members.
I'll offer one thing, which you said,
which I thought was spot on,
which people often overlook, which is the fun.
Yeah.
People think, well, we'll give perks and this and that,
but it's all the things that happen outside of the work
that seem to do most of the work in creating that cult.
And you come up with the best ideas
when you're doing something on the weekend
and you're not in that kind of Monday to Friday,
nine to five zone.
That's when that creativity, I think, happens.
And I think, you know, people spend so long in the workplace
and that's why it's so important
that actually people enjoy coming in.
The one thing that I say is definitely being like
a purposeful shifter.
I look back at early startup culture
and I don't know if it's always kind.
There's very high expectations.
And again, if you're working, you know, I'm calm.
Brandon is very high passion, high expectations.
You know, there's this people feel like
they need to work on the weekends and the evenings
and is that healthy?
Even though actually it's trying to get that balance.
And I think it'd be interesting, you know,
and again with my husband who's
a different stage of startup.
I always just find it interesting around like,
I think especially in today's world,
I was so much more aware about mental health and burnout
and actually has to be much more respectful of balance.
Which I don't know if we necessarily had back then,
but equally I feel like, again,

we're pretty much a bunch of young 20 year olds
with Brandon, you know, being a little bit older.
Who are all just happy and loved what we were doing
and when you start creating things
and you start to see the results of your work,
then that drives you even further.
And then that makes it even more exciting
because, you know, you can see what you're achieving
is actually meaning something.
Do you think you could have achieved the success
with Deciem and the Ordinary and the other brands
if you didn't have that lack of balance
and early cult like culture?
No.
And again, like I think in the early days,
everyone's round the same table.
You've got Predvise making formulations,
Dionne is doing comms and brand like,
everyone's just there talking, coming up with ideas.
And that's, that collaboration is so special.
And, you know, you're in WhatsApp groups
and you're like, have you seen this?
Let's do this.
And also, I think, you know,
the other thing in the early days,
being agile is so important.
And everyone was okay.
You could work on something and the next day,
there'd be a change of decision
or someone had a different review and you're like,
oh, actually, let's go in that direction now.
That gets harder, I think, as you get bigger
and actually there are many more teams
and there's more people involved.
So, that's interesting.
I have to say, I agree.
With any business I've ever been in,
I look back at those first sort of 10, 20 people
and the way they behaved and that's ultimately
what we scaled, but it's that energy enthusiasm
that got us from like zero to one.
Does that therefore mean that there's a certain type

of person you should be looking to hire at that early phase
that maybe can afford to have more of an unbalanced life?
I think it is, you need someone
who's prepared to wear every hat.
So, in our early days, we would say yes to it.
Like, we'd get an order from Booz.
If we didn't think we could fulfill it,
we would say yes and we'd figure it out afterwards.
And that would often mean brandon myself
like all of the, whoever was working in the office
at the time, we'd go and work in the factory.
We would pull all nighters making the products
and back then, I can remember with hand chemistry,
we had like a hand crimping machine.
But it didn't seal that well.
And about one in 10 actually exploded
if you squeezed too hard.
So we'd be like there at night,
like making them, squeezing them like, okay, they can pass.
So you have to have people that are prepared
to get on production line, to pack the boxes.
And again, like, even later on,
like when it was times around November, Black Friday,
which more recently we boycotted
and we have a Slow Vembo campaign.
But those periods where it's busy,
everyone gets into the warehouses
and they help ship the products out.
So I think the ability to wear
whichever hat is needed for you at that moment
is the most important skill set.
What do you think of this concept of work-life balance?
You know, I had someone on the podcast the other day
and it's called Alex Samozi.
And he was saying that he was like,
people need to stop having a conversation
around work-life balance because it kind of assumes
that there is such a thing as a universal balance
that we should all be striking.
Whereas as you described it,
you were happy.
And you, okay, your life might have been

slightly one-dimensional, but you were happy.
And surely that happiness is the most important thing.
And Alex Samozi says, listen, I do two things.
I work and I play video games.
That's it.
And I'm happy.
So stop telling me to do work-life balance.
I'm happy.
Yeah, 100% agree.
And I think, you know, it comes down to
what's the right balance to you?
And it changes at different periods of your life.
So I was in my 20s.
I was fine on my maybe sacrifice nights out
and kind of doing other things, but I was so happy
being traveling all the time,
being in this kind of desi and bubble,
creating all of this magic.
And to me, that's such a powerful concept
around how do we achieve balance
in different periods of your life?
We're all going to have periods where
we can be working every hour and we love it.
And actually it's our work, but also it's our hobby.
It's our downtime because we just love it so much.
Then you have another period of your life where, you know,
maybe you have an elderly parent that needs your support.
Maybe you're going through some challenges.
You've got young children.
How do we step up and support each other to say,
do you know what, I've got you here.
You do this bit, I'll cover those bits for you
because in another few years, maybe it switches around.
And again, that's something that I think is so unique
to when we say a family culture.
That to me is an example of kindness
that I think really actually demonstrates it.
There has been a debate, hasn't there,
about the use of the word family in the corporate world.
People think it means it kind of asserts
that there's a lack of boundaries.
And these are not, you know, Netflix's whole culture document,

which is like, we're not a family,
we're a high performance team.
And I think I have struggled to figure out where I sit on it
because there are many elements of the family culture
that I always want in my businesses.
That sort of care that going above and beyond the way,
you know, a deeper sense of relationship
that's non-transactional.
And then also, on the other hand, you don't fire your family.
You know, so what is that balance
between family and high performance team?
So for me, family is about belonging.
And everyone just really feeling
like they have a safe place to be and that they are loved.
I think kindness, sometimes it's mistaken for weakness.
And also, I think there's a conflict
between the words being kind and being nice.
Being nice is kind but can be superficial, you know.
You see a stranger on the street,
you're like, hi, how, you know, you open the door.
It's nice, but do you truly mean like,
how are you or are you just kind of passing it?
If someone's not performing at work,
it's not necessarily a nice thing
to have that conversation with them.
But it is the kind thing
because if your intention is to help them,
and the help may be, this is maybe a different role
that we see in the company
which we think you're more suited for.
It may be that we think you need this coaching,
this training to get to where you need to be.
And it may be that, look, you're in this role,
but we're not seeing the delivery here.
We actually think the better option for you is outside.
And now when we've done terminations,
you know, we've done things around like,
how do we do counseling where actually it helps them
on to look for another career,
depending on kind of what role it is
and the reasons why we're leaving.
Because to me, then that's a kind of way,

we're actually trying to help that person.
And the other thing, you know, our business,
we were like kind of this,
and we like had a rocket ship kind of boomed,
and then we came to a dump just after kind of COVID.
It hit me when I realized,
if our numbers don't pick up again,
we're gonna have to let people go.
Because actually that is the consequence of business.
You're there to kind of do many things,
but ultimately like one factor of that is
to be a business and to make money.
And if you start to not hit your numbers,
ultimately like you can't lose money for long,
people will start to say, you have to save money,
where does that come from, head count?
And I think that then hit me again that,
okay, we have to perform.
So to be kind to everyone,
we have to be a performing team.
So again, I think you can be high performing,
but by being kind,
I think you can make everyone feel safe and trusted
that again, if you have to make the hard decision,
you're gonna do it in the way to be as kind as possible
and actually, you know, have the action to try and help.
Quick one, before we get back to this episode,
just give me 30 seconds of your time.
Two things I wanted to say.
The first thing is a huge thank you
for listening and tuning into the show week after week,
means the world to all of us.
And this really is a dream that we absolutely never had
and couldn't have imagined getting to this place.
But secondly, it's a dream where we feel like
we're only just getting started.
And if you enjoy what we do here,
please join the 24% of people
that listen to this podcast regularly
and follow us on this app.
Here's a promise I'm gonna make to you.
I'm gonna do everything in my power to make this show

as good as I can, now and into the future.
We're gonna deliver the guests that you want me to speak to
and we're gonna continue to keep doing
all of the things you love about the show.
Thank you, thank you so much.
Back to the episode.
I heard you say something, which was that you,
you're the least qualified CEO ever.
You don't sound like the least qualified CEO ever.
I guess you've been through some shit, so.
Yeah, definitely.
Again, you know, you have to,
I was there from the beginning
and being someone who can, you know,
play a leader for an organization of 10 people, 20 people,
100 people is a very different skill set.
So, you know, we are 1,500 people.
We now have a majority ownership
from SA Lorda companies who are a public company.
Our whole world has changed.
And rightly so, because being a much bigger organization,
we have to be far more organized and planning.
And I wouldn't say those are necessarily my skill sets.
And again, when, you know, the kind of dip I mentioned
was a very difficult period
because we'd just been on this rocket ship of, you know,
even when things were difficult,
the one thing that always,
we were always ahead of budget, targets,
whatever anyone set for us,
we always were just overachieving,
which feels incredible when you're in business.
Like, if you hit numbers,
then everything else just falls into place.
And I remember like, you lose confidence.
And I remember actually saying to, to Safan,
who is, we were put into it, ELC,
who's like an incredible person.
But each time when I used to say,
like, you know, this is not going right.
And I said, like, I'll resign.
Like, I'm not the person.

