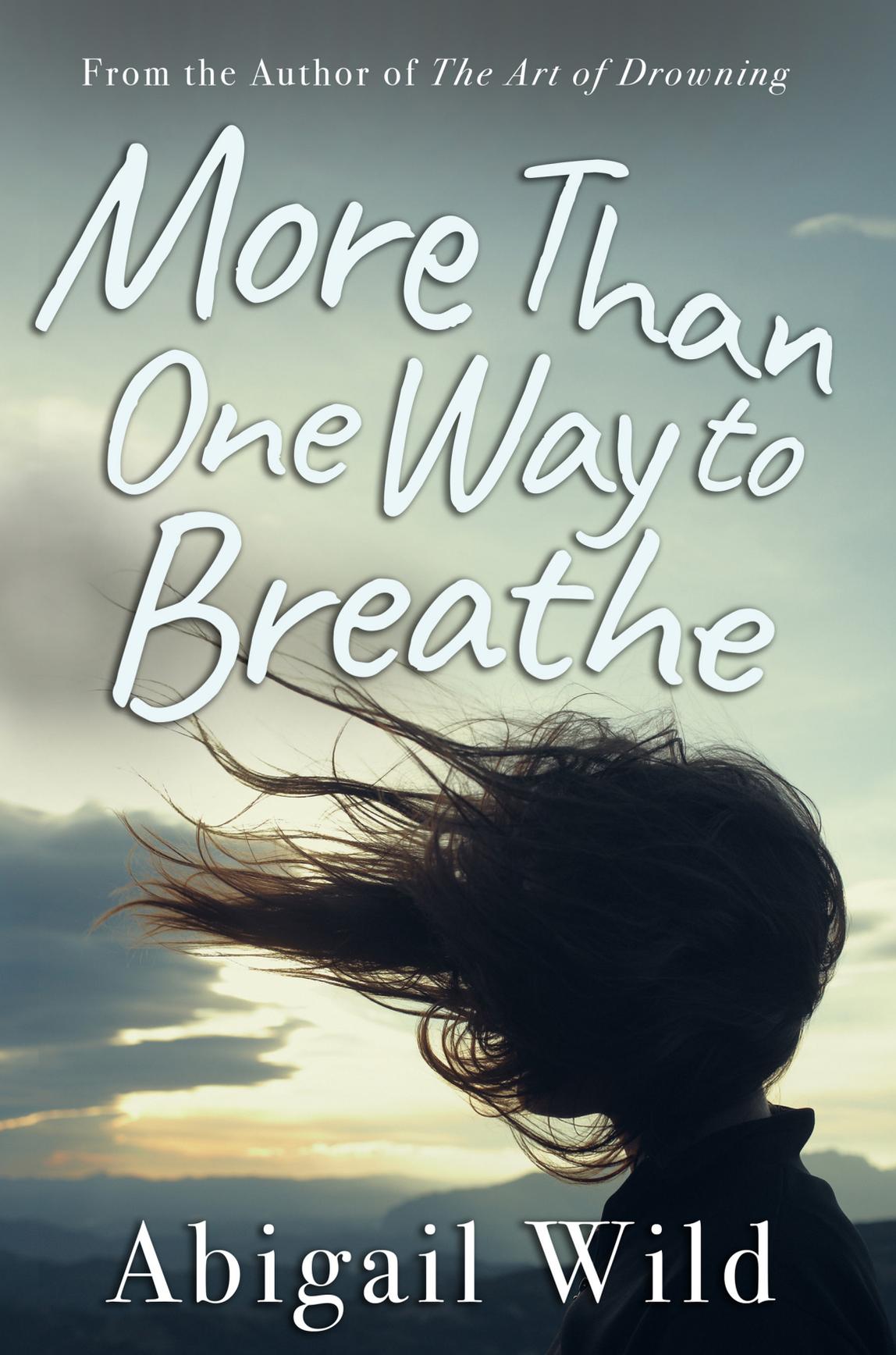


From the Author of *The Art of Drowning*

# More Than One Way to Breathe

Abigail Wild

A silhouette of a person's head and shoulders is shown in profile, facing right. Their hair is blowing in the wind, creating a sense of movement. The background is a soft, hazy sky with a warm, golden glow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.



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Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Names, characters, and places are products of the author's imagination.

## - Chapter One -

“You’re a pain in my ass. Do you know that?”

“Mom, what the hell?”

“Don’t talk to me like that.” She pointed at me. Her bright red nails seemed like they could have slashed my face. “You are so ungrateful.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” She pointed at me. “Your incessant laughter and giggling kept me up all night.”

“How?” I scooped another spoonful of ice cream into my mouth. This was something I was used to. It happened every time Sophie slept over. We were always too loud for my mother. “We were in the basement. There’s no way you could have heard us.”

