

WOULD GOD PULL HER THROUGH CANCER
ONLY TO DIE AT THE HANDS OF KILLER?

Beautiful
IMPERFECTION

{ A NOVEL }

 KATHRYN J. BAIN

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Dedication

First and foremost, I would like to dedicate this book to all the women who have survived this dreaded disease they call breast cancer. I thought I understood what you went through. Researching this book, I discovered I knew nothing. You are the bravest women on the planet because you not only made it through to the other side, but you did it with your head held high.

I would especially like to pay tribute to Abigail Sharpe for all her help and insight. She too is a member of the sisterhood of breast cancer survivors. Thank you God for allowing her to remain with us. She was important at letting me know how the medication affected her not only on the inside, but the outside as well. And she did it all with that beautiful smile on her face. She has proven to me what true courage is. WHAT A LADY!

I'd like to thank my sister, Laura Molyneaux, who helped me with the hospital stuff. Good thing she became a nurse. I'd also like to thank my critique group: Fay Lamb, Mary Hall, Selena Fulton, and Susan Tuttle, and a very special thanks to Marsha Starling for helping me learn about commas. I still don't think I have it, but like they say, you can't teach an old dog new tricks.

Finally, a special thanks to my daughters for putting up with me during this whole writing endeavor.

Praise for *Catch Your Breath*

Kathy Bain writes romance laced with reality for today's readers. I always plan ahead when her new book comes out so that I have uninterrupted time to read it. *Catch Your Breath* kept me reading hungrily until I had devoured every page. ~ Anna Bisbee

A very good read. Kathryn lets you think you've solved things but throws in enough curves to make you second guess. I have enjoyed both books. As a rookie writer I appreciate her craft ~ Betty Jo Carpenter

Catch Your Breath, the latest from author Kathryn J. Bain, continues the excellent story she began in her first novel, *Breathless*. Filled with suspense, it is an engrossing read. I read it "cover to cover" in one sitting, just did not want to put it down. Wonderful job! ~ Sharon Drane

1

"I can't believe you set me up. Why didn't you tell me?" Teddy Federline knew she should have stayed home. She was in no way ready for this.

She adjusted her right bra strap in Club Jetty's bathroom mirror and drew in a deep breath. The lights were bright, showing every pore in her face. The aroma of hyacinths cascaded over her from a woman who'd sprayed perfume moments earlier. Chill bumps formed on Teddy from the vent blowing cool air overhead. She rubbed her arms up and down. Why couldn't the restaurant have the heat on? You'd almost think it summer instead of February.

Teddy dipped her finger in the concealer before applying it to the dark circles under her eyes. A loose strand of hair bounced over her cheek when she looked into the makeup bag. This new hairstyle reached her chin, enabling her to curl it back behind her ear. Not even a year ago, her hair fell to the middle of her back. She hated it short and curly, but at least it was her own.

"You've made too many excuses the past couple of weeks for me to chance it." Claire Hoover, Teddy's best friend, applied a fresh coat of lipstick. "Besides, after what Jim did to you, you need to find a decent guy."

A pang darted into Teddy's heart from the cruel words her former boyfriend left her with. "I didn't sign

up for this," he'd said before he marched out of the restaurant, leaving her to pay the bill. Yeah, like she'd signed up for cancer. What a jerk.

Claire said something bringing Teddy back to the present. "Well? What do you think? Steve looks like a decent guy."

"How can you be sure he's decent when all you've noticed are his muscles?" Teddy sighed. From the way Steve spoke, he didn't fit the good Christian man she'd dreamt of. "Saying I had to be a ten. Come on. He sounds part Neanderthal." She looked pale, not sure whether it was from the overhead lights or her illness. During the chemotherapy, she lost eight pounds. Now due to her medication, she'd gained it back and more.

Claire took her hand. "I know you're having a rough time, but I thought it'd make you feel better. 'Cuz nothing beats the blues more than someone cute giving you attention." Claire released Teddy's hand and turned back to the mirror.

"I'll endure. I just wish Steve wouldn't smile so much. The glare's about to blind me." Teddy laughed.

"It is a bit much, isn't it?" Claire nudged Teddy with her hip as they walked out of the bathroom. "Can you say whitening treatments?"

Teddy jumped at three loud popping sounds. A woman screamed. Then instant silence. Teddy pulled Claire down to a crouch by the side of the bar.

"Sit down." A man's deep voice commanded on the other side of the divider. "No one's going anywhere until the fun's over."

Except for hushed sobs and music drifting in from the club portion of the business, the restaurant was quiet.