But dad was like, I need help.
Like, I was like, I can't do this.
Like, I'm not the CEO who understands numbers
in the right way, who plans, like, I change my mind.
And again, like, you think about all the things as,
as a, as a startup, you can do things quickly.
You can change.
If you change your mind on a decision,
when you now have many more people working on it,
you demotivate people, you become chaos is fun
and a startup in a large organization,
chaos can become demotivating.
So then I was very fortunate that we did bring in
a very incredible general manager
who joined us about a year ago.
And he has had such a transformation on the company
because he can't believe just the basics
we didn't have in place.
And because we'd grown so quickly.
And it's now to get that balance between, you know,
there's, there's areas we don't want any experience
but desiums when it comes to like brand and innovation,
our values, things that we are so passionate about.
When it comes to supply chain and scaling and new markets,
we need experience.
So actually having the GM come in
that actually could kind of take control of those.
And then actually allow me to focus on the areas
which I'm much more passionate about,
which is the, the brand area, our people, culture,
belonging, social impact.
It's just made a huge difference to the business.
So two things there.
You offering up your essentially resignation
from your role when things were a little bit tricky.
It's giving me imposter syndrome.
I'd like to think more just like a realist of...
Have you ever had imposter syndrome?
Because, you know, saying this quote here
about being the least qualified CEO ever.
From a traditional perspective, for example,
if I went now to, you know,

another company with revenues nearing a billion dollars a year
with 1500 employees, I wouldn't be a good CEO.
I think I could be a good people person.
I think I could help on values on brand.
Now, obviously there's an argument of like a modern CEO.
And I think especially for,
there's no one more qualified for desiums than me
because of the history.
But when I think about just the pure metrics
and the size of the business,
it needed someone with some more experience.
And again, I'm a big believer on, you know,
anyone who thinks they're the expert at everything,
they're not.
And I think I'm a good person at relationships
and hopefully bringing people on for the journey.
Hopefully people feeling how appreciative
and truly grateful I am that they choose to kind of be
at desium and give their role every day.
But there are many areas that I'm not good at all.
And actually having trusted people to support that
is amazing.
And I always do think myself more, you know,
it's kind of like the conductor of an orchestra,
like being aware, except I'm not very organized.
So the bigger you get,
then suddenly you do need someone
that maybe has got more technical skills.
It's interesting,
because when I asked that question
about the imposter syndrome thing,
I immediately reflected upon it.
And I thought, it's funny how imposter syndrome
and self-awareness can sound very, very similar.
And that's in fact, from speaking to some of your team,
one of the things they repeatedly said to us
was about your self-awareness.
And I even reflect going back early to your time at Boots
where you were considering contemplating becoming a buyer.
And the first thing you're doing there is saying,
does that suit my skill set and what makes me happy?
I mean, your team said it, they said,

your quote is that she isn't afraid to tell you
and she instinctively knows
what her strengths and weaknesses are.
But I think it's the only way to be authentic.
You know, trying to be something that you're not
or something that doesn't make you happy
is not really good for anyone.
And I actually think like authenticity in today's world,
I think is a value that is, is one of the most important
because otherwise you get cooled out.
It'd be crazy for me to say
that I'm good at the finance piece.
I'm not, it's not a strength,
but we have an incredible VP of finance.
We've got an incredible general manager
that truly understands it.
So I think actually just playing to your strengths
and allowing others to play to their strengths
is actually what brings authenticity.
I should probably read this.
Your team said she delegates a lot and very well.
She very instinctively knows her strengths and her weaknesses.
She isn't afraid to bring on knowledge and talent
for those weaknesses.
Her team says she's incredibly self-aware.
And also she is literally a ray of sunshine.
How much did you pay?
Jenny in market technology.
It was kind.
2017, you launched the ordinary in 2016?
Yeah, at the end of 2016.
At the end of 2016.
And then 2017 is the ordinary's breakout year.
Yeah.
Breakout year, how do you quantify that?
Give us an idea.
The minute it launched, we couldn't keep it in stock.
And again, from the ordinary was the 11th brand
that we came up with a concept for.
Wait, that violates the name.
I know.
It was meant to be 10.

But we don't focus, so we can change our mind.
So we kept going and...
What's the Latin word for 11?
I don't know, maybe a company name change.
With the ordinary, I don't think we ever thought it would,
we never dreamt it would become what it's become today.
We launched the ordinary out of frustration
that there wasn't enough transparency
in the world of skincare.
And we took inspiration from the world of pharmacy.
If you have a headache, you can go into a pharmacy,
you buy paracetamol, you're gonna be paying 50 P to three pounds.
It's a very small window.
No one can sell you paracetamol for 100 pounds
because you know the ingredient, you know the milligram.
The trust is there because the transparency
has been in that industry.
That didn't exist in the world of skincare,
which meant that if you walked into a beauty hall
to pick a skincare product,
you may see actually a relatively similar formula
being sold for 10 pounds, being sold for 100 pounds.
And actually not really understanding
what's the difference.
You know, is it the marketing you're paying for?
We kind of have this assumption,
does like paying more mean more?
But if you go into boots
and you see a new 100 pound painkiller,
are you gonna trust it?
Are you just gonna take the ingredient
that's safe and effective and trusted?
And I think the reason we were feeling frustrated
was because of a NEOD.
We were really using brand new technologies
that were very expensive
and no one else was using these.
It was kind of true innovation.
So we said, well, actually let's take this approach
of people because again,
some of the ingredients we use in the ordering,
they may have been around for decades.

That's not a bad thing.
If something's been around for a long time,
there's so much research done, there's so much safety.
And again, just like paracetamol, aspirin,
we don't always need you
if you've actually found a solution
that has incredible effects.
We presented the concept of the ordinary
to two significant retailers,
two of our big partners now,
who both said no to launching the brand.
And this was when we were kind of still at concept stage
before we'd even create, like produce the first product.
They said it was too confusing,
white boxes will collect dust.
You know, you need to just rename the products
to be anti-aging serum, radion serum.
Effectively just what everyone else looked like
in the industry.
And because we had this umbrella
and we had different brands,
it gave us the confidence to say no
because, you know, we were doing okay for ourselves.
Like we could cover everyone's payroll.
We kind of had traction with some of the other brands.
We said, no, let's follow our gut,
which again, is a privilege to be able to say that
because I know for so many entrepreneurs,
cash flow is a killer
and it can be so difficult to say no to,
a listing that you know could be worth significant money.
But we said, actually, no, we really believe
that actually this transparency
is what's missing in the beauty industry.
So, you know, we, the ordinary launched
and it just honestly was a rocket ship
that even today, we, and throughout our VP of supply chain
has, you know, we're producing 400,000 units
every single day at the moment
in our manufacturing in Toronto.
We still have retailers.
If you go into boots, you'll still see lots of

outstocks on the shelf.
Like we still struggle to keep up with demand
six years later since we launched the brand.
And that has been, it's just been an incredible story.
But I mean, we look back at 2017,
we knew we needed kind of more money to scale.
So we started looking for investment.
Which is how many months after launch?
Oh, the ordering was like three months old.
Desi M was four years old.
And again, we were doing okay.
Like we had some success stories,
not anywhere near the scale of kind of
where the ordering went to.
We met with different private equity firms.
There was like another huge conglomerate
who we had lots of meetings with.
And we ended up meeting with,
I say, Lord of Companies in April.
And it was eight weeks from our very first meeting
to the deal being signed.
Which was due diligence, negotiations, everything.
It was, especially for a corporate
with a board, a public company.
It was just this huge energy.
From the moment they came to Toronto,
the kind of M&A team,
then they were like, we need you to come to New York.
We want you to meet Leonard.
We want to meet you for Britsia, Varsia.
We want you to kind of meet this team.
And I remember seeing for Britsia
the CEO who have a huge amount of respect
and admiration for.
And the deal was done within like 30 minutes of meeting
because they just saw this,
I think the energy, particularly from Brandon,
like Brandon and I were in the room,
like just this creativity, this passion.
And the ordering was just starting
to kind of create these kind of rumbles.
And I think they, you know, ultimately,

