

A close-up, high-angle shot of a woman's face. Her eyes are heavily made up with shimmering, multi-colored eyeshadow in shades of purple, blue, and green. Her brown eyes are looking directly at the camera. Her mouth is slightly open, showing her teeth. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the texture of her skin and the intensity of her expression.

PREGNANT AND ALONE AND
WITH A KILLER CLOSE BEHIND.

KATHRYN J. BAIN
CATCH YOUR BREATH

{ESCAPE IS THE ONLY OPTION}

Catch Your Breath

Kathryn J. Bain

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Dedication

To the great editors of White Rose Publishing. You guys are awesome. To Fay, Beth, Mary, and Susan, my critique group. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be this far. Thanks for all your help with this book. To my daughters for allowing me time to work on my writing. And to country singer Chris Young and his video "The Man I Want to Be" for being the inspiration for Riley Owens.

Praise for *Breathless*

Ms. Kathryn J. Bain has presented us with a book that is certainly out-of-the-box. She gave us much to consider in not only the differences in her male star but also the many other characters vital to the book. This was a suspense-filled storyline with an unnerving chain of events. ~ Brenda Talley, The Romance Studio

[*Breathless*] is full of unexpected lessons in human nature and all its weaknesses. Not judging is so hard when we believe that what we see is all there is. This is a great story full of heart and wisdom. ~ Donna M. Basinow

The book was wonderful and exciting. I couldn't put it down once I got started. ~ Ginny M.

1

Calley Regan stared at the woman who leaned against the building across the street. She glanced at the store every few seconds. Her jacket was different but the cap was the same, and so were the suede boots. Calley swore the stranger was the same person she'd seen earlier. Besides, with the temperature in the upper eighties, why wear a jacket unless you were trying to hide something? Like a gun. Calley's heart pounded in her chest.

"You noticed her too?" Her boss Eva Martinez placed her coffee mug in the microwave. She walked up and looked over Calley's shoulder. "I spotted her when I got here this morning. You don't think she's planning to rob the place or is a lookout for someone else, do you?"

"Not with those Cesare Paciotti boots." She hated anxiety. Why did so many people have to make other's lives miserable?

"Maybe she stole them." Eva's red lipstick almost disappeared with the tightening of her lips.

Her tone cast a hint of fear which only added to Calley's concern. She wasn't about to tell Eva she thought it was the same person outside her apartment that morning. Eva was already over-protective. This would only make her worse.

"It doesn't matter what she wants," Eva said. "There's no way she's getting in that door." After a kid

high on drugs robbed the store several months ago, she bought a state-of-the-art alarm system complete with locked door and buzzer to allow entrance.

Most burglars didn't bother with their small shop. The E. Martinez Gallery of Fine Used Art sold paintings on consignment and not from any world-renowned artists. They kept only a small amount of cash in the drawer. The guy who'd robbed the store months before walked away with a whopping sixteen dollars, ten of which came from Calley's purse.

Calley turned back to the window. Nothing about the woman's appearance stuck out except the expensive boots which Calley knew ran over five hundred dollars. Similar Brave's baseball caps were owned by thousands of women in the area, and the jacket was something you could pick up at any local department store.

The stranger looked up and her eyes met Calley's. The woman seemed unfazed that Calley was aware of her presence. The woman's lack of concern unnerved her. The microwave dinged, causing Calley to jump.

"She has an evil stare." Eva walked back to the kitchen area. "You know what they say. The eyes are the window to the soul. Hers tell me she's not a happy lady."

Calley's belly fluttered like small wings of an angel. She patted the growing lump at her midsection. "Don't worry. I'll make sure nothing happens to you. Not even six months old and already active. Just like your father." She joined Eva in the back.

"Too bad most of his activity involved screwing around." Eva poured liquid creamer into her instant coffee. The aroma of almonds covered the small kitchen space.

The moment Peter Jameson found out about the baby, he announced he was married and wanted nothing more to do with her or their unborn child. Calley lowered herself into a rolling chair behind her desk a few feet from the small refrigerator. Tears formed at the rim of her eyes. She had to stop this. She'd cried way too much for a man who turned out to be such a loser.

"I'm sorry. That was cold of me." Eva pushed her wavy brown hair over her shoulder and walked to the desk near Calley. "You'll be fine. And you'll make a great mom." She took a sip of her coffee and sat on the edge. "I could have finished up on the Nelson sale. You didn't need to come in."

"That's okay. It'll take just a minute. I also wanted to check on the shipment to Monterey before I left." Calley didn't particularly want to go to Lydia's bridal shower. If she hadn't found a couple of shirts to cover her belly, it would have been out of the question.

