

## TRIGGER ALERT

Be forewarned. This book contains elements that may bring about trigger episodes in those who have experienced sexual assault and abuse.

However, this is not a book solely about the horrible and the ugly. On the contrary, it focuses on the healing aspects one must go through to find peace and light at the end of the trauma tunnel.

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# WAITING *for* PAINT *to* DRY

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## NOT MUCH TO CELEBRATE

I grip the hand railing and stand on tip toe. From my rooftop deck, I can almost see it. Water. As the hot July sun sets behind me, just past buildings blocking my view, I see it—a sliver of water glimmering off in the distance. I sigh at the sight of it, yet feel no relief. Crowded and polluted, I don't feel the same yearning with Baltimore's Inner Harbor as I did with my Pacific Ocean back home.

Home.

I lower myself and stand flat. Lean into the wood railing with my body's weight and stare below at the backyard, concrete patio, three flights down. Worn and weathered, the deck's railing could and should give any moment. For that, maybe I'd be grateful.

I hear a ring from my back pocket and pull out my cell phone. Probably my boss asking why I've taken a personal day, again. But it's not. It's my friend Claire. I read her text: *Hey, Matty Bell, on our way! Can't wait to celebrate, birthday girl! 30 years old!!!*

My heart trips a beat, and I feel my skin break out into a cold sweat, despite the heat. I totally forgot today was my birthday. I pace back and forth, my hands holding back the hair that's fallen from the haphazard bun on the crown of my head. I know I said I would do it this year. Try to do it. Forget my decade-long avoidance of my birthday and enjoy

a little celebration in the name of me, Matty Bell, turning a new page. But now that it's here, I don't know if I can.

Feeling a panic attack coming on, I sink down onto the splintered wood and sit with my back to the railing, trying to breathe past the constriction in my throat. The railing gives just a little. *This is how it could happen*, I hear a voice in the back of my head. *No one would know you did it on purpose*. I don't move right away, tempting the fear coiled in my belly to release so I can release myself.

Peace. It's all I've ever wanted.

I feel a vibration under my butt from my cell phone. Grab it and see Claire's text: *Dress down if you want, or wear what you wore to work. We'll be there in a few. Greg's out of town, so just me!*

I text my friend back: *Sorry, Claire. I can't do it*. I contemplate for a good excuse and type: *I forgot to tell you . . . I'm working late again today*, I lie. *Can't do it. Have fun without me!* I hit send, then remember. Hop up and run to the other railing overlooking the street down below. My truck is neatly parked out front.

I fling open the rooftop door to my apartment and run inside, tripping on clothes I left strewn on the floor, and fly down the stairs so fast I barely feel the steps beneath my feet. Bursting out the front door, I grab for the driver's side door and try to yank it open. It's locked.

"Shit!" I yell at myself for forgetting my keys. I dart back upstairs to my studio apartment and dig through my bag. Loose change. Hair bands. Hordes of paper from who knows where. I finally dump it all out and find the keys. By the time I make it back downstairs, I'm entirely out of breath. So much for being a long-distance runner. My father would kill me if he knew how out of shape I've let myself become. Well, not kill me. But give me one hell of a boot camp lesson, if he knew.

I turn the key in the ignition. Nothing. I turn it again. Not even a sound of the engine turning over.

*She said you'd do it*, a voice says in my mind, and I hit the side of my head with a closed fist to shut it up. I shake my head clear of the flashbacks the voice brings and turn the key. The rumble of the engine

soothes me, and I pull out into traffic with my big rolling security blanket wrapped around me.

This is precisely why I've avoided my birthday for the past ten years. Why I've ignored all calls, cards, gifts, and reminders that the tenth of July bears any more significance than any of the other three hundred sixty-four days of the year. I don't want to remember what happened that birthday long ago. Born and dead on the same day, not much to celebrate.

Except, I'd be a liar if I said it only bothers me on my birthdays. Spend enough mental energy running from something, someone, soon it's all you ever think about.

I park my truck a few blocks away, and it dies out before I get a chance to turn it off. See the orange light glow from the dashboard. Out of gas. I lean my head against the steering wheel and feel my heart drop.