they believed in the concept.
They believed in what we wanted to do.
So they, the deal signed in June.
They became a minority investor.
They took 29% of the company.
And I actually, you know, with Desium today,
we have had more time with ELC than without ELC.
ELC.
The SL order companies.
Okay.
When acquisitions happen,
I think companies go from zero to 100%.
You know, we're at 70,
they own 76% now of Desium
and it will go to 100% next summer.
And actually that process will have been seven years,
which actually is one, I think, quite forward.
I haven't seen many deals like that done,
I think, between kind of a startup
and, you know, a larger company.
But actually it's just been this amazing,
different chapters of us both getting to know each other,
learning each other's strengths.
I think having a lot of respect for, you know,
where we need help
and where we kind of need to be left alone.
So actually it's just been this really nice journey.
And, you know, Desium, we're in our 10th year this year
and in six years of those,
we've had the partnership of SL order companies.
29% they took and it's room of devaluation
was about 1.5 billion.
So in the last, in the 2021 investment.
Ah, okay, right.
Yeah, it was, I think, valued at 2.2 billion US dollars.
And at that early stage,
I'm trying to figure out your four years into Desium,
as they law to put some money in.
What was the valuation at that point
when they took the 29%?
It had been about 160 million.
Okay, Jesus.

Okay, super interesting.
I mean, it's a very quick trajectory relative
to most companies in that space
to achieve those valuations in such a space of time.
We move on then from 2017 to 2018.
And this is really where Brandon's behavior
started to change.
It truly happened, what felt like overnight.
So at the end of 2017,
so we close the investment in the summer.
And again, the ordinary at the end of 2017,
it's a year old.
It's having this incredible,
just people are warming to it.
People are loving the concept.
You know, I always think the ordinary is like
a community brand because it really was
spread through word of mouth endorsements.
And I remember my husband and I,
we went to New Zealand and Australia
for kind of the Christmas break.
And then I remember getting this call from Brandon saying,
you know, you need to go straight to the airport.
He was like, have you got your passport?
I said, yes.
He said, you go straight to the airport now,
book a first class flight,
come straight to Toronto on the next flight,
turn your phone off, turn your emails.
He was just like, calm down.
Let's be relaxed, but you need to come immediately.
So he didn't tell you why?
No, but I could just sense,
it was an entirely different person I was speaking to.
All of a sudden?
Over that break in the holidays.
I mean, the flight from Australia to Toronto,
I think I was on the plane now,
traveling for about 20 hours.
I cried the entire way
because I knew something really bad was happening.
And I guess, so just kind of towards the end of 2017.

And again, I had to say Brandon is someone who
he would have like one drink in the month.
Like he barely drank.
As far as I'm aware,
we spent so much time together,
like wouldn't do drugs was just a,
he was high on energy and happiest,
just drinking Diet Coke and eating fries
with ketchup type person.
Towards the end of 2017,
he'd become intrigued I think by magic mushrooms
and just kind of this idea of,
can you access different parts of your brain?
And again, this was just something like in Amsterdam
where it's legal and it's kind of just this,
almost just this inquisitive,
actually how does the mind work?
And I knew he'd planned to go to Amsterdam over a new year
to kind of experiment with some of his learnings
on kind of mushrooms and different dosages.
And I'm someone who's quite anti-drugs.
Like I've always been kind of,
I like to be well-behaved.
I don't like to kind of break any rules in those senses.
And I just had this awful feeling.
And I came back to Toronto and he summoned,
around 10 of us to have this meeting in the distillery store,
which was one of our desium stores in Toronto
is that we closed for the day and everything had changed.
And it was just like talking to a stranger.
He had this like coldness in his eyes.
And he'd gone from someone who,
the second you see him,
there'd be hugs, there was just so much warmth.
You know, all of his emails would have hearts on.
It was just kind of all of this love in messages
and kind of just being.
It's just this almost kind of zoned out cold person
that suddenly almost felt like,
kind of just had this like,
it's like he didn't understand.
There was no understanding anymore

between him and any of us.
He spoke around things where,
we're too caught up now in the concept of time.
So for example, he said to me like the next day,
when we'd meet for coffee and our routine
for the previous four years has been,
he texts me like I'll pick you up at 7 a.m.
We'd go to a coffee shop,
we'd get breakfast and head to the office.
And he suddenly was like, there's no time anymore.
I'm gonna meet you in the coffee shop tomorrow,
but we don't need to tell each other a time.
We'll just be there when we're supposed to be there.
And I remember finding it really hard
because he truly was, it's such a genius and a visionary.
And this has happened so quickly.
And I remember like ringing, ringing Sean
and saying like, does he have a point like,
are we too caught up in time?
Like, is this just like, are we taking things the wrong way?
So I had a lot of confusion just around that.
How can something change so quickly?
And again, this is someone who,
you know, over the four or five years
of being like insanely close to him.
You know, I was in going to Toronto at this point
for like three weeks out of the month
and we'd have every dinner together,
breakfast together, lunch together, every weekend together.
And never seeing any episodes of mental health
or anything changing.
So suddenly have this drastic change
of someone you loved,
but someone suddenly who feels like
he's completely closing the door to you
and kind of pushing you out.
This was an indifferent person who was angry, shouting,
crying, scary.
It was suddenly very cold to everyone.
And then, so everyone's very confused, very upset.
And then there's business things that start to happen
that make no sense that are actually quite mean,

you know, cancelling a brand on Instagram,
a big partnership we had done with someone,
cancelling a retailer on Instagram.
So you went on Instagram and told them,
said to your following on Instagram that...
This brand's no longer gonna exist.
Before telling them?
Yeah, so we'd spent all of this time with Dr. Esho,
building this brand.
I know Dr. Esho.
Yeah, and then it cancelled.
Like T-John found out on Instagram with everyone else
that this brand that he'd put all this passion and energy in
was ended.
Retailers were ended.
It became, it was just horrible.
So I did challenge him.
And what happened when I challenged him was I got a meanest,
meanest response around how I just don't understand him,
of all the people I should understand.
Gaslight mode.
And just, yeah, and be like, you look back
and like nothing was making any sense.
And then I got fired.
Because again, and he wasn't technically allowed to like,
you know, you need board approval and all of these things,
but there was no rational actions at this time.
So this just accelerated so quickly.
And then it's so difficult because then anyone
who's trying to help gets pushed out.
So then everyone's, and again, like in the background,
like I'm, because it's all of these early team members,
like everyone wants to help him and protect him.
And everyone's like, what do we do?
And you know, it's the hardest thing about, you know,
mental health and drug abuse,
which then like circle together.
But ultimately, when it's affecting someone's brain,
they can't necessarily recognize that themselves.
And someone said to me,
it's like you're speaking Polish to them.
You may think you're speaking English, a common language.

There is no understanding in that conversation
of what each other is saying.
And actually that did start to make sense.
But it was just very difficult.
And I think, you know, again, I got fired in February.
So like a month into this,
and it's been the worst month of my life,
like truly like horrendous, like so emotionally difficult.
What happened in that break?
Do you know, have you got any suspicions?
Yeah, I think he's, well, yeah, he was very curious.
And I think he, he took everything to an extreme.
And I think he'd been reading a lot around psychedelics
and kind of how to access different parts of your brain.
And I think he experimented a lot during that break.
And do you think that triggered some kind of psychotic episode?
Yeah.
So on that point about being fired.
Yeah.
How were you fired?
I knew it was coming.
Wow, why?
Because he'd, I'd gone from being, we were inseparable.
So I was suddenly pushed out of everything,
excluded from conversation, conversations, emails.
He'd came to London.
He was in London at the time when I got fired.
And again, when he'd landed in London,
from the minute he landed to the minute he left,
we would be together.
And I didn't, I barely saw him.
How did that feel?
So hurtful, because hurtful and confusing,
just really hard.
And I guess you have like a whole team who are like,
what's happening?
Everyone is scared because it's a very strong personality
who now could take anything anyone in the team said
the wrong way and kind of,
someone could be at the end of quite,
you know, an explosion of anger,
which again, was never there before.