“You know what? Get out of my house. I’m sick of you.”

“Mom, stop.” I rolled my eyes.

“No, get out.”

“What do you mean?”

“I meant what I said. I don’t want you here anymore,” she said with a wave of her hand.

I stood up and stared at her for what felt like an eternity. This was not the first time she had said this to me, but it was the first time she wasn’t backing down. Her cold eyes stared into me. I shivered.

She opened her mouth and slowly whispered, “I said - get - out - of - my - house, you - disrespectful - waste - of - space.”

I grabbed my phone and turned just as she bum-rushed me and grabbed the phone from my hand.

“I pay the bill.” She held the phone up in my face. “This is mine.”

“Mom, you can’t be serious.”

“You show no respect. None. You think you can just live here and treat me like this?” She waved her hand at me, swooshing me away. “Get out.”

My heart started racing. I couldn’t believe she was serious.

“Just because Sophie and I were loud?” I screamed back at her, tears falling from my eyes.

“Because you weren’t just loud. You were disrespectful.”

“I’m calling Dad!” I tried to grab my phone out of her hand.

“No. He’s not going to rush home and save you. When will you learn that?” she said as she recoiled.

“What about grandma?” My legs felt like they were going to buckle from under me. What was I going to do? We lived in the woods, on a mountain, in the middle of nowhere, and it was snowing. I wasn’t sixteen yet, so I couldn’t drive anywhere. Not that she would have let me take the car anyway.

“I said you can’t have your phone.”

“Mom.”

“GET - OUT - OF - THIS - HOUSE!”

I turned toward the front door, stunned with my eyes wide and my mouth open. My face was hot and tears were forming in the corners of my eyes. I didn’t want to appear weak, so I closed my mouth and bit my tongue to stop crying. I still didn’t think she’d actually make me leave, so I walked slowly and carefully. Every step grew heavier and heavier until I got to the door and turned to face her. I looked at her and waited for her to change her mind.

She didn’t.

We stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. I sat on the floor to put on the shoes I had haphazardly kicked off the day before. I stood up again, still staring at her. Holding my breath, I stood back up and slowly reached out to the coat rack and grabbed my jacket. “Can I pack some things before I go?” I asked, hoping this would stop our game of chicken.

“No, just go,” she said. Then she turned her back to me and walked into the kitchen. After that, she grabbed her mug, leaned against the kitchen island, took a drink, and picked up her phone.

I stood watching her as she called a friend. She acted like I was invisible. There she was chatting with a friend, laughing, as if she hadn’t just kicked her daughter out of the house. I decided to open the door, thinking this would make the game stop.

She didn’t say a word.

I realized she meant what she had said just as a big gust of cold wind rushed inside the house, blowing my hair away from my face. I turned around

one more time. My face warmed as it faced our fireplace, with its bright red and orange glow. I stepped backward, away from the door, closing it. I would need my gloves, hat, and scarf.

I took a step toward the closet.

My mother slammed her phone down and yelled, "I told you to get out." She gestured to the door, her stiletto-shaped nails pointing the way out.

"Mom, it's snowing, I'll get sick." I couldn't believe she was serious.

"Get - Out," she said, enunciating each word slowly, loudly, and clearly.

I turned and opened the front door again. The cold made my face sting. I was still biting my tongue, sure that my tears would freeze to my face.

Without winter clothes, my phone, or any plan at all, I left my home.

I walked down our long, dirt driveway with my hands in my pockets, knowing that I had to stay warm as long as I could. I made my decision. I would go to Sophie's house. I could have gone to my neighbor's house, which was closer, but I needed more than they could give me. And besides, they probably would have walked me back home again, where my mother would have feigned love for me. Then they would have left, and she would have kicked me out again.

No. I needed that special hot chocolate with one lone marshmallow and caramel syrup artfully poured over it. I needed the warmth Sophie and her parents would give me. Emotional warmth. I needed to hear I was loved. Lisa, Sophie's mom, would make me feel wanted. Sophie would make me laugh. It would be okay. I just needed to get there first.

I held my arms tight against my body and walked with my head held low against the snow as it whipped me in my face. My entire body was tight, rigid. Why didn't my mom love me? Why did two teen girls giggling cause her to decide she didn't want me in the house anymore? I didn't understand any of it. I tried my hardest to keep her happy. I did everything she always asked of me, but it was never enough. I wasn't good enough to be her daughter. Why was I so unlovable?

Despite my best attempt, I started crying again.

