INTRODUCTION

I love the sound of deafening silence. In fact, I don't hear enough of it. I have headphones, but through them, I can still hear the rustling of the noises outside and the grind of my teeth or the breathing from my nose. I like the lack of sound that envelopes my head when I'm underwater. I need to be silent when I'm meditating. I have got to start meditating more. I've decided to start today. Today is the day. Today is the day I start. I mean, we all say that, right? For anything…everything. Today is the absolute day that I will start this and follow through. It could be anything. It could even be stopping something. Today is the day I stop. Today is the absolute day I will no longer do this. I live my life this way every day. I'm always stopping and starting something, never following through—never to actual completion.

Even my victories have hollow tendrils within them where I shove my dark opinion, and it says things like "I graduated high school but didn't have a 4.0", "I was married and happy, but I got divorced, that's a failure," I graduated college and had a high GPA but didn't graduate with honors" "I am many years sober. Still, I shouldn't have been an alcoholic to begin with"—all my dark opinions. My husband calls them my clown voice. We all have the clown voice that hovers inside our ears, waiting for a moment of weakness. My clown voice says some disturbing things. You might hear some of them in this book. Don't take offense. He's not talking to you. Believe me. Now, I must apologize before you read any further. I don't exactly have natural brevity, so I might scatter the words before you on the page and gather them up again to make sense of them while I write. I know this is a lot to ask—that you continue to read while I process my thoughts, but I am skillful at symbolism, so

you will be able to get more than what you bargained for from reading this book—even if you don't know it.

I started writing this book with the full intention of processing all my trauma within it. I wanted to do it in real-time. I know many books include what to do and how the one thing they write about may fix everything in your life, but I don't have that answer. I need to find it. It's on this journey that I hope to experience my personal way to happiness.

Well, maybe not happiness. Maybe not even fulfillment. I don't need to feel good all the time; I'm just tired of feeling bad all the time, and I don't know how not to do that. I'm hoping to accept myself by the time I finish writing this.

The only way to experience healing is to feel what happened, accept it, and move on. The only way to break free from the chains that bind me is to describe the chains and explain what they are and why they are there. If you recognize a part of yourself here, I would be thrilled if you could come on this journey with me. If you don't see yourself, then maybe you could find comfort in the fact that none of these terrible things have happened to you, and you don't live an everyday struggle. I do. It's hard for me to live a relatively normal existence. I'm tired of struggling. I need another way. I truly believe that the way to empowerment is to discover oneself, let go, find inner peace and then acceptance.

I'm starting with a new therapist today, and it's scary to begin from scratch and tell everything to a person you don't know. Do I recommend it? Absolutely. Do I enjoy it? Definitely not. If I'm going to start writing, I'll need some inspiration bytes. What are inspiration bytes? I'm glad you asked.

Inspiration bytes are tiny moments or ideas that get my attention and are the gas I use to move forward. They are my motivation, my muse. I function off them. They can be anything from a news article to a dance in a competition or a beautiful cake being baked and falling apart at the last minute. Books,

documentaries, videos, recipes, people, and real life give me inspiration bytes. The most inspiring bytes I got in one span of time was the summer I embarked on a trip around the United States with my life mate, my persistently supportive equal, Christopher. We went with the intention to start building our world together. We came together, haunted by the past and still living the lives we were born into. We were stuck. We needed unsticking.

We traveled thousands of miles, went to 35 states, and saw everything. I learned many things on the trip that summer, and some of the most important are as follows:

1. My ruthless ambition to be better than myself is both a curse and a blessing.
2. I am capable of much more than I give myself credit for.
3. I never know what might make me happy.
4. Anxiety is one of my biggest enemies and yet the best indication that I'm doing something against my values.
5. Motivation and inspiration must happen daily for me to keep my sanity and creativity.

Since June 1st of this year, I have been on a mission to find and reclaim my sanity. I lost it somewhere around October of last year. I can mention the exact choices that led up to this breakdown; however, those are not pertinent at this time. I can say this with all the resolve in the world, knowing full well that I will lose all will and stamina as soon as my attention span switches to something or someone else. One of the many things that demand my attention is my Clean Cajun business.

I started Clean Cajun with the idea of putting my food out there…I never made it as a chef, and it was my dream to be one. This was my way of becoming something I've always wanted to be. The trouble is, I simultaneously love food and hate my

body. It's something I've always done. As of today, it's a voice that is there constantly like an annoying frenemy whom you claim "tells you the hard stuff, so they're a true friend."

Clean Cajun was also a way for me to combine all the parts of me that are so integral to who I am. I am a sober person. I am a mother. I am a counselor. I am a chef. I am a writer. I am an artist. Someone asking me to pick one would be like growing a tree with one branch, no leaves, no other branches, and no chance to produce fruit. I saw it as this, and other people didn't. It was hard to write recipes when seeing clients all week. It was difficult to spend a lot of time with my daughter and still go to AA meetings. It's a balancing act that I must do daily, and I have to choose sometimes. When I am forced to choose, my sanity takes a backseat. So, I challenged myself to create a wellness routine. It included some of the obvious (eating right, exercising) but also included some aspects that I need to work on intrinsically as well. Meditation, cultivating my mind, changing habits that need to change, and practicing the things I need to practice to reach my goals. This is the deal. Truth time. You can't be an inspiration without transparency. It won't happen. So, I'm not going to wait until I change fully to inspire you with how hard it is to change in the first place.

I get the most inspiration bytes from my daughter. Something about seeing a small version of yourself interacting in the world and not hating it is very soul-satisfying. Honestly, I truly believe my daughter is the exact version of me without the trauma. Without the car accident, broken legs, years in a wheelchair, sexual abuse as a child, sexual abuse as an adult, mental illness, alcoholism, drug addiction, bulimia, self-destructive cutting, and suicide attempts. I believe she is the version of me that "should have" been in the world. The trouble with that is I have overcome all of that just to believe that it should have never happened in the first place. It did. And I did with it what I could. I made mistakes and choices I will never

be proud of. I missed opportunities and destroyed great things because I didn't think I deserved them, and I hated myself too much to enjoy the blessings given to me. That has changed, and now I am grateful for the scars on my feet.

Every work I've painted has been inspired by my writing. I don't write to read what I've written. I write for people to feel what it is like to be someone else and for the people in my life to have the wisdom I wish I would have listened to when it was presented to me. Hopefully, my writing will inspire people for as long as it exists. So, I will continue writing. Continue cooking and helping and raising my daughter. I will continue to listen to people whose hurt resembles mine, even if it makes my hurt come to the surface and suffocate me. I'll do it because they need it and because this world could use a little love right now. We have lost the art of unconditional love. The true, all-encompassing love we have for another human that includes their hurt, bad choices, and rude remarks. We need to love again, and I'm starting with myself. I firmly resolve not to wait until I run to give myself credit for walking. I won't wait until I write the entire book to congratulate myself on writing. And I won't wait until I have a steady career to say that I work hard and my work is worthwhile. We all need not to wait until we get back up to start talking about how hard it is to fall down. If you are down right now, welcome; we meet every other Tuesday after our need for outside validation and right before our people-pleasing sessions. We will be down together for a while, but I'll hold your hand to help you up, I promise.

“Wisdom Ad Infinitum”

Painting - “x” unframed canvas

Acrylic and pen mediums