

B R E A T H
of L I F E

A NOVEL

BREATH
of LIFE

NICOLE PETRINO-SALTER

REDEMPTION  PRESS

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Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022

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ISBN 13: 978-1-63232-087-2

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2011926487

To:

My Michael, with love forever. . .

My family and friends who've prayed faithfully for me: thank you is never enough. . .

My Lord and Savior, Friend, Inspiration: Apart from you, I can do nothing.

Few people truly consider the cost of sexual sin. . . until it's too late.

“Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

—Corinthians 6:18-20

P R E L U D E

SHE COULD MAKE smoking a cigarette look elegant, seductive. . . and dangerous even. Chic. Cool. And somehow romantic. Of course she could make anything look good. She appeared taller than she was, standing flat-footed at maybe 5' 7". It was probably the shoes. Often those very high skinny heels somehow lifting that lithe, narrow frame. I saw her in the summertime out there against the building with her cigarette, her skin nearly bronze and not one bit unnaturally enhanced. Standing there in the rain of late winter under the generous overhang, well, leaning really, against the coarse white brick of the building, it was almost the color of ivory. So fair. I wondered how she didn't burn in the summer sun. On the one occasion when I saw her smile in the last year, her teeth were a dazzling white—right out of a toothpaste commercial or a mailer ad from a dentist for the new Zoom 2 whitening method. No smoker's stain on those pearly whites.

Anyway. . .

That's basically how the whole thing began. By casually, unintentionally, watching her smoke. . .

CHAPTER ONE

“MILDRED,” SHAY CALLED out from the doorway of her office but didn’t see the woman at her ample, organized desk.

The woman was old enough to have such a name but certainly didn’t fit the stereotype her name inferred, at least not to Shay. Mildred went by the full pronunciation of the name, too, unbending to shortening it or using a nickname as Shay had done with hers. She laughed after Shay first hired her when she said she went by Mildred because her middle name was even worse. When she told Shay it was Lucille, Shay couldn’t help but wonder why she thought it worse. Names were what they were—they meant something important to the one who placed them upon a person. Her own name, Shaylen Price, was a melding of her mother’s name Shayna, which her mother repeatedly insisted sounded like the name of a jungle queen’s sister, and that of her father Lenoard with the unusual spelling, aka Lenny. (Lenny invariably teased Shayna, who he called Shaynie, with affectionate Tarzan yells when he was feeling romantic—or so he said. He was a terrible tease.) Shaylen actually liked her full name but went by Shay for simplicity to the few people who really knew her.

“Sorry, dear,” Mildred answered upon seeing Shay surveying the desk from the doorway. “Restroom.” Her need to excuse her absence. “What can I do for you?”

“You want to go to lunch?” she forced out. “We never do that anymore. We can put the calls to voice mail. We’re allowed, don’t you think?” Shay pushed a smile.

Mildred examined the young woman closely but briefly. “Sure, dear. Sounds like fun.” She paused, noting what must be done to secure their suite. “Right now?”

“How ’bout we leave in. . .” Shay lifted her coffee-bean colored silk blouse sleeve to check her bracelet watch and finished, “a half hour?”

That brought a smile from Mildred. “I’ll be ready then.”

Shay returned to her part of the office behind the rich dark wooden door which always seemed heavy to close over the pale plush carpet. Unless she was having a guest, she never wore her shoes in the office. Mildred always wore her shoes even after Shay gave her the freedom to take them off. Mildred never stooped to wearing slacks of any kind either, and Shay couldn’t help but admire the woman for her innate sophistication—the genuine kind that didn’t happen because you had money to dress well or because you had years of education and cultural background. No, Mildred had simple, unpolluted class. You couldn’t manufacture it—it came from somewhere within you, or it was appointed to you by some supernatural gifting process, she surmised. Shaylen Price hoped she had it too, but wasn’t honestly sure she did. Mildred Lucille Devons was a very special lady assessed through the cloudy grey eyes of Shaylen Price.

A good sign, Mildred thought, that Shay wanted to go out to lunch. It had been a long while since Shay wanted to engage herself again in social interaction. Such a guarded young woman. . . delicate exquisite beauty like a fragile piece of crystal or blown glass. No one upon looking at her would ever assume how withdrawn she was from the vibrancy of life. Of course very few people even knew her real name since she wrote under the pseudonym of Cabin LuCaine.

The one young man had known it—if ever so briefly. Their two lives touched as quickly as a tender kiss that speaks of so much more but concludes with only the hint of it. It was like the sped up film sequence of a budding rose exploding into full bloom. Then nothing. So utterly tragic, she mused. Yet somehow noble and important. In spite of the ache of sorrow, it had such value for its season.

Reminding her of her own bout with sadness, far more time allowed to her and her first love—he having just departed. Well, not “just”, she conceded. It had been three years now. The grieving was slowly making its way into the recent past like that of visiting a particular cupboard which one only seeks out occasionally for its special contents. How so many yesterdays could seem like one quick glimpse and way, way too short of one at that, she would never understand. But she accepted it

just the same, for she had come to understand this much in full: life was just a breath. . . in terms of eternity.

