



Sample Chapters for

**BREATHE**  
by Sloan Parker

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## Chapter One

*Hope you found some peace in jail. You never will again.*

Lincoln McCaw read the note one last time and crushed the paper in his fist. The bus jerked forward as it came to a stop. No need to check. He was home. The smell of hog manure from the surrounding farmlands and the burning steel of his hometown's only manufacturing plant filtered in through the crack in the window one seat over. Funny how he couldn't feel the coolness of the winter air hissing in through that crack.

Maybe he never would again.

He stuffed the wadded-up note into his duffel bag, stood, and headed to the front of the bus. The jail wasn't far from Edgefield, but he hadn't wanted Nancy waiting for him outside. Who knew what sort of people lurked outside a jailhouse.

He laughed at that. Who was he afraid of? Men like him?

Six months in the county jail. His fellow inmates and the deputies probably thought he was the worst of the lot. He'd spent more days there than most of the guys who came and went. Some spent less time at the state pen.

But the jail was behind him now. It was over. Wasn't it?

Not according to the latest "love letter" he had tucked in his bag.

He stepped off the bus. The driver shut the door and pulled away as soon as Lincoln's boots hit the pavement. Not surprising. Most didn't want to stick around the three-stoplight town. But Lincoln did. He had a lot of reasons to be there. A lot of reasons he'd never leave.

Clear plastic walls surrounded the bus stop bench, cracked on all three sides and coated in a slime no amount of scrubbing with the industrial strength cleaner they'd used at the jail would remove. No one would wait inside the enclosure, no matter how desperate they were for a bus out of Edgefield.

He checked anyway. Splinters covered the faded wood of the bench. If anyone sat there, they'd get an ass full of tiny wooden daggers. Not the best way to ride the bus. Edgefield was so damn inconsequential nobody at the Metro Transit Authority probably gave a shit about the upkeep on the small-town stop that made up the farthest point of the outlying community bus route.

*Home sweet home.*

"Lincoln!" Nancy crossed the parking lot behind the bench, waving her arms through the air, a smile spread across her face. She quickened her stride. He did the same and hugged her when they met. The warm embrace reminded him of their mom, reminded him one person in the world loved him. She squeezed tighter.

"Nance, I can't breathe."

"Oh sorry." She released him and stepped back. She wore a brown and orange waitress uniform and those heavy-duty shoes nurses wore, designed for support and long-wearing comfort. Hers were dingy, nowhere close to the white they must've started out as, and were on their last leg. They wouldn't provide much support or comfort. Her disheveled dark hair fell

from the ponytail in several places, and she had a hint of makeup smudged under and over her eyes. Exhausted. His baby sister was working herself to death.

Despite that, her eyes shone at him. The smile was also a reminder of their mom. Nancy had always taken after their mother in a physical way. Whereas he looked more like their dad with skin tone and features that gave a nod to their Iroquois heritage.

“Just missed you,” she said.

“Missed you too.”

“I wish you would’ve let me visit. Was it bad?”

“Nah. It was okay.” No need to tell her about the gray food that smelled of dish soap, the foul stench from the unwashed inmates he shared space with, the lack of privacy, the endless hard surfaces of metal bars and concrete floors, or the countless cracks about his short-lived racing career from the two good ol’ boys who’d recognized him.

He’d hated every minute of his time there.

And he deserved far worse.

“Come on. I parked over here.” She tilted her head to the left and pointed to the vehicle she’d driven. His black pickup. The damn thing looked huge in the empty lot.

He missed the truck. He also hated the hell out of it. Like it was the truck’s fault.

Nancy had parked next to the County Cooler, an ice-cream stand run by the Drakes, the elderly couple who’d owned the place since Lincoln had been a kid. Every winter they boarded up the stand and headed south to visit their grandkids in Texas. When the place closed, it always had the look of a shack you’d see Bo and Luke Duke plow the General Lee through as Rosco P. Coltrane chased them down. In Lincoln’s day, local teens needing a dry place to hold their beerfest orgy sneaked in during the long winter months while the Drakes were out of town.

An open window near the garbage bin was missing several slats of wood. Lincoln smirked. Same window he’d used when he first had sex with Tommy Vanderline during their sophomore year of high school. Nice to know some things never changed.

“You wanna drive?” Nancy asked.

His smirk vanished. “No.” He yanked open the passenger-side door, tossed in his bag, and sat.

Then again--sometimes everything changed.

Nancy slid into the driver’s side and wrenched the seat forward until her feet touched the pedals. “Sorry. I thought you might want to. You haven’t tried it out since it came back from the body shop.”