So it's just a very difficult situation of one where
you just, you don't even understand it,
which I think is what makes it so hard.
But I'd also, I think at that point,
we didn't maybe know the extent of how,
how things were gonna spiral from there
or how mentally unwell he was.
Because I mean, six weeks earlier,
he'd been, he'd been the Brandon,
like we all knew and loved.
So it was such a quick turnaround and change.
And I remember getting a call from,
from the, the person who ran our HR at the time.
And I remember saying, I know, like he wants to fire me.
And obviously she said, yeah.
And then, I remember just like crying my eyes out
actually at the time.
The person from Estee Lauder companies
who was on the M&A team, who was based in New York.
He was in London at the time and I went to meet him.
And I remember just saying like,
I'm scared because I don't know what's happening.
And this is someone who's just entirely changed.
And I don't know what to do to help him.
And I remember then, you know,
the confusion of someone's now acting.
It doesn't matter what agreements are in place.
This is now someone acting irrationally.
But we've got to act in a certain way
because it's someone who is so unpredictable in the way.
And again, I think at this point,
I hadn't really realized how bad things were going to be.
And you know, part of you think it's like,
maybe it is me like,
maybe I'm not the right person to be there anymore.
And maybe for whatever reason,
like he thinks I don't believe in the vision
or things have just changed.
My husband, who's like the most supportive person
in the world, but also very calm,
takes such a like, relaxed approach to anything.
Like nothing is a problem to him in his world

in a very positive way.
He like booked as a holiday.
He was like, let's just get away.
You know, it's been like a very hard month right now,
Brendan, like doesn't want you.
We can't change that.
So let's just focus on just like taking a moment
just to kind of reflect.
And obviously I'd always wanted children.
We'd be married for a few years at this time.
I'd never wanted them whilst I was in like
the busyness of Desi-en because I wanted the time
to enjoy being, you know, a mum of young children.
So we were like, let's try and have a baby.
So I got pregnant in the March and...
A month later.
Yeah.
But then at that point, things were spiralling with Brendan
and, you know, abusive emails were being sent,
targeting everyone.
He was firing so many people within the business,
firing people and copying the whole company in,
copying retailers in, pressing.
And it became clear like, things were really unwell.
And I remember, I think, being about six weeks pregnant
and I was being targeted on like some of these emails
and I remember thinking, if I tell him I'm pregnant,
because I know he's so kind,
that maybe he'll like leave me alone
or if I like, impart something.
And then he now still on Instagram
and I was like, as six weeks pregnant.
And again, and something like that happens.
You know, someone's not rational.
Like, no good human being does that to someone.
And then it became really hard,
because I was still in this situation
of loving him so much, wanting to help him,
feeling just not knowing what to do,
also having like the company and like having,
everyone's still coming to me asking me like,
what should we do?

Because you've got someone saying things that make no sense
and being, you know, he was just very, very unwell.
So I was all trying to help people in the background,
keep things going with the business.
Obviously, you know, trying to be in the early stages
of pregnancy, which now obviously the whole world knew.
And it was just really, really hard.
And I remember when he first got sectioned,
feeling such a sense of relief,
that he was finally gonna get the treatment he needed
to get better.
And it was actually in London
when he got sectioned for the first time.
And then he was out five days later.
And then that was the start of, you know, over that 2018.
He got sectioned five times across London,
across Canada, across America.
And each time we just get released a short period after.
And then that's when I started to almost kind of,
you lose the hope of like, how can we help this person
when he keeps getting into these terrible,
like, you know, to get sectioned,
you're in a terrible situation for authorities
to actually come in and remove you for your own safety.
But then this would just happen again.
And it's almost like there wasn't even a connection
between like the countries and the medical systems
and kind of like how that all works is confusing.
But he asked in the June, you know,
he was sending me videos crying and just saying,
like, I need you back.
I don't know what I've done.
Like, I'm so sorry.
And I remember feeling like I could,
I can't help if I'm not there.
Maybe if I'm with him, maybe I can help him.
So I went back and the first week I went back,
we went to Morocco because he was like, you know,
we need to plan, like we need to get the business
thing sorted again.
And actually it felt like a normalish conversation.
So I remember feeling like, you know, maybe,

maybe things can get better.
And I remember the week in Morocco,
just things were worse than ever.
Things had got even worse in that time.
I'd been away.
And it's just, it's a helpless situation.
And I have so much empathy for anyone who
or want the people who struggle with mental health
and addiction, but also for the people surrounding them
because it's a very toxic environment to be in.
One, because you're being abused.
But secondly, you're losing the loved person.
And thirdly, you just feel like you can't help.
Because again, with so many other health issues,
when you're not battling with the brain,
there's more acceptance of treatment to get better.
But that just doesn't exist in the same way.
I can tell how much you loved him.
Honestly, he was like, and this is what I find so hard.
He really was so kind.
And like would do anything.
And again, like, you know,
when I talk about Desiem being a family,
in his estate, in his will,
every single beneficiary is a Desiem employee.
Like, that's this family bond that was just so strong.
So just to see that go.
And again, like everything was played out on Instagram.
Brandon was doing all of these posts
in terrible situations.
And it's a very hard line.
I mean, we talked to Instagram like this.
It's such a free, it's such a difficult,
you have free speech.
You have someone like it's a platform
like people can post what they want.
You know, some things would get removed, others wouldn't.
But it was just an awful situation to be in.
And I think everyone just had such a huge desire
to help him.
And like in this time period,
I mean, even like SA Lord companies were

behind the scenes, they were so supportive to us.
But again, you have, you know, you go on Instagram
and you see all these comments.
Why is no one helping him?
What are you all doing?
And again, it's so hard because people don't see
that situation of it is pretty much impossible to help.
And then you have people that say,
look, someone has to reach rock bottom.
Like they have to just reach rock bottom
until they get better.
So then in October,
Brendan had done an Instagram post basically saying
he was shutting down the entire company
and there would be no more Desi M.
And obviously that was the point
when the shareholders had to step in
because suddenly, you know, there's,
I think at that point we had 800 employees.
Like there was everyone's jobs on the line.
And again, you think, look, maybe,
maybe this is the kind of bottom point he needs to reach
to actually understand he needs to get help.
So that's when the call order happened
to remove Brendan from the company,
which again is an incredibly hard situation
because no one wants to remove the founder
who they care so much about.
And, you know, a founder who is such a visionary
and is the brand like to feel like
he is being forcibly removed from his own company
is very difficult, but you've also got a situation
where everything was public so every email sent
had the whole company on CC, had all the journalists,
had all of our retailers, had customers on,
Instagram posts were obviously going to everyone.
So you're also living this out in public,
which I think also makes it a lot harder.
So in October, he got removed as the CEO.
Reflecting on what you said to me
at this earlier in the conversation about him wanting
to keep the family together

and be part of the family based on his own early experiences,
maybe his own family upbringing,
that must have been particularly painful for him.
Seems like he had designed this company to be a family.
And that's clearly one of the most important things for him.
So for him to be ousted from his quote unquote family
must have been tremendously painful.
Did you ever learn about his early years?
Did you ever learn about his own background, his family?
Yeah, I actually, it's interesting because
for how close I was to him, when he became unwell,
I actually learned how much I didn't know about him.
And I think, you know, he just,
I think he had a lot of challenges
of never feeling accepted for who he was,
which makes me so sad because me as a person,
and especially like the destiny that we have now,
like we truly accept anyone and love anyone.
It doesn't matter like who you choose to love,
where you're from, like you belong to us
and like we are grateful.
If you want to be part of the family, you are the family.
So I find it hard that he never felt that accept.
He never felt like he could be his true self,
which I think I only learned more when he became unwell.
How?
Like he'd had, he'd had this incredible life partner
for 10 years that I didn't even know about.
A romantic partner? Yeah.
A husband? A boyfriend?
Pretty much, yeah.
And again, like those things when,
I mean, that's a big thing to hide from someone.
Why was he hiding it?
Well, I can only think that was him feeling
like he wouldn't be accepted for it.
And I mean-
Because it's a man?
Yeah.
And I mean, well, in the world today,
but I mean, especially the beauty,
it's, I'm so proud of the diverse team we have.