"I don't know what I'd do without you. You're not only a good worker, but you did the one thing I swore I'd never allow." She paused. "You became more than an employee. You're a friend. And as such, I want you to know that I plan to buy a crib for that baby of yours."

"That is so nice of you." Calley rose and gave Eva a hug. Her closeness to her boss helped Calley's longing for a stronger relationship with her own sister. Eva kept her from feeling alone.

She sat back down while Eva returned to the kitchen for a snack.

"Would you like something?" Eva said.

"No thanks." The nausea from earlier had finally dissipated so why take chances?

"You've heard absolutely nothing from Peter on getting his medical history?"

"Nothing. I even tried his cell, but it's been disconnected." Calley sighed. "I'm not sure it's worth worrying about."

"Probably not."

Calley opened her top drawer and pulled out the picture. She ran her hand over the cold glass of the photograph. A dark-haired man smiled back at her. "Peter, why did you have to be such a jerk? Worse yet, why didn't I figure it out sooner?"

"Now, don't blame yourself." Eva sat at her own desk on the other wall of the shop. "My husband had an affair, and I never knew it until the woman called me. It took us years of therapy to regain that trust."

"It's just hard to have new dreams when the old ones died out the way they did."

Calley returned a glimpse out the window. Their watcher looked up and down the road. What could she want? Calley prayed when she headed to Lincolnville in the next hour, the woman wouldn't follow her.

Riley Owens sat in the sheriff's cruiser parked along the side of the old highway. Why'd he agree to be best man? He'd have to give the toast which meant getting up in front of all those people. The blank paper stared at him. Maybe he should try for something funny. "Like I've got a sense of humor. I'll just make more of a fool out of myself."

He tugged at his collar. June had just arrived, and the air was already stifling. He could only imagine how hot summer would be.

A blue Nissan Versa whizzed by. According to the radar it was doing sixty-five in the fifty-mile-per-hour zone. Riley, thankful for the distraction, switched on his lights and siren and pulled out behind it. Less than a mile up, the car jerked into the parking lot of Fred's Diner, the local greasy spoon. It pulled into a spot at the front of the building. Riley used his car to block the vehicle from backing up. A dark haired woman jumped out of the driver's side door.

"Stop right there." Riley placed his hand on his holster holding the Glock he carried as he emerged from his vehicle. The brunette didn't look dangerous, but you couldn't be sure.

"I need to use the restroom."

"You'll have to hold it until I get finished."

"I can't." Her hands trembled when she wiped her forehead.

"Too bad." He wrote down her plate number and called it in. The name on the registration information read Calley Regan of Atlanta, Georgia. From the DMV photo, she was the brunette. There were no warrants out for her. Riley figured there was nothing to worry about from the lady, but he'd keep his guard up just in case.

"Good morning, Sheriff. What's new?" Dolly Swenson strolled up behind him. Dolly, a waitress at Fred's, must have been arriving for the opening shift. The diner was opened for lunch and dinner during the week. It opened for breakfast on the weekend. She lived just a block down and usually walked to work. "Oh, she's a pretty one."

Riley's jaw tightened. "Doesn't matter how pretty they are if they're breaking the law." He pulled his ticket pad from the console in his car.

"You really need to learn how to have fun, Riley. A smart man would find out if she's married, and if not, ask her to lunch." She headed to the woman standing beside the car. "Don't let the old curmudgeon bother you. He sees everything in black or white."

Calley Regan nodded her head and glanced to the road she'd been on. The concern on her face redirected Riley's attention to the street, but no one came or went.

"I need to see your license." He walked up and joined both women. A glance in the driver's side door showed a bottle of water in the console and a pack of opened saltines on the passenger seat.

"Can you write the ticket while I go inside?" Calley handed the license to him. "I promise I won't crawl out the bathroom window."

"This'll take just a minute," he said. Riley wrote up the ticket for speeding. "Sign here." He passed her license back. Dolly continued to watch, obviously disapproving, if her hands on her hips were any indication.

Callie let out a heavy breath and swallowed hard. Her face was pale and sweat covered her forehead. Her hands shook as she signed her name.

"Are you on something?" That would explain her almost paranoid search of Plaskett Drive.

She rolled her eyes. "Prenatal vitamins. And if you don't let me go in, I'm going to throw up all over you."

"I suggest you listen to her, Riley," Dolly said with a laugh. "I know how bad morning sickness can get, and when you need to hurl, there's no stopping you."