He leaned his elbow on the armrest of the door and stared out the side window. “Can’t. Restricted to work privileges. There and back. That’s it.”

They drove in silence, the darkness surrounding them in the cab, the sound of the truck’s heater filling the void of unasked questions until he couldn’t stand not knowing.

“Did he hit you again?”

He would’ve missed her slight nod if it weren’t for the dim display of the dashboard. She turned away from him as though checking the side street traffic at the next intersection.

“You didn’t call the cops?”

“I should have,” she said.

“Fuck, yes, you should have.” Lincoln stabbed at the door lock with two fingers. Lock. Unlock. Lock. Unlock. He took a deep breath and let off on the button. She didn’t need him being an ass. “When did he come back?”

“The Friday after you left.”

“How long did he stay?”

“Until a couple of weeks ago.”

“Jesus, Nance!”

“I needed--I couldn’t afford the hospital bills without him, or her medicine without his insurance.”

“Well, now you can. Soon as I get a new job.” He’d take care of her like he should’ve been doing for the past six months. If he had been there, Mel wouldn’t have had a chance to hurt her again. “Is he gone for good?”

She didn’t answer.

“Why not?”

“He left some of his stuff.”

“You let me know the minute he shows up.” He’d remind the asshole that family looks after their own. “The kids okay? Did he--”

“No!” Her tone was defensive, and she threw him an angry look before she focused on the deserted street ahead. He shouldn’t have asked. She wouldn’t let anyone hurt her kids.

When she spoke again, her voice was under control, more conversational. “Could you stay with Davy and Jessica tomorrow after school? Adam has basketball practice.” Softer she added, “They’ve been home alone a lot lately.”

He stared out the window into the darkness and said, “I’ll be there.”

A block from Nancy’s, they pulled up to a stop sign next to the Late Night Paradise Plaza--home to the only all-night gas station and carryout in town, a movie rental shop, and Sonny’s Tavern.

Lincoln sat taller. “Can we make a stop? I need smokes.”

“Lincoln...”

“I’ll quit again. Just need a pack to get me through the transition.”

She sighed and turned into the plaza’s drive.

The neon signs advertising an ATM machine, lottery tickets, and beer had him shielding his eyes with the back of his hand. There were no neon lights in jail. Sounded like the title of a country music song. Something his fans would have blasted from their car stereos as they drove in on race night. He reached for the truck’s door handle, but her voice stopped him.

“No smoking around the kids, okay?”

He opened the door and said, “You know I won’t.”

“Or in the house,” Nancy called through the side window as he strode for the store.

Lincoln waved an okay sign her way and opened the door to the carryout. A young man passed by the front of the store, hands shoved inside his pockets, head down as if he had to watch his every step. Lincoln froze in the doorway.

Great-looking guy. Nice body.

The kid headed for Sonny's Tavern.

Great ass too.

*Fuck.* Lincoln had been away too long. Not a good idea--gawking at straight guys on the streets of Edgefield. But...the kid had stopped, hand on Sonny's front door, replicating Lincoln's frozen stance. He was staring at Lincoln, his mouth parted, his eyes conveying a hunger Lincoln knew all too well.

The door to Sonny's burst outward, almost smacking the kid in the forehead, and two guys exited. The kid moved out of their way, then slipped inside, his gaze on his feet again.

Lincoln's body screamed at him to follow. He ignored it and entered the carryout.

What was that look? Something?

It didn't matter.

He passed by the front counter with the smokes and found what he'd really wanted--a bottle of Jack Daniel's. He grabbed two for good measure.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jay, did you hear me?"

The front door of Sonny's Tavern flew open, and cold winter air blasted in.

Another man might have chosen a stool farther from the entrance. Not Jay Miller. The cold didn't bother him. Why would it? He was already numb.

"They let the bastard out today." His dad's voice cut through the haze of alcohol. "Six months and now he's..." He trailed off.

Jay dropped the beer he'd been nursing for the last fifteen minutes onto the bar. The bottle clanked and rocked, foam building, drops of the precious liquid spilling. He didn't bother rescuing it. He'd just order another as soon as his dad left, like he planned to do for the next couple of hours.

"Your mother's still going on about frying his ass, and he gets out the day before..." His dad cut off midsentence again. Maybe he always did that. Usually Jay's mom was there to continue on.

"Today?" Jay asked.

The look his dad gave him was comical--if anything could make him laugh again--as if his dad thought he was mentally deficient in some way. Maybe he was. How much did you have to drink before the brain cells died off?

"He's probably already back in town."

*In Edgefield?* How long until Jay found himself face-to-face with the man? He nodded. That was all he could manage. Six months in jail and the man who killed his wife was getting his life back. He'd be working and living and loving. And Katie was turning to dust in the ground. Jay would never have his life back. He'd never have anything.