"I'm sorry, Betsy," I say to my truck. "I'll take better care of you. I promise."

It's darker on the sidewalk. Lonelier. And I feel too obvious in my shorts and tank top, showing too much skin. I walk fast. The humid heat makes the air thick, and I can't seem to take in a full breath of air. I hear a noise in the alley as I pass by. Feel eyes on me as I cross the street. Hear footsteps following quick. I look back. Check and check again. I can see that no one is behind me, but my heart pounds just the same. Three more blocks. Two. One. I start to run. I reach my front stoop out of breath and full of fear. When someone says my name, I scream.

"Matty! It's just me." Claire rushes over to me, bringing me back to reality. I sit on my stoop in the glow of the overhead light and put my head between my knees, sure I'm about to pass out from my self-induced anxiety attack. "Breathe, breathe," she says as I feel her squat down beside me and rub my back. "You okay?" she asks, and I sit up.

"I'm fine," I smile weakly when I see the worry in her eyes. "You just startled me is all."

Claire stands up in a breeze that has graciously arrived now that she's here, all grace and casual in her cork sandals, khaki capris, and flowy, sleeveless, peach blouse. I gather myself up, wishing I had dressed in something similar. She always seems so comfortable, so easy in her own skin. Only, I don't own anything remotely close to her chick sense of style. Monochromatic and drab, my clothes suck.

"Where were you?" she asks. "I thought you said you were working late tonight, so we were just going to drop this off," she says of the package in her hands.

"Oh, I was," I answer quick, not thinking straight. "But then I decided to go for a jog."

"In flip-flops?" she says, pointing to my shoes.

I look down at my feet and roll my eyes at myself. Unlike my sister, my lies have always been lame and completely transparent.

"I mean . . . my truck . . . it died."

"Again? Matty," Claire says, switching over to her typical motherly tone. "When are you going to get a new car? You have a good job now, you know."

"Yes, I know," I say of the office job she helped me get. Made me get, rather.

"Well, it's got to pay more than being a dog walker or those random waitress jobs you've had—"

"Yes, it does. Thank you."

"—because it's about time you start doing things right and taking care of yourself, Matty. I can't take care of you forever, you know."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I ask. Instead of answering, she shoves the package into my hands. It's a big, heavy gift, wrapped in crisp, white paper and a lovely red silk bow.

My heart jumps into my throat and I swallow hard. "What is it?"

"A birthday present from the kids and Greg and I," Claire chastises me, then softens. "Come on. I know it's hard, but Greg's out of town, and the kids have been waiting all day. And I've kept it totally low-key

like you said. See?" She spins around. "No party. No tons of people making a big fuss. Just us."

"I know what I said," I interject, looking forlornly toward her minivan, feeling my throat tighten. "I just—"

"I mean, it's not every day your best friend hits the Big Three-O before you do," Claire adds, giving me a playful wink.

"Yes, I know," I say of her excitement and the promise I made last year, wishing now I hadn't thought I'd magically find the courage to instantly fix years of denial. "I'm sorry, Claire, but . . . I changed my mind," I say looking back at her, attempting to hand her back the gift. "I can't do it—"

"Come on, the kids are so excited. I actually can't believe they've stayed in the car this long without whining," Claire says, more to herself.

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry, but—"

"I mean, the AC is on, and I left the movie going, but usually when they see you, all my mommy rules go out the window—"

"Claire, you're not hearing me!" I yell, breaking off her monologue. "I don't want to!"

"Why?" Claire says in a condescending tone. "Because you might blow up if you do?" she adds, making fun of the way I've explained how accepting my birthday makes me feel. As though it makes everything that I've tried to ignore real again.

I open my mouth to lash back, but nothing comes out. Claire may not know everything that happened to me, but she knows enough. And she took me in years ago when I left home. Now, her dismissal is like a slap in the face. My heart and head pound out my dismay.

"You weren't there," I say in a low, slow tone.

"Yeah, but it happened when you were sixteen, Matty," she says, exasperated. "Do you really like living as though you're dead? I mean, just throw that shit away already."