"What's going on?" Claire whispered.

Teddy shook her head. Her heart slammed against her ribcage. She peeked around the corner. A figure dressed in black pointed a handgun at the woman with the hyacinth perfume. She sat motionless in a chair.

"Please. I have a family," the woman whimpered.

An evil grin fell over the man's face. A shudder rose up Teddy's back when the man placed the muzzle of a gun against the woman's forehead.

The lady cringed and closed her eyes.

"Sure hope you have your insurance paid up." He squeezed the trigger. The woman's body slammed backward.

Teddy crawled back behind the partition. Her body shook at the wickedness of this man's actions. Claire raised her quivering hand to her mouth.

Teddy scooted around the corner again. The shooter's back was to her. She jerked up to see their table. Steve's head leaned back and his arms dangled at his sides. The other two men where they sat earlier were slumped forward. Terror rushed into Teddy. Where was Linda? Teddy's eye caught sight of her friend who cowered at a stool near one of the tables by the salad bar. Linda's stare fixated on her husband, one of the men at the table.

Teddy continued to hide behind the bar. Her pulse pounded in her ears. She had to find a means of escape. The killer stood between them and the front door. The hallway led to the bathrooms then a dead end. Determination rose in Teddy. God didn't bring her through cancer to die by some jerk with a gun.

"Here." Teddy's stomach bounced. She grabbed the cell phone from her purse and handed it to Claire. "Get back in the restroom and call the police."

"What are you planning to do?" Claire's voice

trembled.

"I don't know. But you go. If there's a window, climb out." Teddy gave Claire's hand a squeeze. Tears welled in her friend's eyes. "I'll be all right."

Claire nodded and crept to the bathroom.

Teddy raised her eyes to the ceiling and whispered, "Please God, get us through this."

The gunman sneered at a pregnant waitress Teddy met when she first entered the restaurant. Her name tag read Brenda.

"Please. I'm having a baby." She let out a sob.

The killer showed no emotion and shot her point blank.

Teddy scooted back behind the bar. She wiped her sweaty palms against her jeans. When did she get to be so brave? Maybe she should follow Claire's lead. She sucked in a breath before glancing over her shoulder. Claire was out of sight.

"Who's next?" The man laughed. "Maybe you. Or you."

Teddy knew she had to do something. She eased back around the corner of the partition. A young man with a crew cut caught her attention. The gunman paced a few feet in front of him. The young man gave a nod which Teddy returned. An ally.

A silver tray which usually held glasses sat on the ledge above Teddy's head. She lifted it, making sure to not scoot it across the counter. The gunman walked toward Linda, still hidden behind the stool. He kicked the seat out from under her grasp. Linda toppled to her knees, her face wet with tears.

Teddy said another quick prayer then stood upright.

"Hey, you," she yelled and flung the tray with

every ounce of strength she had.

It smacked the executioner in the back. The blow jolted him. He jerked around. His dark eyes showed no hint of a soul. He aimed the gun at Teddy.

The short-haired man rushed forward and rammed the shooter into a tall wooden table. The gun slid across the floor. The gunman's head hit the edge so hard he lost consciousness. The young man stood at full soldier's stance with one foot on the killer's back. He gave Teddy a glance and again nodded.

The front door jerked open and two police officers rushed in, guns drawn.

Taber Hainsworth gazed at his reflection in the large mirror that hung on the wall. Bloodshot green eyes stared back at him. He ran a trembling hand through his mussed hair. In his other, he held a glass of scotch. The bottle on the counter sat half empty. Before the night ended, it'd be gone.

The staff had left for the day. The only sound was the second hand of the clock. *Tick, tick.* He'd never noticed its loud noise before now. His heart beat with the rhythm. *Tick, tick.*

How could he let it go this far? In just a few short moments, two murders should occur.

If everything worked out according to plan, Sprague would be out of the country by midnight. Tab would transfer the rest of the funds into a Cayman's bank account in the morning. Not paying wasn't an option. He didn't know Sprague personally, but anyone crazy enough to shoot a pregnant woman would come back and hunt him down.

When talk of murder first came up in conversation between his father-in-law and campaign manager, he thought they were joking. But the more they discussed it, the more he realized they were serious. Killing for a political career. It seemed surreal, like a movie played out in slow motion. *Tick, tick.*

A former astronaut, Tab once held life by the horns. Why did Brenda have to go and get herself knocked up?

"Too bad you didn't know who the power was in this election." Tab poured more bronze liquid into his glass.