Shay stared out into the grey overcast and misty rain. Would it be an early autumn as it appeared today? She considered the maple trees passed on her way to work. Mostly the leaves still green. A good sign. Maybe an Indian summer this year, and a slight smile crossed her lips at the hope of it. She looked down past the sturdy awning to her right from her third floor office windows. Tully's was full she suspected judging from the in and out traffic through the front entrance. She wondered for a moment where she and Mildred should go to lunch, but she knew. It was always Minelli's for them. They both loved the pasta entrées and couldn't resist going there even when they held out an adventurous hope of going someplace different. She turned away from the tall windows, taking in a deep breath and exhaling quickly. Her life was so predictable—purposefully, she kept it that way. Change was only easily possible in her writing. In her writing change was exciting, often fun, curiously satisfying. Fiction, she scoffed at herself, looking down at her desk with a plaintive glimpse that quickly blurred as her eyes began to gloss over. She swore at herself, something she rarely did, and felt terrible for doing so.

She jerked open her right lower desk drawer and grabbed her handbag, sitting down hard in her black leather chair swiveling it to feel under the desk for her heels, slipping them on without help from her hands. Standing and walking to the antique coat rack she kept to the right of the door, she tugged on her taupe London Fog trench coat without buttoning or tying.

As she stepped into Mildred's part of their office, Mildred buttoned her grey wool coat.

"Ready when you are, dear." Mildred smiled at her, the kindness emulating from her eyes.

"Then we're ready," and Shay forced another smile. "Minelli's?"

"Where else?" Mildred answered with a laugh.

And Shay laughed too. "So predictable." Shay frowned.

"Is that a bad thing?" Mildred's inquiry came with feigned disappointment.

"Probably not for you. I'm not so sure for myself."

Mildred followed Shay out of the suite, locking the door behind them, and into the wide hall with more lush carpet. They walked the short distance to the elevator, and Shay pushed the number one.

“I promised I’d stop and see the new arrivals at David’s. Do you mind?”

“Of course not. We’re going to have fun, are we not?” Mildred grinned.

Shay loved the woman. So much at that moment. “That’s right.” She smiled, and this time it was real.

When they left the elevator, they walked the short distance to the indoor entrance to the boutique shoe store. David, the owner, importer, salesman, and boss of just two other employees looked up from the 20-something dark brunette’s feet upon which he’d just laced a size 7 1/2 pair of black leather over-the-ankle boots and sent a subtle smile toward Shay.

“Excuse me for a moment, please. Feel free to walk around and see how comfortable they are.” David stood from his kneeling position and quickly walked to Shay and Mildred, shaking Mildred’s hand and embracing Shay which brought a blush to her late summer tan.

“Come this way,” he said to the ladies and led them back to a small private showroom. He’d displayed several pairs of boots, all lengths, and seven pairs of high heels along with some casual shoes of varying sizes and shapes of heels, all complemented with stylish handbags.

“I’ll give you two days, Shay. First choice belongs to you. Then I’ll have them all inventoried, and I’ll have to put them out on the floor. Is that enough time?” He reached for her hand and caressed it.

“It is. I’ll be back later this evening to look more closely. Thank you, David,” she said, her voice sincere but her shyness making her expression awkward.

“Wonderful,” he said, bringing her hand up to his lips. “See you then. Mrs. Devons, nice to see you again.”

Mildred smiled at the man, and he returned to his customer.

After surveying the collection, both ladies pointing, handling, and expressing their preferences to one another, they exited through the store’s main entrance out onto the sidewalk with David’s voice of assurance he’d be seeing Shay later following them out the door.

It was so strange to see her anywhere besides leaning against the building that I actually turned in my chair as she walked by the front of the coffee shop with an attractive, also impeccably groomed, silver-haired woman some years older than herself. Her mother? They were discussing something, and she listened intently when the older woman spoke. I was so tempted to get up

and follow them it surprised me. What would that accomplish? I felt foolish for thinking it and tried to refocus on my laptop screen when I could no longer see them. But I failed completely. She was. . . unique. Maybe not in how she looked—I couldn't deny I thought she had true beauty. There was just that something indefinably—I didn't know. Indefinable. I began to wonder how I might. . . what? Meet her? Learn about her? What? And how?

I started assessing myself. Not bad looking. Every bit of 6 feet. Women came on to me sometimes. And good looking ones, too. I knew the signals. I'd given them myself—mostly just for fun. Flirting gave your ego—and theirs—a boost without having to deliver, you know? Right now, I didn't feel like I could deliver a newspaper, let alone. . . Divorce has a way of taking every facet of your self-confidence and devouring it through clamped jaws filled with razor teeth.

I wanted to forget about it—"the sighting", I mean. But it followed me back to the office and made me realize she wasn't just a lovely mirage, a sensual distraction standing outside Tully's leaning against the wall of the adjacent building having a smoke once in awhile. She was a person. A beautiful, real person. I was sure of it. And that thought haunted me like an unscheduled visit to fantasyland.