I tried to stop, but I couldn't. Crying was making my face freeze. I knew the only way to stay warm was to keep my face dry, but I couldn't do it just yet. I tried to walk as fast as possible. It was growing dark, but I was still able to see around me. The trees appeared to grow taller and taller over my head. Their shadows menacingly taunted me. I could feel eyes in the woods. I could feel hunger. I stopped crying and began to run.

That's when I heard something run beside me. I had no idea what it was. But for some reason, I stopped running to see if it stopped too. It did. To my side, I saw two glowing eyes. Something inside of me knew it meant no harm, but still, I remained frozen.

I heard a sound behind it, like another creature lurking. The glowing eyes came toward me. I saw it was a coyote. It stepped out onto the snowy dirt road from behind the treeline. I shivered. It walked toward me and nudged my legs as if telling me to go. Then turned, ran into the trees, and disappeared. I heard howling, then growling. The sounds moved further away, one animal chasing the other.

I had no idea what had just happened, but I needed to get to Sophie's house as quickly as possible if I wanted to survive. Sophie lived in town; I lived on the mountain. I knew that if I could make it to the streetlights at the edge of town, I would survive. If I could just make it there, I could collapse under a light and someone would notice me.

By the time I reached the lights, I was out of breath from running. I felt like there was a heavy stone on my chest, making it impossible to take big breaths. My fingers and toes were completely numb. The rest of my body felt like it was burning—not from heat, but scorching from the severe cold. My hair was frozen. My face stung. I was exhausted. But there was light. I was going to be okay.

I felt like collapsing, but I was able to gather what little energy I had left to walk the five blocks to Sophie's house. Once I saw her rowhome in the distance I started crying again. I could not hold it in any longer. It hit me all at once, sheer terror leaving my body, sadness from what had become of my relationship with my mother, and happiness over the fact that I knew I would survive the night. I would be okay.

Sophie's outdoor light was on; it welcomed me. I sighed in relief to have made it as I walked up their section of sidewalk. I stepped up to her covered porch, shaking. This was the first time that snow and wind weren't slashing at my face. I reached my hand out and tried hard to uncurl my clenched fingers to ring the doorbell. It was harder than I thought it would be. But I was able to ring it once before balling my fingers up again and shoving them in my wet pockets.

The door opened and a warm welcoming glow spilled out from the doorway. Lisa, Sophie's mom, stood in front of me, looking at me in horror.

“Mia!” She grabbed my arm and pulled me into the house. “What are you doing?”

The heat from the warm home felt like fire on my face. It was a shock I was not prepared for. I sobbed loudly, finally allowing tears to roll down my cheeks freely. Lisa took my wet coat off me and threw it on the foyer floor, then started rubbing my arms trying to warm me up.

She yelled up the stairs, “Robert, get two blankets from the closet, bring me one, and put the other in the dryer to warm up. Quickly!”

I saw Robert, Sophie’s dad, peek down the steps to see what was going on. He turned quickly after seeing the state of me. I heard the hallway closet door open and close. He ran down the steps, then quickly wrapped me in a quilt. Then he ran to their basement to throw the other in the dryer.

“Mia, I’m going to get you some of Sophie’s clothes to put on.”

“Thank you. I... I...”

“No, we’ll talk after you warm up. Not before. Okay?”

I nodded.

She ran to Sophie’s room. I could hear Sophie asking what was going on.

“Don’t worry about it, honey. Finish your breathing treatment.”

Sophie had no idea I was there. Her breathing nebulizer was always so loud, she probably didn’t hear me come in, or any of the confusion. That was okay. She needed her breathing treatment more than she needed to know I was there.

Lisa ran back down the steps with new clothes in hand. “Sophie is in her room getting a breathing treatment, so you can go in my bedroom to get changed. I’ll go make some of that hot chocolate you love so much, okay?” she said as she handed me clothes.

I sobbed again. No, it was a guttural wail. I couldn’t stop. “Thank you,” I choked.

I walked up the steps and peeked into Sophie’s room. Her back was toward the door as she sat at her window watching the snowfall. I could see the cord from her nebulizer fall behind her back, leading to an air compressor. Her shoulders rose and fell with each breath. Instead of interrupting her, I turned and walked to her parents’ room to get changed.



Abigail Wild dwells inside her dreams where creativity thrives. As a child, she focused on visual arts, but after twenty years as a graphic designer, all the stories she held captured in her mind clamored to be set free. She put down her tablet and picked up the pen. She went back to school, earning an MFA in creative writing, and began her new life's work: writing the stories of her heart. Today, Abigail is a novelist, writing coach, editor, competition judge, and writing teacher. She particularly enjoys working with emergent writers, often giving them the same pep talks she received years ago. She lives in central Pennsylvania with her husband, three children, and three budgies. The budgies tend to make a racket while Abigail is trying to write, but she is not deterred!