"Throw it away? Throw it away?" I feel myself rise up out of my body and back up onto the rooftop deck. I should have done it. Should have pushed that railing hard and fallen. Then I wouldn't have to do

this anymore. I'd finally have my peace. "Dammit, Claire!" I yell, all feeling gone from my body. "Why can't you just leave me alone when you know I don't do birthdays!"

We stand in sudden silence, our words hanging fat in the humid air around us.

"I can't do this anymore, Matty," Claire says in defeat, hands raised. "You need help." It's not the first time she's said it, but it hurts as though it's the first cut. I want to run. Lock myself up forever. Cower away from the voices and the flashbacks and the memories and die. But then I hear another voice speak up. A little voice.

"Aunty Matty?"

Claire and I both look down. Max, her almost-two-year-old, says my name again, peeking out from behind his mommy's legs.

Claire spins around and sees her other two climbing out of her always polished BMW minivan.

"No, no, no. Back inside. We're leaving," she says, picking Max up and directing the other two back to their car seats. But it's no use, and I can see by the slump in her shoulders that she knows it, too. Her other two children maneuver around her to get to me.

Despite the tantrum I've just thrown, I don't hesitate. I open my arms wide to greet Molly and Marcus, her three and five year olds. The two jump into my arms, and I give them a big squeeze hello. Unable to have children myself, I love Claire's kids like they're my own.

"Aunty Matty! Aunty Matty!"

I hug them, tears escaping my eyes at the calmness their presence brings. I wipe the tears away with the back of my hand. I feel little hands on my leg.

"Hey, Max-man," I coo down at little Max. I set Marcus and Molly down and scoop him up. Nuzzle his warm face. All tenseness in my body melts to heaven as he wraps his little hands around my neck.

"Mommy said we weren't supposed to get out of the car," Marcus informs me with a pouty lip. He climbs onto my back as I bend down to gather his sister Molly up in my arms.



“Well, you’re out now,” I whisper back to him with a wink. I dance and bounce them all over to my front stoop and plop down in a puddle of giggles. Molly instantly moves to sit behind me and starts to undo the mess on top of my head, releasing my long, blonde hair into golden strands down my back. She loves the length. Anything that almost touches your butt is “mermaid hair” in her book. I hand Max my keys and cell phone to play with. All the while, Marcus gives me his rendition of their latest adventure.

“ . . . and then we saw the dolphins swimming underwater, and we didn’t even get wet!”

“No way,” I say to Marcus, wide-eyed and full of fun.

“Yeah! And right after that Molly got pooped on by a bird!”

“Oh, no,” I say, looking back at Molly. She nods her head, teary-eyed.

“Molly got pooped on! Molly got pooped on!” Marcus sings.

“Marcus,” I take both his hands in mine. “That’s not very nice. You’re hurting Molly’s feelings.”

“But it’s true,” he pouts, and I want to smile at his earnest sincerity but know better when I see Claire out of the corner of my eye, arms folded.

I situate everyone on my lap and await the lecture. Only, her stern look turns slack, and suddenly my friend looks years older than she really is.

“It’s late, kids. Say goodbye.”

“But we want ice cream!” they all cry in unison.

“Aunt Matty can’t,” she says. “But we’ll get some on the way home, okay?” As they cheer and dance around the sidewalk, she scoops them up, one by one, and buckles them back into their car seats. When she’s got them belted in and closed away behind the sliding door, she looks my way one last time and climbs in herself.

My stomach tightens in a knot. I want to call out, rush over and tell Claire I’m sorry, hop in the minivan with them, and go wherever it is they wanted to go. Tell her I know she’s excited I hit the Big Three-O before she did and laugh off my craziness as that one-last-time I let

the past gobble up my happiness. But I'm stuck, left with the words trapped in my throat and my chest squeezed tight like a straightjacket.