He would have been so accepted,
but I mean, he was from Iran.
I think he maybe just had, well, I don't know.
I can't say the reason-
That's a different-
Yeah.
But he clearly never felt like he could share
with the world who he truly was.
And I mean, that's a huge thing to carry.
What about his parents?
So his mother died when he was very young.
And I think he had a challenge relationship
with his father, but again,
I only learned a lot when he became ill.
And I also have a battle with,
if he didn't want to tell me,
he didn't want people to know.
So there's kind of a balance of,
you know, I have so many things that,
gosh, I wish I could ask him.
What are those things?
About his childhood, about who he is,
about why he felt the need to keep things secret.
And then also just to understand,
because, you know, people say to me,
like, did he have any signs
of mental health challenges before?
And again, it depends what you consider traits
of mental health.
But no, I mean, he was eccentric
and he was, you know, high intensity
and many things that I think are traits often of founders.
I mean, I would love to understand more.
Like, how do we support people with mental health?
Because again, for someone to be sectioned five times.
Why was he sectioned?
He would just be in very bad situations.
Police would come and get involved and then-
Drugs?
Drugs, mental health, and again,
it's so hard to diagnose.
Mm, cause an infection.

Because, yeah, they both kind of spiraled each other
quite dramatically.
He was doing meth in the UK I read as well,
and then he got arrested for-
Yeah, and again, my limited understanding of drugs,
but I think crystal meth is as bad as it gets,
I think in many ways.
So then in October, he got removed.
And again, I remember feeling like maybe this will show him,
like, be the push he needs to get help.
But it wasn't, things just kept spiraling.
And again, what's so difficult in these situations is,
at this point, I think he's pushed pretty much everyone away
who really loved him.
And he's now, because you have to remember,
he also had funds.
He had, you know, resources,
which meant, you know, at this point,
he was now flying private jets everywhere,
and he was kind of surrounded by people
that I had never met before,
and who I don't think were particularly good people
for him to have around.
But I mean, you don't have control over another human being.
And I think that's a thing that I really struggled with,
was how much everyone wanted to help him and loved him.
But at some point, you know, so by October,
I mean, we've had 10 months of so much hurt,
so much trying to help him, so much, you know,
you have moments when you think you're getting through,
and maybe like, this is gonna be a change,
and then things just fall down again.
So he, then, when you've got sort of 700 employees,
takes to Instagram and announces
that he's shutting down the company.
And did he mean that?
Yeah, I think he did.
Again, I don't know if he meant it,
or if he was just wanting to be removed.
And almost, you know, if that was the reason
he was kind of doing some of these behaviors,
there had been things that had been very extreme.

And I sometimes don't know if he would have thought like,
you know, what else do I need to do
for someone to just take me out of this?
So then obviously at that point, you know,
the board, the shareholders,
there's no choice but to now remove Brandon
from the company.
Did they contact you after that?
Yeah, they did.
Privately, I mean, before the lawsuit,
and all that started, they'd said,
listen, Nicola, we're gonna have to do something here.
Yeah, and I mean, throughout this process,
there were many conversations,
because again, you know, every shareholder loved Brandon
and cared for him, and like, everyone's a good person,
it's like everyone wants to help someone
that they've seen this brilliance in,
kind of seen this quick, quick downfall.
And I think the viewpoint was always,
how do we protect Deciem
so that Brandon can get better and come back?
So it was always just a temporary order.
And obviously they rang me because it would name me
as becoming Sol CEO and kind of the interim period.
And again, you know, I had this thought that maybe,
maybe this is what is needed for him to actually
get the help, because sometimes they say, you know,
you have to lose everything to hit rock bottom,
to then be accepting that you need help,
but that didn't happen.
And I think when the court order happened in October.
Which is what, three days after he announces
he's shutting down the company, was it more?
It was a very quick period, I can't remember exactly,
but yeah, I think it was within days.
But then things just seemed to keep spiraling.
And obviously, you know, at that point in October,
I was seven months pregnant.
So I remember I had like one last travel
before I was at the kind of no flying stage.
So I went to Toronto.

And actually the first thing I did was bringing back
a lot of the incredible team members
that had gone during the period of 2018.
So I need to pause there
because that's pretty astounding.
You're seven months pregnant.
The founder has been ousted by a huge,
like multinational billion dollar conglomerate.
And you're thrust in as CEO of the company of 700 people
who have just gone through chaos.
What do you do day one?
So assemble the team.
So, you know, the key people who were incredibly close
to Brendan, who had also been fired
and kind of pushed out in all of this chaos,
they needed to come back to the company
because they were also co-founders.
They were also people who had been there
from the beginning and understood the values
and we desperately needed.
I remember going for dinner with Steven
and saying like, I need you to come back.
So Steven was our CFO at the time
and then we came back as a COO.
And again, like we just needed to get organisation
because I mean, in this period of 2018,
you have to remember our demand for the products
went through the roof because, I mean,
there was a lot of noise around what was happening and...
Did it help sales?
Massively, which is frustrating, but, you know,
because we had such good products,
that was also in the conversation,
but it was like, have you seen what's happening?
Have you seen this Instagram?
Have you seen this founder like it's...
I'll be honest with you, the only time I'd heard,
because I'm not a buyer of the products,
the ordinary products, the only time I'd heard
about the brand was I heard a story when I was in New York,
I think in 2017, 2018, when I was living in New York,
about this founder that had like hijacked the Instagram

and was posting like a dead sheep.
He posted like a picture of a dead sheep or something.
And I remember clicking on, this is so funny actually,
I clicked onto the Instagram to like see what was going on.
It's kind of like being nosy or whatever.
And I was like, that branding's cool.
So for the last five years,
I've known it from that first moment,
but I remember thinking that branding is really on the money.
Well, in 2018, I mean, the brand was only one a year old.
Crazy.
So actually, you know, many people's first interaction
with the brand was probably through, you know,
being told, have you seen this person on Instagram?
Have you seen this breakdown that's happening in public?
So that was, and I think that's one thing I find very hard
is that Brandon was an incredible human being.
He was so kind.
He was such a visionary.
He was so high energy.
He truly was a genius.
That I find it hard that people didn't really know him from before.
And actually so many people only learn about him
through that period,
which is very sometimes difficult to accept.
But this is also the reality of just the situation
and social media and the appetite for controversy
that I think kind of exists today.
Did when the lawsuit was happening and he was being ousted,
was there a point during that couple of days,
that period where he called you?
He became, you couldn't reach him.
He turned all his phones off.
He didn't go to the court or like, you know,
he was obviously sort of in normal world,
like would have a representation and would, you know,
he just vanished.
It was just vanished.
So you come into the office, you assemble the team,
you pull the people back?
Yeah.
And again, so then for those next couple of months, you know,

we did it like Brandon would sometimes be parked outside
the front of our office in Toronto.
And again, you have to remember,
this is people who love him.
But now there's a character who is still acting
at times, you know, frustrated, upset.
And it's just a very difficult environment to be in.
You've got a responsibility now as CEO.
You've got this guy parked outside the office.
You're trying to focus the team.
There's a guy parked outside the office
who's capable of causing chaos to the company,
to the team members, to the employees,
you know, really not, you know, stable.
Surely you've got a responsibility to call the police
or something or get him out of there, you know?
Is that, there's a conflict of intro.
It's such a hot, because you try everything.
And actually you have to remember as well
during this period, I was back in the UK.
So actually it was even harder,
because I mean, at this point
I'm like eight months pregnant, nine months pregnant.
So hearing this, but actually not being in Toronto
to actually be there and head office with the team.
And again, that's where Steven
and kind of other members were incredible.
And again, it's difficult because, you know,
Steven, like there'd be a conversation with Brandon,
and then you'd get to the point where people
would just be leaving out the back exit to kind of,
because it's such a horrible situation.
I mean, he's not doing anything wrong,
sitting in his car on the road.
So it's kind of, you couldn't even ring the police
unless he was actually acting abusive,
but sitting in the car alone, like.
Were you not worried?
Everything was just more just sadness
about how he would be feeling at that time.
And then you just get frustrated at yourself
because, you know, I think we're so used to figuring out

the answer of figuring out solutions.
So then when you're in this heartbreaking situation
of, you know, trying to be nice, trying to be there,
trying to ask if he's okay, being away, being distant,
nothing works.
And actually that feels very hard, I think,
to actually accept, especially as someone who, you know,
I like to find solutions as a problem,
like we find the answer.
So it was a hard period.
And then my daughter was born December 29th,
just four days after Christmas.
And then I remember in the January, getting a message.
So Dion had, the press had got in touch with us
to say, is it true, Brandon's died?
We had heard nothing at this point.
And you remember thinking, surely not, like,
we wouldn't be hearing from a reporter
asking us the question.
So I said to John, look, I'll ask Stephen to see
if he can hear anything.
So Stephen went to the police station,
who confirmed they'd found his body and he'd passed away.
I remember Stephen ringing me
and I was breastfeeding my daughter at the time
and just feeling this shot because
you just never think that's actually the ending
that's going to come.
Like, I think, I always did just think
at some point he would get better.
And actually not within a year,
someone could go from like being the person you know
and you love and who is normal and sin for them
to a year later that this such a fast downward spiral
has happened, that's kind of had that ending.
And then you also, I then realized that
I don't think his partner knew.
I don't think any of our Desi and family,
like no one knew other than that reporter.
But if the press know, that means quite quickly
everyone's going to know.
So then having to go through this process