Riley looked into Calley's hazel eyes. "I would think if it were that bad, she'd have stopped sooner. Besides, what kind of a mother drives like a maniac and puts her unborn child at risk?"

Calley took a step toward him. "Why you patronizing son of ..." She lurched and turned to the side. Not far enough. She threw up on Riley's polished black boots.

"She warned you." Dolly placed an arm around Calley's shoulder. "Come on, dear. Let's get you out of this heat." She paused and turned to Riley. "If you need her, she'll be inside with me. I can't imagine at this point you'd have a problem with that."

Dolly didn't wait for an answer. She led Calley into the diner out of Riley's view. He shook his left boot. The smell was rancid. He almost thought she'd gotten sick on purpose. That was fine with him. He tore the hefty ticket from the book and slapped it on her windshield.

"I can't believe I just threw up on a cop." Calley shook her head. He wasn't even bad looking. In fact, he was hot. His black cowboy hat sat on top of his forehead. Those dark brown eyes stared down at her and the day's growth of beard look good on him. His features were strong, from his square jaw to his muscular biceps. She would have enjoyed the view any other time but the baby had been upsetting her stomach on the hour and a half drive up.

"You really do have good timing, don't you?" She talked to the child in her belly.

Country music played from a speaker overhead. Calley sang along. She glanced around the diner while she waited for the woman with the nametag of Dolly to return. Handwritten ads painted on the window announced the special that day. A half-pound burger,

fries, and a coke for three ninety-nine. The thought of that much food made bile rise in Calley's system. She was grateful they hadn't started cooking yet. The idea of greasy food would only make her feel worse.

She sat off to the right in the first red booth by the door. The vinyl covering was cool to her bare legs. Red stools lined the counter to her left. Dolly had gone into the back to what Calley assumed was the kitchen area. Voices sounded behind the swinging door. The place reminded her of a small café she'd worked in when she was sixteen. Different color scheme, but same layout.

A black sedan drove past. Calley's hands trembled. She had seen the car in her rearview mirror several times on the interstate. It had to have followed her from Atlanta.

"Here you go." Dolly returned from the backroom with a cup, drawing Calley's attention from the window. "It's peppermint tea. I drank it when I was pregnant with my second. He gave me a fit during my entire pregnancy." She slid the cup across the table.

"How many kids do you have?" The aroma of mint filled Calley's senses. She drank a sip of the hot liquid.

"Three. All boys." Dolly scooted into the booth across from Calley. "This is your first, isn't it?"

"It's obvious I don't know what I'm doing?"

"No, just deductive reasoning. You have no car seat in the back for another kid. What brings you through Lincolnville?"

The tea helped calm Calley's stomach. "My cousin's getting married, and her shower is this weekend."

"My word. You're Lydia's cousin." Dolly patted Calley's hand. "She's just the sweetest thing in the

world. No one deserves to be happy more than her."

"Yeah." Calley swallowed hard. That's the problem with small towns. Everyone knows everyone else. "Can I ask you a favor?"

"Sure."

"Can you not say anything about the baby? My family doesn't know yet. And seeing as how they're such good Christians, and I'm not married, it's probably not going to go over real big."

"Now don't you worry, I won't tell anyone. And Lydia's a great lady. She isn't the judgmental type."

"It's not Lydia I'm worried about. It's the minister she's marrying."

Riley finished cleaning his boots. His mood had gone from bad to worse. He didn't care if Calley Regan was pregnant. He should have arrested her for throwing up on him if only to confirm his reputation as being cold and heartless. Doing it in front of one of the town gossips didn't help matters. It was probably all over Lincolnville by now.

"You okay?" BJ stuck her head into his bedroom. "I know you're not thrilled about the people being here for the shower, but it's only the weekend. Then the wedding. After that you can go back to being the recluse you love to be."

Riley's aunt had a way of being direct with everyone, especially him. She'd raised him after his parents died in a car accident when he was eleven. He brought his Aunt BJ to live with him after his uncle's death, about six months ago.

"I told you it was fine."

"Your words say fine, but your face has that sourpuss look on it. You need to cheer up, my boy. There should be some nice looking women at this shower. I understand she's invited her whole sorority from college. If you'd loosen up, you might find one whose company you enjoy."

"I have too much work to worry about chasing after women." Riley didn't want another woman. He hadn't protected the one he'd had before. Why take a chance on losing another?

BJ sat down on the bed. "It's been years since Beth's death. I wish you'd talk to that preacher friend of yours about it so you can move on."

Riley stared at his reflection in the mirror as he adjusted his tie. He had moved on. It just wasn't in the way most people thought he should. "I don't need to talk to Matthew about anything. Like you said, it was a long time ago."