I watch as Claire's taillights blend in with traffic and disappear down the street. I stand, staring, waiting for them to come back. When they don't, I look down at the gift on my stoop, it's sweet bow staring back at me. Suddenly, I feel the gravity of the day weighing me down. I gather up my hair in a loose bun again, trying to forget the tiny fingers that just ran through it. I may have made a habit of pushing the past down so that I won't remember, but I never intended my running to hurt anyone. Maybe Claire's right. Maybe I do need help.

I sigh and raise my eyes skyward. Illuminated by the city lights, the sky looks more rust orange than midnight blue. Not a star shines through.

Another gift.

Stars only remind me of the time I wished for something so big, so out of this world, that I got it.

*I wish I will meet a man who will change my life forever.*

I had no idea what I was doing, but I wished for it anyway. Then learned the old adage well—be careful what you wish for.

I close my eyes and feel my mind start to vibrate with hurtful voices, demanding restitution.

*See! they scream at me. You did this to yourself! If you hadn't wished for a man to change your life forever, you wouldn't have been raped!*

I crush my head between my hands. The pain helps subside the guilt.

I feel a sudden breeze and something touches my leg. I jump down off the stoop, ready to bolt, when I hear the meow of a cat. A poof of burnt-orange, almost-red fur frames its emerald green eyes. The cat warmly glides its furry self along my leg, and I laugh at myself for losing it so easily. But my lighthearted mood ends quickly as I can hardly breathe past the constriction in my throat, my fight-or-flight response taking over. I grab my things, fish out my keys in an instant, and unlock my door, my hands shaking. I slam the door and press my face against it.

“Stupid,” I chastise myself. “How dumb do you have to be, Matty?” In a quick succession of movements, I secure the bolt and padlocks, all the while reprimanding myself, “There are consequences to being alone in the dark. You’re a girl. A stupid, stupid girl.”

I flip on the three light switches next to me that illuminate the empty first floor, which houses the living room and kitchen, as well as the bottom half of the stairwell. I fight back the tears as I climb the crooked, narrow steps, reminding myself that I don’t deserve to feel scared. It was my own dumb fault I sat out there in the dark, alone. I was lucky it was just a cat.

I run past the darkened second floor—the empty lone bedroom and bath that used to be Claire’s—and rush up to the third floor. By the time I reach my sanctuary, my tears have dried and all’s been forgotten, although never forgiven. Safely inside my attic apartment, my heart slows a little, and I’m finally able to fill my lungs with a full breath of air. I drop my bag on the floor. Kick off my shoes. Hold Claire’s heavy gift to my chest. Lock the door behind me.

My place—with its faded brown couch situated against a bare brick wall, a full-sized mattress without a headboard pushed up against the other, and a worn, faux-mahogany table used to separate the sleeping/living area from the makeshift kitchenette—would look just as it had when I first moved in ten years ago, if it weren’t for the mess I leave behind every day or the moving boxes I never unpacked. I haven’t always been a slob, but the fact that I am one now doesn’t bother me much anymore.

I sit on Claire’s itchy, old, brown couch that she left behind and put her gift on my makeshift coffee table—three moving boxes lined up in a row, dressed up by one of Claire’s old tablecloths she left behind when she got married and moved out.

I lean back and close my eyes, not wanting to think about anything but the here and now. So stuck in the past, it’s something I’ve never been able to accomplish without a lot of strain. Yet I close my eyes

and attempt to silence my mind. Attempt to relax and feel something different, maybe even something new.

*Thirty years old*, I think to myself. *Finally*.

Although on the outside I've worn my shield of indifference well, I know deep down I've been waiting for this moment. I'm thirty years old, entering a whole new decade. Something magical is about to happen. I just know it.

Excited, I wait for it, eyes closed, envisioning a sparkly mist descending upon me, my very own fairy godmother here to save me from myself. I tap my fingers on my thighs and hold my breath in braced anticipation. Tune out the hum of the window air conditioning unit as it blows cold gusts of air into the room. Ignore the honks from cars passing by on the street below. I wait. And wait.

Nothing.

No difference. No explosion of wisdom. No sense of security in myself. Unable to believe it, I try two more times, sure I'm doing something wrong. I close my eyes and wait. Close my eyes and wait . . .