of ringing his partner, ringing like the people
that I knew were incredibly close personally to him,
ringing SA Lorda companies,
like telling the people that I had to know.
And then quite quickly having the email drafted
because also, you know, this press inquiry
has gone to our general media at Desi and Minbox,
which means the team are already knowing
that this inquiry is out there.
So suddenly it's like, okay, gosh, like,
I need everyone to hear this in the right order.
So trying to like make those phone calls,
send those messages.
Did you process it yourself?
No, I think I went into, I remember just the shock of,
I really didn't think it was going to end in that way
or that soon.
And then I think it was just, okay,
let's like go through the motions.
Like, who do we need to tell?
Like, how do we handle this from here?
And then, I remember like, then we'd be like,
I need to get Mila a passport
because we flew to Toronto five days later.
And yeah, just go into like,
how do we, because again, it's not just a company
that's left a founder, it's a family, it's a friend,
it's someone who's so close to all of us.
And it's also hard because it's just such a,
just a tragic story and a tragic ending.
And you know, and I think back to sometimes
like our family bond and especially the bond
that we still have now,
so many people who were there at the beginning,
but I mean, we lived through this like,
we had this year,
we're messaging each other around,
this has just happened, what do you think we should do?
How do we handle this situation?
Like, we lived that pain together,
which I think is probably why there is a bond
that I think is still incredibly strong

that wouldn't normally exist
because it does strengthen when you go through
those tough times together.
He was on his own when he passed away?
Yeah, he posted Instagram videos on that night.
So, you know, we know from various things
that he was obviously still in this cycle of drug abuse
and then kind of mental health.
We don't know, no one was there.
He fell off the balcony.
I don't believe it was suicide
with an intention to end his life
because he'd have,
I believe he'd have left a note,
he'd have sent an email,
he was big on words,
like he always had something to say
that I find it hard to think that he would,
and again, you know, even if it was videos,
like there was always kind of communication
coming from him,
but I find it hard to believe
he would purposefully end things
without having a last kind of voice in the world.
But again, you know, when you are in that situation,
I don't know if he was sat on the edge
and kind of felt he was a high floor apartment.
There was kind of huge storms and winds that night,
but I mean, none of us were there,
so we'll never truly know what happened.
As well as your job to sort of communicating this to your team
and dealing with the after effects of his passing,
when do you, when do you process it?
This is someone you love.
This is your friend that you've just found out has died.
This is your co-founder, your former co-CEO,
someone you've been on an incredible journey with.
When do you have a chance to stop
and just really work through the emotions?
I actually don't know if I ever have even to this day
because it's just hard when, you know,
work was, Desi and I were so busy

because we've just gone through this year of turmoil
where demand has gone through the roof,
yet behind the scenes,
you know, people have done an amazing job
of holding things together,
but it'd also been a year of no leadership,
kind of decisions being made in the wrong way,
a lot of chaos there.
So you suddenly have this situation of like,
there's a lot to fix, there's a lot to sort out,
and I'm not talking even from like culture and emotions,
but just actually from like business practicalities
because this is a brand that's exploding
with this kind of soaring demand
that's had this chaos that now needs stability
in these kind of all of this love
put back into it and back into the team and people.
And then also I also have a newborn baby at this time.
So I feel like almost just that period since then,
like things have just been so busy.
And I'm just a big believer in like,
there are, you pick the times in your life
when you're ready to focus on something.
And I know there's a period in my life
where I want to sit down with a psychologist
and just go through everything that happened
to have a better understanding of it.
But I feel like that's,
it needs to be at the right time when I'm ready.
And actually to really like,
I'm someone that when I put my energy into something,
it becomes such a big focus.
And you know, I want to do it right.
And I know at the moment with everything going on,
I wouldn't have the right time to dedicate to it.
And also probably partly healing like it's still,
you know, it'll be five years in January since he passed away.
It's coming to a time when I think it maybe gets easier,
but it's also still very raw because I think
it's hard to say if it's regrets,
but you always have those feelings of,
is there anything different we could have done

because you feel so helpless about how things just spiraled?
That's what I was going to ask is upon getting that news there,
people often talk about this
when they talk about the passing of a parent or something,
they look back on the relationship from a new perspective now,
because as you said in your own words,
you didn't ever envisage it would end that way.
So when it does end that way,
your perspective on the situation can shift to what you, as you said,
you know, thoughts of the past,
but you're not going to be able to do that.
The situation can shift to what you, as you said,
you know, thoughts of regret or words unsaid
or things that maybe we could have done and that can be quite,
that can consume one's thoughts.
Was there a lot of that during that time?
I think because, you know, the year 2018,
I'd had a lot of reflections of maybe we weren't as close as I thought
because, you know, if you could have this life partner
and all of these things and not even feel comfortable to tell me,
then maybe I thought we were this closest
that we actually weren't.
You start to kind of question those things.
And actually, the area which I then kind of got the comfort back
that it was genuine and it was the love that I felt,
that he felt was when we got a copy of his estate,
of his will, of his kind of last wishes.
When it said around the decision on what should happen with his body,
it first went to his partner of 10 years.
And then it said, and in the absence of that person,
I want Nicola to decide what happens to my body.
And actually, that was a very comforting thing
because, I mean, there's nothing more personal
than to trust someone with, if something happens to me,
this person can decide what happens to, like,
my remains.
So that then actually gave me the comfort that, like,
it was genuine, it was a true love.
Like, he did see me as that other than his partner,
like his kind of best friend, his partner,
someone who was incredibly close,
who we would feel like that was the right person

to make that decision.
So I'd kind of gone on the cycle of feeling, you know,
very pushed out, very targeted, very, maybe it wasn't all real,
maybe I was just a colleague and kind of it was just business
to actually know it was family, it was love.
So I kind of had that reflection
and I think that gave me a lot of comfort.
Do you miss Brandon?
Incredibly much.
You know, it's quite lonely
because when you've gone from having someone
where every decision you're texting, you're together,
you're kind of, you're doing it together,
gives you the confidence that you're going in the right way.
So it's very difficult to lose that and, you know,
it's like you go from a two parent to just one parent
and you feel responsible for this incredible child,
but also a child that's growing very fast
and, you know, you want to do the best by everyone.
And it's also like it's a huge change.
I mean, the company we are today is very different
and, you know, like with any kind of fast growth business,
you have to try and find the balance of, you know,
never compromising on our values
and things that are so core to our purpose,
but then finding a way that you can actually grow and scale.
And actually, you know, when we, you know,
early years we'd never had a strategy
and it was kind of never anything like that.
I thought we would do,
but then obviously you go to a size
that you start thinking about these things.
And it was interesting
because the first time we did strategy.
I think it's worth pausing there
and just highlighting what you've just said.
You had a philosophy early on
where you didn't have a company strategy.
It was never plan, never have a strategy.
That was your thought.
Why?
We actually, again,

we had all of these slogans in our offices
and one strategy is also overrated.
And you need to be agile as a startup.
And again, I think, you know, a big thing,
Brando is a big believer in this.
He always used to say,
we've got to be the small rabbit running into the holes
that the big elephants can't get to.
And the big elephants,
obviously being the big conglomerates
because they've got far more money than us,
far more resources.
There is no point as doing what they're doing,
but with far less.
Let's find the holes.
And part of that is, again, being agile.
I mean, again, you think the ordinary was the 11th brand.
And as much as we had like elements of success before then,
you know, the ordinary,
it took 11 attempts to really get it right.
Now, a strategy can't plan for that
because our strategy was to keep failing
until we kind of got it right.
Now, as you get bigger,
it changes because suddenly, you know,
you need to articulate things in a different way.
But it was interesting
because when we did our first process of strategy,
and obviously I'm still very,
at this point was very on the fence of,
I don't think we're a company
that kind of needs a big document, et cetera.
So it's quite nice
after we kind of had all these conversations,
we came down to basically having
our entire strategy was build growth, power good.
That was the strategy because almost it was,
and again, I'm very proud that I feel like
we're more than just a beauty company.
We want to have a good impact on the world.
We believe in making incredible products,
but also having a good impact on the planet.