The door swung open again, and a pair of giggles floated in with whoever entered the bar. What the hell were they so happy about?

He had to get out of there. Get away. Escape all of it.

"Why don't you come stay at our place tonight?" his dad said. "You can sleep in your old room. Then we'll all visit the cemetery tomorrow."

The restroom. Maybe if he didn't come out right away his dad would get a clue.

Jay stood, and the weight of his body proved too much for his unsure legs. He sank onto the bar stool. The beers--which he drank fast and barely tasted--had hit him hard, but news of Lincoln McCaw's fate had finished the job. It was over.

Except it wasn't. It never would be.

His dad put a hand on his back. "Hey, Sonny, get us a cup of coffee?"

"Sure," the bartender said. When he returned with the coffee mug, he added, "He's had a few."

"I imagine so." Jay's dad pushed the coffee closer.

The smell of it churned Jay's stomach. Nothing smelled good anymore. Nothing tasted good either. What had he last eaten? And when? Probably why the beer wasn't settling too good.

His dad was talking again. Didn't he get it? The last thing in the world Jay wanted to do was give up the beer and face that McCaw was done with his punishment.

"You should come tomorrow," his dad said. "It might give you closure."

Closure? There wasn't enough beer for that.

There was one thing that would give Jay closure. Finally confronting McCaw, looking the man in the eyes, making him understand how much he took from the world, making Lincoln McCaw suffer.

That'd be closure.

## Chapter Two

The house was dark when they pulled into Nancy's driveway, and Lincoln said, "Guess I missed the kids." *Damn*. Hearing their voices on the phone hadn't been the same.

"I told them to go on to bed. They'll see you tomorrow." She cut the engine, and they walked to the house in silence.

Nancy opened the front door, and Sparky barreled into them. The large black mutt didn't bark, but he rammed his paws into Lincoln's abdomen in greeting.

"He gain more weight?"

"I think the kids have been feeding him junk food while I'm at work." She smiled, but her eyes didn't join in on the expression. A working mom with two jobs meant a lot of nights home alone for her kids.

Lincoln patted Sparky's head and sighed as the dog ran off down the hall. He stepped to the couch in the living room. Same couch he'd slept on during the long months between the accident and the start of his time at the Grant County Justice Center. The secondhand piece of furniture had been uncomfortable back then. After months on what could only be described as a metal slab with a mattress the thickness of a blanket, the couch was a welcome sight. The exhaustion of the long day slammed into him. Waiting for your freedom took a lot out of a man. They had released him late in the day, and by the time he'd signed his paperwork and made it to the bus stop, he had to wait for the last bus, which worked out since Nancy had been on the late shift.

He dropped his duffel bag and the paper sack with the smokes and whiskey onto the couch.

Nancy shook her head from where she had stopped at the hall doorway that led to the bedrooms. "I've got you set up in Davy's room."

"I was fine on the couch."

"That was only for a couple of months. I was hoping... I thought you said you'd stay with us."

He picked up his bags. "I will." He followed her and said, "Just don't want to put anyone out."

"Davy's fine with his brother." She opened the last door on the left, and Lincoln entered the small bedroom. A child's room. A twin bed. A kid's desk he'd never be able to fit his knees under. A dresser that had machine screws sticking out where the knobs should have been. Action figures and half-constructed LEGO sets piled beside the desk as if someone had swept the treasures there with a broom to clear a path to the bed. A green beanbag chair in the corner surrounded by toy cars, fire trucks, and army tanks, each vehicle neatly lined to form an arch around the giant cloth ball, pointed outward as if to protect the chair from unwanted visitors. Lincoln smirked. He'd never sit in the chair. It'd be hell getting up. But it did seem like a comfy place to get drunk and pass out.

He shrugged off his coat and draped it over the back of the desk chair. The chair teetered, rocking in indecision if it could hold the weight of the leather jacket.

For the first time since Lincoln left the jailhouse, the cool air reached him, and he shivered. "Is the heat on?"

Nancy stood in the doorway. “The thermostat isn’t right. I keep having to turn it up to eighty-five to get any heat.”

“I’ll look at it tomorrow.” He’d also look at the sliding door on the laundry closet they’d passed in the hall. It was off the track, the plastic hinge snapped in two.

“Thanks.” She stayed at the door as if she shouldn’t step inside the room. Which was bullshit. This was her house, not his. He’d left his house the day he was arrested and hadn’t stepped so much as one foot inside since.

It hit him then. How different his life was going to be now. He’d never sit in his recliner again. Never watch his big-screen TV. Never drive another race. Never make love in his bed.