Nada, zilch, zero.

Nothing.

I'm just as uncomfortable in my own skin as I was before, unsure of my own thoughts, of what I'm supposed to do with myself and my life. I still feel like a sixteen year old.

Frustrated, I get up to take a shower. I pull off my top, unbutton my pants, and leave a trail of clothing along the paint-splattered hardwood floor and into my bathroom. Standing naked and making sure to not look in the mirror, I pull out the hairband that's twisted into my long hair and feel the weight of its length fall harshly against the pale tones of my skin. I take a quick shower, finishing before my five-minute time limit, and twist up and secure my damp hair in the same hairband without bothering to brush it. I towel off without looking down at myself and put on the same pajamas I left lying on the back of the toilet this morning.

I dig around in my unmade bed and then under the couch until I find the remote control. I sit myself down on the itchy, brown couch, my legs neatly curled under me, and heave a big sigh of relief in the familiar rhythms of solitude. I push aside piles of indiscriminate junk that are piled on the coffee table and stretch out and prop up my feet.

“It’s time to unwind, Matty Bell style,” I say to myself and turn on the TV. The food channel comes to life. “Ooh! Iron Chef!” I cheer.

Having caught one of my favorite cooking shows midway through, I lean forward and watch intently to see if I can figure out the secret ingredient. From the looks of it, both chefs in Kitchen Stadium are using some sort of gigantic, reddish squid I’ve never seen before. Not exactly appetizing, but entertaining nonetheless.

After a while, my stomach starts to grumble. I glance at my cell phone. Ten o’clock. I haven’t eaten anything since lunch, and that was just a bagel. Tummy rumbling, I wait for a commercial break to dash into the kitchenette for a bite to eat. Opening my small freezer, I decide I have enough time to dish out what’s left of the ice cream. It’s not much, but it’s my favorite—crazy-sweet, pink ice cream, speckled with those fizzy pop rock candies that crackle and snap on your tongue. I slip a spoonful of the ridiculously hot-pink, cotton candy flavored ice cream into my mouth and make it back to the couch just in time to see the last commercial drop out of focus.

“Twenty minutes to go,” the announcer from Kitchen Stadium states from the TV.

“Now this is my kind of night,” I say as I lounge back into the couch.

Although I’m no cook, I find watching others cook fascinating, with their fast-flying chopping action and sautéing magic. I concentrate on the two varying cooking methods of the competing chefs. The chef from Japan—the legendary Morimoto—is stuffing his soon-to-be-braised squid with a wasabi, seaweed, and candied ginger mixture.

“Go, Japan!” I cheer, feeling a kindred spirit as I was born in Japan.

The guest chef, who is challenging the Iron Chef, turns his steamed squid and squash combo into a liquid. For some reason, this stomach-turning yet oddly aesthetic combination wins the judges over.

With the show over, ice cream gone, and sleep still feeling miles away, I look again at my cell phone for the time. Eleven o'clock p.m. I watch some random movie that sounds interesting and ends up being a dud. Check my phone after it's over. One thirty a.m. No longer my birthday. I tap my fingers on my thighs for a moment, then pick up Claire's heavy gift.

I hold my breath as I pull the red ribbon with a gentle hand. Watch as it slowly unwinds itself from the package and take one more step—I rip open the white paper. And breathe easy. Just as I suspected. A book.

The Big Easy Cookbook.

"Ha!" I laugh, shaking my head. Perfect for the non-cook me. I flip through the pages, excited to learn its simple methods that will transform me into a capable chef. But instead, I find the book isn't as the title describes. The meals and recipes are nowhere close to easy. Intricate and culturally specific, it's a cookbook all about New Orleans—The Big Easy.

"Oh, Claire." I shake my head with a smile, imagining my friend walking through a bookstore with her three little ones in tow. She, seeing the title of the book. Them, seeing the size. I pick up my phone to call them. Thank them. Laugh with them. But it's too late, maybe in more ways than one.