You know, I believe the world of skincare
is now a better place
because there is more transparency,
there's more awareness, ingredients like neocinamide.
I think there's better price points.
I think there is, you know,
we talk about quality equality and actually within skincare.
I think that's something
that now is much more accessible to people.
So I believe like we are having a good impact
and I think that businesses can do that.
And you know, I like,
if you ever get the chance to come to Toronto
and you know, I welcome anyone to come look around our offices,
our production facility,
because the warmth you find from people
is unlike anywhere I've ever, I think could exist.
Ladies and gentlemen, as you know,
Zoe is now sponsoring this podcast
and I'm a proud investor in the company.
And I've been going on the Zoe journey myself.
It all starts with this home testing kit
you get sent in the post,
which measures your gut health,
your blood sugar and your blood fat.
I've had this little device,
this blood sugar glucose sensor on my arm,
which came in the home testing kit,
to understand how all of the different foods
that I eat day to day have an impact on my body.
And it's been pretty unbelievable.
A big thing for me is feeling tired
after I've eaten something and not understanding why.
Historically, I didn't understand.
Now I do understand.
I'd been eating, I think it was like a rice stir fry
with a bit of chicken and some chilli sauce in there.
And I saw on my blood glucose chart on my phone,
which is connected to the device that Zoe sent me,
this huge spike.
And then later in the day, I saw a huge dip
when I started feeling that sort of post lunch slump.

And what will happen next is,
Tim tells me they'll take all of that data
and give me my own personalised Zoe scores for any food
so I can figure out what I should be eating
and what I should avoid if I want to avoid
those afternoon slumps.
And if you want to get started on your Zoe journey with me,
use the code, we've got an exclusive code here,
ceo10 for 10% off and let me know how you get on
when it arrives back to the episode.
If I was to ask you then, again,
we're looking there at like the finished painting.
I want to know the colours that went into the painting.
So how, and you were there the whole time,
so you got to see what created that end product.
If I'm a startup founder listening to this now
and I go, okay, Nicola, I'm at the very start
and I want that end product,
I want to be 10 years in, super successful
and everyone's happy.
What are the most important things
for them to understand in body
and sort of implement into their companies?
Just maybe like top line.
So from a business perspective,
product quality is the only way to be successful.
And therefore, I mean, the only reason we're now
in a position where I think we can invest so much
in sustainability, social impact in people
is because if we started with science,
we made the very best product
that people know they get results with,
which ultimately has allowed us to grow.
And again, it comes back to this,
the more we build growth, the more we can power good.
And this is a continuous circle that we're now in
that I think is just the bigger we get,
the bigger impact we can have,
which I think is very powerful.
And then I think from a people perspective,
I mean, any founder can now write the new rules.
And again, for us, it's around like belonging.

Everyone belongs at Decium.
Like that's our North Star.
Like we have so much work
on how we make people feel belong.
Why does that matter?
I'm playing devil's advocate here, obviously.
Why does that matter?
Why does that help me be successful?
Because you want humans to feel supported,
to feel safe, to feel trusted,
if you want to get the best from someone.
And also we have such a diverse workforce.
I mean, even 50% of our team, 50% of our leadership's BIPOC
and we continue to kind of strive to do more.
But I think that diversity,
like the more different viewpoints you have in a room,
the more you're gonna drive innovation,
you're going to drive creativity,
you're gonna move things forward.
And actually a favorite quote I had of Brandon's
was he said, which I always just find fascinating,
like people are skeptical
and then one day planes do fly.
And again, if you think back to like,
there would have been a point where
someone would say, what we can fly in an aeroplane
in the sky and it's, you know,
like that would have been baffling.
And then it happens.
So actually incredible change and advances can happen.
And it starts with small changes.
It starts with some, you know, we always say like,
we started as a group of just good people,
having fun, wanting to do the right thing.
And then it's kind of led to where we are today.
What are your non-negotiables?
You know, cause you're now the chief disciple of DCM.
You're the one that knows exactly what a DCM person is,
how they behave, what a DCM decision looks like,
what DCM behavior looks like.
What are your non-negotiables?
Definitely kindness.

I also always say like,
you have to do the right thing,
even when no one is looking.
And for me, that's like the authenticity piece.
And then that's also the difference, I think,
between being nice and being kind,
is that actually, even if someone's not looking,
you're always just doing the right thing.
Caring about the small things,
because actually the small things
become the big things over time.
So I think really nurturing that.
And just thinking differently.
And again, it's something where,
if you're taking inspiration
from the industrial category you're already in,
there's no point,
because you're just gonna end up doing
what everyone else is doing.
You need to take inspiration from everywhere,
but the industry and category you're playing in,
because, you know, as I said,
like the ordinary inspiration came from pharmacy,
from healthcare.
If we took inspiration from the world of beauty
and skincare,
we'd have just done what everyone else is doing,
but with far less resources
and kind of ability behind us.
So I think where you take inspiration from
is very important.
I'm gonna do a little bit of a quickfire here.
I hate quickfires and interviews
because it's so shitty and inauthentic,
but I just wanna make sure my stats are correct.
How many staff do you have today?
Just shy of 1,500.
How many stores have you got?
We've got 32 of our own stores.
How many of the positions in your company
are held by women?
We're over 50%.

The vast majority of your products
are still under $10?
Yes, our best-selling ones are.
Okay.
You're the most searched skincare brand on TikTok?
Yes, we're very proud of our TikTok virality.
You're the most popular skincare brand in boots as well?
Yeah, I think that, maybe on dot com.
Do you know how many products you sell a second?
I love stuff like that.
I lose track.
Is it two a second?
I have no idea.
Yeah, I don't have any money in front of me.
I'm just curious.
I thought you had it there.
No, no, no.
I think with Niece in the mind, it may be two a second.
Right.
Yeah.
Looking back at the career you've covered so far,
what's the advice that you wish someone had given you?
Let's say, let me say the day you met Brandon.
If I could have just ring, ring, your phone goes.
And it's you at 34 years old, you are?
34 now, yes.
34 years old.
And you got to speak to Nicola back then on the phone,
60 seconds, you get to give her some advice.
Stay calm, always find the positive in everything
because I think that positivity is what's infectious
and actually makes other people believe in what you want to do
and kind of can get you through the toughest times
by just being calm, being kind,
and just have belief in the end game.
Like we're on this planet for such a small amount of time,
some things you can control, some things you can't.
Life isn't fair.
You have your own situation.
And I think I've always found coming to things
just with an air of calmness has always been the best way.
I don't get stressed out

and I think that's an important quality.
It's not easy.
Don't get stressed out.
Takes a lot.
What is your mother think of everything
that's happened in your career?
Incredibly proud.
And I'm incredibly close to my mum.
Like I see her every week and you know,
it's also been nice that she's travelled so much with me.
You know, she's so often my childcare,
kind of looking after them when we travel
and you know, Sean's parents, they're very close to you.
But yeah, I think she's just incredibly proud
of how everything's turned out.
In your father's past when you were?
When I was 20.
And again, it's very hard
because probably see some similarities I think
between kind of what happened back then
and I guess just the uncontrollability
and the ability to help the situation
because you know, up until the age of,
well, when I was 18, like two years before he passed away,
I mean, he was healthy, he was well, he liked to drink,
but you know, not to the point of being an alcoholic.
And then very quickly things spiralled.
So he loved being a radio presenter like that was his life.
But I think it is a hard industry
where suddenly you're not current anymore
and there's younger presenters coming through
and he'd, you know, he'd gone from presenting
on the radio station for literally 25 years
or something, you know, he started at 18
and it'd been very successful in kind of the,
in you know, the big kind of South Yorkshire radio station
and suddenly it was taken away from him.
And I think that created just a spiral
and you know, he also, I think had challenges
with his upbringing and alcohol just became
a coping mechanism.
And again, I think it just, both times,