"If you say so." A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. "Sounds like our first guests have arrived." She walked from the bedroom and pulled the door partially closed.

BJ's beaming face told of her excitement. She'd probably been bored since she moved from Jacksonville. There certainly were no dinner theatres or dance studios like she used to attend. Riley wondered if it was wise uprooting her from her life. She didn't argue, but then she never did.

"Well, hello. How are you?" Enthusiasm reigned in BJ's voice as it carried into the bedroom.

"Hi. You must be BJ. My name's Calley Regan. I think I'm supposed to be here for the weekend."

Riley's stomach bounced. Of all the luck. He glanced through the crack of his opened bedroom

door. Her color had returned to her face. He hadn't realized how pretty she was when they'd first met.

"I have two more things in the car," she said.

"You must have planned for every occasion."

"Yeah, I pack a lot. What can I say? I'm a girl." Calley's eyes sparkled.

"A woman can never have too many supplies." BJ gave her a quick hug. "Why don't you bring in the rest? I'll take this one to your room. It's the second on the right."

Riley watched BJ walk into the hallway. Earlier that day, after Calley left the diner, he'd gone in for coffee. It was then Dolly told him about her being Lydia's cousin. That probably wouldn't go over very big since Riley was the best man for Lydia's wedding.

Right now, he'd like to find a quick means of escape, but decided Calley should be the one uncomfortable, not him. A fading scent caught his attention when he entered the living room. Calley must have put on perfume before she got to the house. The aroma lingered after she returned outside. He hadn't noticed it at the diner. He couldn't place the fragrance; he just knew he liked it. He walked up to the large picture window and watched Calley head to her car. She glanced up and down the road, definitely looking for someone. Her head followed a black car speeding past. It slowed. She continued to watch. Riley came into full view of the window and the vehicle sped off. Maybe she had a fight with her boyfriend.

He returned his attention to Calley who tugged a guitar case and another suitcase out of the car's trunk. She shouldn't be carrying those heavy items in her condition.

He sucked in a deep breath and headed for the

door.

Calley swore it was the same car she'd seen earlier. Dried mud covered the license plate making it impossible to get the number. The windows were too darkly tinted to see in. Why would someone follow her all the way here? There was no reason. It couldn't be anyone after the baby. She wasn't even showing yet. There was no money to be had. And Calley certainly didn't make anyone angry on the drive over to cause some sort of road rage. Maybe it was her imagination. Maybe she was just being overly protective because of the baby. But she could have sworn the car slowed when it came near.

A woodpecker pounded a nearby tree. Calley stared across at the woods. A path led away from the road. She wondered how safe it would be to walk in the mornings. She glanced up the road again. Only if she could find someone to walk with.

She placed her guitar and the suitcase on the ground to close the trunk when the aroma hit her. Sandalwood. She sucked in the fragrance. It reminded her of the hike she took in Australia after graduating college.

"Here, let me get that for you."

Calley jumped at the masculine voice behind her. She spun and found herself face to chest with the sheriff who'd left the ticket on her car earlier.

"I can handle it." She bent to pick up the guitar.

"You shouldn't be carrying all this heavy stuff. At least not in your condition." He wrapped his hand around hers holding the guitar case.

She loosened her grip to try to dissipate the heat his grip had caused. "By the way, my condition, as you so gently put it, isn't common knowledge. I'd appreciate it not becoming town gossip."

"Not a problem." He glanced down at her stomach. "How far along are you?"

"Twenty-four weeks."

"You're not showing too much yet. But by the wedding, you will be. Kind of hard to keep it a secret then."

He walked off carrying her belongings. She slammed the trunk lid. She hadn't considered that by the wedding she'd be about eight months along. Why couldn't they have the wedding sooner? Instead Lydia was waiting for all the family members to be available. There would be no way to hide it by wearing a larger sized shirt. How was she going to get up and sing in front of all those people in a church?

"Well, I see you met my nephew." BJ stuck her head out the front door. "He took your things back to your room. Would you like some sweet iced-tea?"

"Sounds good. I met your nephew earlier," Calley said. "When he gave me a one hundred eighty-five dollar ticket."

"I wouldn't have given you a ticket if you hadn't been speeding."

She didn't like the fact he could walk up behind her without her knowing it. "No, you wouldn't have given me a ticket if you weren't a jerk."

BJ laughed. "I think I might have to hide Riley's gun before this weekend is over."

Calley followed Riley back to the bedroom. He didn't say a word as he placed her suitcase at the foot of the queen-size bed and the guitar on top before