I dismiss the thought and open the cookbook. It's filled with delectable photographs of scrumptious foods that make my mouth water and my stomach rumble. I have a thought. I walk over to the kitchenette and balance the open cookbook on the only available counter space between the sink and the stove and start to rummage around for something I can make. Although it's been a long while since I've made anything outside of a microwavable meal, I'm feeling inspired tonight.

In the fridge, I see that I've got an egg, a few pieces of bread, some lunch meat, and some other odds and ends that I guess I can make a sandwich with. I don't know. Doesn't sound exciting.

I open the cookbook, flip through the pages. I see tons of dishes I could attempt to make if only I owned any of the ingredients and had

the know-how to not screw it up. Defeated, I pull my cell phone out of the back pocket of my pajama bottoms and call for pizza. I turn the cookbook over in my hands while I wait for someone to pick up and look at the back cover so I can glare at the chef responsible for this so-called easy cookbook and my maddening hungry stomach.

On the back is the photograph of a woman. Inside a frame of sleek crimson hair, her green eyes exude such a strong sense of self, of confidence, that they hold my attention as though she were a real live person, right here in my tiny kitchen. I study her features and wonder how this woman got to be so strong, so sure of herself. She looks like a woman who knows what she wants and how to get it.

A timid thought dashes through my mind. *I want to be like that.*

I bite my lip and hang up the phone. Open the cookbook once more. See a recipe for Lake Charles Monte Cristo. Although I've never seen anyone on a cooking show make anything like it before, the picture looks fantastic, and the directions, once I actually read them, seem easy enough to follow. I scan the ingredients against what I have.

Bread, check.

Eggs, check.

Lunch meat, check.

Milk, none. But I have yogurt.

"Maybe if I add a little water to the yogurt," I think out loud and begin to pull out the ingredients I have and the make-do substitutes for the ones I don't.

Try as I may, the egg shells crumble when I crack the eggs open, and I spend forever fishing out tiny shell pieces from the bowl. Unable to get them all, my hunger still growing, I leave a few in, deeming them tiny enough to be unnoticeable. I add the milk (yogurt watered down to the consistency of milk) and whisk it together with a fork. I smile, satisfied that my mixture resembles that of the picture in the cookbook.

I construct the sandwich—bread, lunch meat, bread—and place it face down in the egg-milk (yogurt) wash bowl. Anxious I'm missing a step, I reread the directions to make sure I'm doing it right. So far, so

good. I search for a pan and put it on my hardly-ever-used, tiny stove top, medium heat.

“Okay, now what?”

Rereading the directions—I have a hard time following directions, so I know to read and reread them for accuracy—I realize too late that I didn’t butter the sides of the bread before I put them in the egg-milk (yogurt) wash. Nor did I add some to the pan so the sandwich contraption doesn’t stick.

A quick look in the fridge. I don’t have any butter. A minor setback. I use the remaining yogurt as a substitute for the butter. I plop some into the heated pan and spread it around with my fingers, burning myself in the process.

Burnt fingers under running cold water, I refer back to the recipe directions, feeling the steps begin to jumble in my head. I read that I have to dip both sides of the sandwich into the egg wash for only a few seconds on each side and then add the sandwich quickly to the pan—not let it sit in the liquid concoction while talking to myself and rereading the directions a dozen times.

I turn the sandwich over in the bowl to coat the other side, but soggy bits of bread fall away. I try to transfer it all to the heated pan, but the bread deteriorates even further, plopping back into the bowl. Not wanting to lose any of the ingredients, I pour everything into the pan, only too fast. A small tidal wave of egg-milk (yogurt) and bread bits splash out of the pan and onto the front of my pajamas.

But the sizzle sounds about right from what I’ve seen on TV and almost resembles the picture in the cookbook. Almost. Somewhat satisfied, I put my finger back under the cold water while I towel off the egg wash from my clothes.

“I should be wearing an apron,” I say to myself, charged with the excitement that I’m actually cooking and doing it right. I know I have an apron somewhere in my closet from one of the waitressing jobs I’ve had. A hoarder, I don’t throw much away.