A drunken grin ran across his face when he recalled the popularity, the wealth, even the beautiful mistress on the side. She thought getting pregnant would cause him to leave his wife, but no way. Not when Paige had all that money.

"I wish you all had left me out of it." His vision blurred. He tossed back the remainder of his glass. The liquor no longer burned his throat, now numb to it, to the whole situation.

"Here's to you, you scared fool." He raised the empty glass and toasted his reflection.

He glanced at the clock. *Tick, tick.* Time mocked him. It drew close to T minus zero hour, as his friends at Kennedy Space Center might say. Ten minutes until eleven. It should be about over now. Tension released his shoulders from its embrace. He punched the button on the remote control to turn on the local news. Tab swallowed hard not convinced if the bile in his gut came from too much alcohol or the person he'd become.

Sloan Michaels gave a sideways glance to Raven Templeton when she picked up the phone. It had been a quiet evening. A bit unusual for a city where at least one shooting a night was the norm. His partner nodded as if the party on the other end of the line could see.

"We've got a shooting at Club Jetty." Raven hung up the phone. "Several casualties." She tugged her jacket on over her beige blouse. "I guess we've got a mass murder on our hands."

"Could be some guy after his girlfriend who hit a few others on the way." Sloan rose from his seat.

"Most would do the girl, then themselves. More than likely a psychopath."

"More of your Freud stuff?" Sloan couldn't stop his eyes from rolling.

"Common sense. The only reason he quit was because someone stopped him."

Sloan thrust on his tan coat and grabbed his Glock from the drawer. He checked the magazine of his gun before shoving it into the holster attached to his belt. Any cop who wasn't prepared when the time came would either be dead or ripped apart in front of their colleagues by Sergeant Daniels. And he could rival a pit bull when it came to tearing into people.

In the standard issue black shoes, Raven stood only at his shoulders. She'd said on more than one occasion she wished she could wear high heels if for nothing else, to be able to see over the top of the desk.

Sloan stepped outside and snapped his leather jacket. Jacksonville's cool February wind slapped at him. The bitter aroma of the paper mill on the Northside drifted into his sinuses. Sirens blared in the

nearby distance. Club Jetty was just two blocks down. No point in driving. Between the emergency units and news people, parking would be impossible.

The medical examiner's van pulled to the curb at the same time they arrived. Emergency personnel shouted instructions, and police directed vehicles and the media out of the way.

Paramedics lifted a gurney into a nearby ambulance. A thin brunette sobbed nearby. Two other women consoled her. One blonde, the other a redhead. A lump rose in Sloan's throat. Even with short, curly hair, he'd know her anywhere. Teddy Federline. Those green eyes used to stare up at him with complete amazement at every word he spoke. At least, that's how he remembered it.

The memory of their last meeting crashed over him. After what he'd done to her, he'd be the last person she'd want to see. Besides, a woman as wonderful as Teddy would have a husband who'd give her the comfort she needed. Sloan inhaled a deep breath. That man might have been him if he hadn't been so weak all those years ago. He took one last look at her before turning and heading to the officer in charge of the scene.

2

An officer escorted Teddy and her friends back inside the dance club. The OPEN sign no longer blinked its welcome. The smell of alcohol rushed over her. Lightheadedness drifted in. Teddy fought the urge to vomit. The sensation passed after a few shallow breaths. She couldn't be sure if the nausea ensued from the killings or her medicine.

"Here." She handed some napkins to Linda whose shoulders shook with each sob.

"But Randy—I need to get to Shands." Linda patted her wet face.

Teddy looked around for someone in charge. She needed to get Linda to TraumaOne where most gunshot victims were treated.

"Excuse me." A woman walked up to Teddy and her friends. "I need to get a statement from you ladies." The female officer wore a dark blue skirt which fell above her knees.

"Which one wants to go first?" The policewoman said.

"I'll go. You stay with Linda," Teddy said to Claire. She walked out into the cool February night. The fresh air eased her upset stomach.

"I'm Detective Templeton. Can you tell us what happened?"

Once finished, Teddy let out a sigh. "You read in the news about these things happening, but you never

think it'll happen to you."

"You're being called a hero for stopping him."

"No. The Marine who tackled him, he's the real hero. If he hadn't, I'd probably be dead, too."

Red lights reflected off the downtown windows announcing the tragedy that had taken place. Candy-striped tape surrounded the perimeter to keep intruders out. Several television satellite trucks parked at the curb across from the Blackstone Building. An antenna jutted from each. Reporters scurried like hyenas salivating over the latest kill. Cameramen scanned the area while reporters shoved microphones in front of patrons trying to escape.