it surprised me at how quickly it can happen.
And again, with two years, my father had gone.
Give me a hug.
Give me a big hug.
I wouldn't be a guest if I wasn't crying.
My grandma died on Monday as well.
So it's just an actual one of all the emotions.
You okay? Yeah.
We're going to get some tissues.
Jack, have you got some tissues there?
Thank you.
Okay.
The conversation around addiction, we don't,
it's taken us some time to understand
its relationship with mental health, right?
And in that situation, what you describe
is the loss of your father's purpose
and how that turned him to alcohol.
And then within a short period of time,
I'm guessing there was an alcohol related death.
Yeah.
When you were 20, the world wasn't in,
it certainly wasn't in a place that's sort of 14,
15 years ago, wasn't in a place where it would have
understood alcoholism in the same way.
Were you able to understand the causes
of your father's behavior at that time?
I was, I felt like I could understand it
as in in the way of, I remember one of the doctors saying
to us, because he was in hospital quite a few times,
like you have to treat this as a terminal illness
because even if he gets better, it's there
and it can come back within the brain at any time
when it's a severe addiction.
So I think I kind of understood what was happening.
Again, found it incredibly difficult
of being helpless in terms of,
again, you go from someone who you love
and who loves you and who would do anything for you
and for their family.
Just suddenly, again, this not talking the same language
and again, it's very hard, I think, with addiction

and any of it, like, alcohol abuse
because you find it hard, like, why can't they just stop?
Like, they love us, like, why do they want
to be in this situation?
And again, it takes like the rethinking around,
like, they can't help it.
This is an illness just like cancer, like other diseases,
like their brain is ill and they can't think
of anything other than how they can get an egg's drink.
And I think it's just a hard,
it's a hard thing to accept, feeling helpless
when there isn't a medication, you know.
Again, in the UK, you can't put someone into rehab
unless they want to go, but they've got their brain
battling with them that won't allow them
to make that decision.
And when everything happened with Brandon,
it was like history repeating itself again.
You watch someone you love slowly slip away into.
Yeah, it was, I guess one of the differences with my,
with my dad, he never became, he was still very loving
and kind even though, you know, he couldn't stop.
Whereas I think with Brandon, it was,
things were much more, it was more anger
and it was kind of more, yeah.
My dad always still had the love and the kindness
coming through even when he was ill.
Were you able to process that, your father passing?
Did you take the time, did you get the support,
did you have anyone there to speak to about that?
Probably not really.
I think I've always just, I just keep busy
and actually I'm a very, I'm generally a very like,
positive, calm, happy, like, I truly have a high level
of happiness in my life, despite all that tragedy
that has happened.
And I get so much joy and so much love
and I can have so much support from my husband
and my mom and my sister and, you know,
some of the best friends in the world
who've been my best friends since we were in school.
That I've just, it's strange to go through everything

that's happened, but actually still feel very just secure
and loved, which I think, you know,
and I often say this like, despite what happened,
I mean, I had 18 years of probably a very boring
but very stable, loving, happy childhood
that I think really does set the foundations for later life.
And now we're here and you've got a wonderful husband.
You've got two gorgeous, wonderful, beautiful children
and happy and healthy.
And then you've got 1,500 children.
Yeah.
Desiem, who are doing just great as well.
How are you feeling?
Honestly, very privileged, very lucky.
I mean, to be like 34 and feel like actually,
I've accomplished so many of my dreams,
like having my children, having an incredible husband,
having an amazing home and amazing life together
and then also like, I mean, how lucky that it,
24 Desiem came into my life
and I've met the most incredible people.
I have best friends now from the company.
I live in such an exciting world, like, you know,
I get to work with one of the best brands
and companies in the world and also actually,
I like to think influence and set the footprint
for actually what business can be like.
It can be a place where leaders can be kind,
again, if you think around business from 20, 30 years ago,
I'm probably the polar opposite
to what would be expected to be a leader.
You don't have a big glass box.
You don't sit in your own big glass office above everybody else.
I heard you hot desk, your team told me you hot desk with them.
I've never had my own desk in any office at SEM,
probably the only person to never have my own desk.
And actually, I love it first of all,
because I'm traveling and whenever I'm somewhere,
I always want to spend time with people.
So normally, I'm in meetings that I want to be in,
just getting to know everyone.
And if I do have time on my desk, hot desking is far better,

like, who's not in today?
Or go sit in their desk,
because then you get to talk to another team,
you get to be around people.
So I've always kind of just enjoyed the floating piece
of just getting to know everyone in the team.
We have a closing tradition on this podcast, as you know,
because clearly you just said you'd watched an episode before,
so this is, this will not be a surprise.
We have a closing tradition
where the last guest leaves a question for the next guest.
This is a bit of a long one.
The question is,
okay, I've been trying to figure out what this word is,
that's why I was mumbling around,
because I was like, I can't, okay.
Stasis is a lie.
In every moment, we are either progressing towards
the better self within or regressing.
So the question is, who are you becoming?
I think I'm becoming someone who is just accepting
of who they are and actually just being very content
and being happy with who I am.
And I think, you know, like people always ask me like,
and I have no plans to leave Desi,
but people always say like,
after Desi and what do you want to do?
And they always don't believe when I say like,
I just want to be a mom.
Like that's so important to me.
Like, and again, I talk about chapters in life.
Like, if that's that period
that I get one chance at life to do,
then I want to prioritize that.
And I think, you know, sometimes people associate,
well, because you've been like business
and you've been driven, that becomes a conflict.
And that, but it doesn't because also I think the qualities
that make me want to dedicate so much to my children
and being a good mom,
I probably also would actually mix the culture
what it is at Desi and today.

So I think just accepting that actually we're all unique
and I am very content at this moment in life.
I feel I don't particularly have any regrets.
I want to know more about if things could have been
differently in this, you know,
the bad situations that have happened.
But I think because I've always feel like I've approached
things with kindness that I've been true to myself
that actually that's something that I kind of want
to continue to be.
Well, you certainly do embody kindness.
And you, you know, your team described you
as being a rare of sunshine.
That isn't my experience of you.
That is also my experience of your husband
who I met a year ago,
who's also a wonderful human being.
Thank you, thank you for so much.
Thank you for the inspiration.
You really are an example
that in order to be a successful leader in business,
you don't need to be what we used to see in movies,
which is like screaming and shouting at people
and throwing things from the glass box
and being cruel and being selfish
and being a leech on society or the earth
or whatever it might be.
You are one of those shining examples
that success and kind aren't mutually exclusive.
In fact, and clearly in your case from speaking to your team
and seeing how much they adore you,
it's additive to the outcome of success.
It doesn't deduct from it,
but your story as well that it should be a movie.
And I'm sure you're gonna,
I'm sure it will be a movie someday
or at least an incredible, incredible series of books
is one that is so incredible, so inspiring,
so, you know, unthinkable at times.
And the way that you share it
with such wisdom and vulnerability
is going to induce so much light and inspiration

and liberation in everyone that's listened today.
So sometimes when I do this podcast,
I realize that I have to thank you
on behalf of the listener
because I realized the listener is at home
and they are gonna DM you and all that stuff
because they do that a lot, which is fantastic.
But I would really like to thank you
on behalf of everyone that listened to this conversation
because I know how many of them in so many ways
that you'll never understand.
You'll see maybe 1% of it.
You'll never understand how much you've helped
and you don't have to.
You don't have to come and do these things
and share the way you do and open yourself up like this.
You do have a choice in that and you've chosen to do that
and I know why you've chosen to do that
and it's because of the value that you've shared today.
So thank you, Nicola.
It's been a pleasure to meet you.
You're very much the reason why I do what I do here
is to find the stories like this
and to share them with the world
and you'll continue to inspire me for many years
to come through all those chapters of your life
that you described.
Amazing.
Thank you for having me.
Thank you for listening.
Right now I'm incredibly busy.
I'm running my fund
where we're investing in slightly later-stage companies.
I've got my venture business
where we invest in early-stage companies.
Got a third web out in San Francisco and New York City
where we've got a big team of about 40 people
and the company's growing very quickly.
Flight Story here in the UK.
I've got the podcast and I am days away
from going up north to film Dragonstone for two months.
And if there's ever a point in my life

where I wanna stay focused on my health
but it's challenging to do so, it is right now.
And for me, that is exactly where Huel comes in.
Allowing me to stay healthy
and have a nutritionally complete diet
even when my professional life descends into chaos.
And it's in these moments where Huel's RTDs
become my right-hand man and save my life
because when my world descends into professional chaos
and I get very, very busy,
the first thing that tends to give way
is my nutritional choices.
So having Huel in my life has been a lifesaver
for the last four or so years.
And if you haven't tried Huel yet,
which is I'd be shocked you must be living under a rock
if you haven't yet, give it a shot.
Coming into summer, things getting busy,
health matters always, RTD is there to hold your hand.