I flip on the walk-in closet light and look around. Pushing aside piles of random stuff and fallen clothes, I search through what's on the floor and then look up at the shelf. There, on top of a moving box and under a pile of indiscriminate odds and ends, I see the stained strap of what I'm sure is an apron.

Steadying up on tippy-toes, I reach up over the moving box and sizzle my hand on the bare bulb that hangs too low. I yank my hand back to suck on the sting until it subsides, then reach up again and pull the strap. It won't budge. I hold back all the junk with one hand and untangle the apron strap from some leftover dog leashes I still have from when I was a dog walker, all the while cursing my lack of organizational skills. Just then, I smell smoke followed by the sound of the smoke detector screaming to life. Frantic, I yank the apron with a quick, strong tug, only to realize too late that it was partially wedged under the moving box.

In slow motion—and for my entertainment only—an avalanche of junk comes crashing down. Papers, books, dog leashes, forgotten clothes. Oh, and let us not forget the icing on the cake, the moving box—*bam!*—right into my face. The box rips open, spilling its contents in a flood all over me and onto the floor.

Holding my crushed nose, my ears ringing from the fire alarm, I jump over the broken box and dart into the kitchenette to fan the smoke detector with a dish towel. Indignant, it roars on. I grab the now too-hot-to-touch pan without a hot mitt—I don't own a hot mitt!—and throw it into the sink. Still fanning the damned fire alarm with a towel, I turn on the cold water to run over both my scalded hand and the pan below it. The smell of burnt food mixes with steam as it billows up into my face.

I survey the damage in the sink. My hand is okay, a little painful is all, but the sandwich couldn't be worse. Blackened and burnt to the bottom of the pan, *Monte is crisp-o*, for sure. I pull the batteries out of the smoke detector, silencing it forever, and blow a puff of breath up at the wet hair that has fallen free in the chaos, clinging to my face.

Still hungry, eyes burning from the smoke, ears pounding in the new silence, finger burnt, nose hurt, hand scalded, I pout toward my bed. I am stopped short of flopping down on the mattress, however, at the sight of the massive mess flowing out of my closet. Sprawled out on the floor like a drunken schoolgirl are my old art notebooks, dozens upon dozens of them, filled with the pages of my passion gone dry.

In disbelief, I pick one up and leaf through its color-spattered pages. Like magic, I feel the unforgettable tug in my heart, the excited sputtering I haven't felt in years. In a rush to hold onto its sudden resurgence, I pick up as many art books as I can and hold them close, keep them safe, like friends I haven't seen in a long time that might fly away too soon.

I open one. Then another. And another. I flip through their pages. Haphazard displays of artwork spill forth in a myriad of mediums—crisp acrylics, faded watercolors, smudged chalks, pencil drawings. My heart leaps for joy, and I feel my eyes fill with tears. I haven't seen these notebooks since I left California. I open up another. And another. I turn them over in my hands, flip through their pages, run my fingers over the movements of life on every page.

Some pages are filled with playful practice strokes, others completed like mini-masterpieces. I used to love the way colors swirled together, creating magical combinations of life. I pick up another book and open to a simple pencil sketch of the beach near my parent's house in Oceanside, touched here and there with different colored smudges—clay cliffs a burnt sienna, the ocean a beckoning slate turquoise. Picking up yet another, I find the one I dedicated to the portraits of any poor saps who would sit still long enough for me to try to capture their whole life in one single frame.

I look on with renewed ownership as I leaf through the pages, feeling my smile grow with deep satisfaction, gratitude. There are no blank pages. I was never without want to capture something, anything, on canvas. No matter where we went, I always had my little art bag in hand and an art notebook under my arm. My mother never understood

nor approved. My sister, the same. It embarrassed them. But my father loved it. Said my talent came naturally, as though born with me. And although I didn't always fit in with the in-crowd, it never mattered much to quirky, artsy me.

I pick up the last remaining notebook and see a crumpled piece of blue paper lying on the floor.

*Leave it*, a loud voice demands from the back of my mind, and I kick it away, my heart pounding. But then a different voice—a softer, more timid one than the first—whispers, *pick it up*.