In an effort to avoid a camera, Teddy spun away. Her knees weakened. Sloan, the man of her dreams and nightmares stood with notepad in hand. Her heart caught in her throat. She forced her attention back to the officer.

"Is there anything else? I need to get back to my friend. Her husband is on his way to Shands."

"I believe I have everything. If we need more, we'll contact you. You can take your friend to the hospital. We'll interview her in the next day or so. However, the other one will need to stay until we get her statement."

Teddy retreated into the building. Claire and Linda, with bloodshot eyes and mascara-stained faces, huddled in a corner clinging to one another.

Teddy patted Linda on the shoulder. "Claire, they still need to talk with you, but she said Linda and I could go." She guided Linda outside, catching another glimpse of Sloan. Her heart fell to the cold cement.

Please, God, let us make it through the sea of people without drawing any further notice. In particular, from

the one person she prayed she'd never see again.

Sloan couldn't wrench memories of Teddy from his mind. Even now after the evening she'd endured, Teddy's façade held the same strength he remembered from years before. One of the many reasons he hadn't ever forgotten her.

Their gaze met when she walked out of the club. He saw instant recognition hit her. Yet she couldn't whirl away fast enough, jerking up any welcome mat he might have hoped for.

"Hey partner, you in there?" Fingers snapped in front of his nose.

Sloan shook his head. "I'm sorry, what?"

"You seem out of it," Raven said. "It's a mess. Hard to believe it could happen here despite all the crime we have."

"Yeah." Sloan tried to focus on the job, but his attention roamed to the woman he once loved. A fire of guilt burned in his gut. How could he have abandoned her?

"Here." Raven passed a business card to him.

Theodora Federline, OTR, Registered Occupational Therapist. "What's this for?" The name stood out in embossed black and raised lettering. Sloan allowed his thumb to caress the words. The card came from thick white stock, not cheap like from a home computer.

"I noticed you watching while I interviewed her. You look interested." Raven shrugged her left shoulder. "I'm only trying to help."

A flash of light red hair caught his peripheral vision. Teddy was helping her friend toward a dark

SUV not even a half block away. From that close distance, he could see the paleness of Teddy's face. She was in no shape to drive. He gulped hard and headed in her direction.

Tab watched the news crew pan the area. Paramedics assisted those injured and sirens blared in the background. No officers or direct witness had appeared on the air as of yet.

"The police have yet to make a formal statement." A brown-haired newsman stared into the camera. "However, a source within the department told us that a shooting occurred at a popular night spot in downtown Jacksonville. We are one block from Club Jetty where we have been told that a shooting did occur."

Tab swigged another shot. This time a double. He scanned the screen for any sign of Brenda. Nothing.

"Word is at least five are dead and several wounded, in serious condition." The newsman pulled his collar up against the cold wind.

Tab's knees wobbled yet he sat. They hired Sprague to kill two and hurt a couple more. *Tick, tick.* Again, the sound of the clock overwhelmed him. Sweat crawled over Tab's body to the point he could smell his own stench. He poured another drink and sucked it down. The numbness from earlier had all but disappeared. The sting of the drink slapped the back of his throat.

"The alleged gunman is being transported to Shands Jacksonville," the newsman continued. "We haven't learned the extent of his injuries, only that he is

expected to survive.”

Tab’s mouth went dry.

Tick, tick.

“The gunman is expected to survive? Jack Sprague is looking at the death penalty.” Tab’s breathing intensified with each word uttered. The jerk doesn’t know how to follow orders. How did he misinterpret kill two, hurt two? “The last thing I needed was for you to get caught.” He rose from the stool. Anger and fear crashed together.

Tick, tick. Tab threw the scotch at the clock, hitting it dead center. Shards of glass sprinkled to the ground. The clock no longer made a sound. He ran a shaky hand over his mouth. What if Sprague made a deal? What if he turned on them to save his own skin? Tab jumped when the telephone rang.

Teddy guided Linda into the passenger side of the Toyota RAV4. She reached over and listened for the buckle to click. Her hand brushed a tear while at the back of the vehicle. It felt like forever until she reached the driver’s side door. That’s when it hit her. The smell of citrus mixed with wood and a subtle hint of spice.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to drive.” The rich voice dug deep into her soul, manlier than six years ago. She sucked in a deep breath before turning.

He stood before her a different man than she knew in college. His face thicker and his body had bulked up. Now he looked down on her, tall, rugged, and more handsome than she remembered. The streetlights cast a shadow across his features. He carried more of a man’s build, now an imposing figure who could