Not used to hearing the softer voice inside, I hesitate before turning back and bending down. I pick it up, undo its crumpled edges until it lies flat in my hands.

With no salutation at the beginning, no signature at the end, it's just a jumble of words on one lonely page of sadness and self-hate. My heart goes out for whomever wrote it. Since it came from the moving box, it could be anyone's handwriting. A friend from high school in California. Maybe even from someone I knew when we lived in Italy. Or any number of friends I've had to leave behind while moving around with my dad in the Navy.

Although the note feels tortured, I'm intrigued to read more, find out who wrote it. Maybe in the words lies a clue. I read on. Line after line, the tightness of the handwriting makes it illegible to read, until one word halfway down the page seems to have been written with such force, it is literally sliced through the paper in three distinct letters.

*W-H-Y*

It's written, not as a question, but more as a demand. Somehow I know this.

The words start to unravel and reveal themselves the more I read. I feel my throat tighten as I attempt to discern the meaning of the tear-stained page.

*Why, God? Why?* it says.

After a snarl of words I can't make out, calm and clear writing emerges near the end of the page, and I read it with ease.

*What's the point anymore? There's only pain.*

I feel the hair on my arms rise when the next sentence reads itself to me, almost out loud, from somewhere in the back of my mind.

*Only in death is there peace.*

I don't have to look down at the paper to know what the next line says. I've read it before. I see it now. This is my handwriting. I wrote this.

*You live and you die. And then finally, peace.*

I clamp a hand over my mouth. Tears sting my eyes.

*I don't want to live like this anymore. I just want to—*

"Die," I finish the sentence out loud.

Like a fist to the gut, the air is knocked out of me. All of a sudden, I remember writing the note one dreadful, lonely night after leaving home. And now the same redundant questions start up again, just like they've been nagging me all day.

Why?

Why me?

Why didn't anyone help me?

And why, please, God, do the aftereffects linger on and on, like a heavy hand holding me down? I ran away from the pain, and yet I'm still here, asking the same damned questions and getting no answers. Why do I still feel I'm drowning in guilt? Why do I live in unbelievable solitude?

To keep myself safe. That's always been my mantra.

"But have I really accomplished that?" I ask myself out loud. All I wanted was to get away from it all, yet I've been set in stone and left to feel this way forever.

"If I die . . ." I repeat the thought that led me to write the note in the first place. "If I die, it all goes away." It's the only answer I've ever come up with.

I pull a shaky breath past the constriction in my throat. I don't like the sound of my own defeat. I feel a heated tremor building up deep inside me, and I scream out, pounding the floor with my fists.

"I hate this shit!"

I storm the few steps back into the kitchenette and turn on the stove. Lay the note over the heating element until it crinkles into smoldering ash, erasing it forever.

“Fuck him,” I say. “Fuck them all.”

A waft of charred smoke puffs up over me like a calming hand. I close my eyes and breathe it in.

Feel a change. A pivot.

I round the corner and pause only for a second, noticing I never closed or locked up the door that leads out to my rooftop deck. I take a few cautious steps up until I’m standing outside, still in the night. The air is less moist up here, with a windy breeze and a serene view of city lights dancing in the night sky. Sirens sound from the streets below and off in the distance. I turn slowly and realize, at this late hour, I can actually see the passing of boat lights in the harbor. Loose whips of hair blow about my face. I walk over to the railing. Grab hold of that which protects me from the three-flight drop down.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I feel it, all throughout my body and all of my existence. I still want peace.

Calm.

Tranquility.

Balance.

Only, as I gaze down at the pavement to where my truck should be, I know I won’t get any of that from death. Not death in the real end-of-life sense.

No. There has to be another way.

With a shallow breath, I walk back into my apartment. Close and lock up the rooftop door. Slide a tower of moving boxes back in front of it. The barricade I had created long ago to keep me from walking out there in the first place. Back in my tiny kitchenette, I clean up the mess, slowly turning soapy circles in the burnt pan. And that’s when I hear the soft voice speak up in me again. And it’s right. What I want—need— is the kind of peace that doesn’t come from death.

It comes from a new beginning.