There were a lot of things he’d never do.

He was staying in an eight-by-eight-foot room he’d commandeered from his ten-year-old nephew. He sat on the edge of the bed and laughed when he pulled back the blankets and found sheets and a pillowcase covered in metal robots from the movie *Transformers*.

Nancy didn’t laugh with him. Probably had more to do with what she tugged out of her pocket than her lack of humor over the bedcovers. She unfolded the papers and stared at them for a moment before she handed them to him. “The insurance I mentioned.”

He snorted as he looked it over. “Ain’t cheap.”

“It was the only one that--”

“Would take on a man who killed someone?”

“Don’t say that.” She brushed aside the dark bangs that were stuck to her forehead. “They said they’d insure you for any vehicle except your race--”

Lincoln held up a hand. “Yeah. I get it.”

“If you want to sign, I’ll fax them at work. They said the coverage can start tomorrow.”

He took the pen from Nancy and signed the contract. “Am I going somewhere?”

“I talked to Mitch like you asked.”

He handed the papers to her. “And?”

“He said to come by tomorrow after lunch. You can’t so much as drive a forklift, but they’ve got some manual work in the warehouse. He might be able to get you on the payroll in the next week or two.”

“Thanks.”

“Will you make good money there?”

“Mitch does okay.” Lincoln tried to meet her gaze, but she wouldn’t look at him. “Nancy, are you in trouble?”

“I’m behind on the utilities.” She swiped at the stubborn pieces of hair again. “They’re threatening to shut off the phone. And the electric.”

“It’s the middle of fucking winter. And you’ve got kids living here. Did you tell them that?”

She shrugged as if it wasn’t bothering her. Right. He *had* to land the job with Mitch.

He stood and went to her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders. She dropped her head to his chest. If he had been home, he would’ve seen how much trouble she was in. He would’ve been able to stop his asshole brother-in-law from laying another hand on her.



“I’ll help out,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m glad you’re home. And it’s not the money.” She breathed deep, then spoke softer. “I missed you. I’m glad you’re staying.”

He tickled her sides. “You won’t kick me out when I get in the way?” He’d leave in a heartbeat if she wanted him to go. He wouldn’t be a burden on her.

She giggled and pulled away from his tickling. The smile on her face brought out his own. He could’ve sworn his cheeks creaked with the expression. He hadn’t cracked a smile since the life he’d known had ended one year ago.

His last smile had been the morning of the accident, in the shower as he looked down at Paul on his knees before him. Paul had made a lame joke, and the mischievous look in his eyes teased Lincoln, as did the man’s tongue swirling over the crown of his dick. He caressed Paul’s cheek with his thumb as the man set to giving him a blowjob--the last blowjob he’d had since then.

Lincoln drove the image away.

He should get laid. Someone like the guy he’d seen outside Sonny’s.

No. Edgefield wasn’t the place to cruise for a simple fuck or blowjob. He’d wait till he could make the fifty-minute trip to Fort Wayne.

Or maybe he’d wait a little longer. He wasn’t up to feeling that good. Not yet.

He spotted three boxes stacked in front of the closet. He walked to them and kicked the bottom box. “My stuff?”

Nancy nodded. “He brought them by a couple of weeks ago. There’s more in the garage.”

Lincoln grunted.

“He asked about you. Wanted to know how you’re doing.”

“Don’t want to talk about him.”

“He wanted to be there for you--for the arraignment, the sentencing, all of it. You pushed him away and that wasn’t fair.”

“He’s moved on.”

“But he hasn’t forgotten. You never gave that man closure.”

“He’s got his dick in someone else.” Lincoln dropped to the bed. “I’d say he’s over it.”

Nancy shifted on her feet, her attention on her shoes until she spoke. “You’ve got to let it go, Linc. Give yourself permission to forget what happened. Move on.”

“I’m trying to.”

“Forgive yourself.”

That, he couldn’t do.

Nancy was quiet again until he looked her way. She said, “You have a chance to start over.”

“But do I deserve it?”

She came to the bed and placed a kiss on the top of his head. “You do. And someday you’ll be able to accept that.” She shut the door behind her before he could argue.

He shouldn’t have said anything about what he deserved or didn’t deserve. Nancy didn’t need to deal with his guilt on top of everything else. He toed off his boots and stretched out on

the bed. His feet hung off the end, the backs of his ankles digging into the edge of the mattress. He sat up and leaned against the headboard, then grabbed the brown sack and pulled out a bottle of whiskey.

Maybe with enough, he could close his eyes and not see the woman with red hair lying broken on the pavement of State Road 91, her green sweater soaked with blood, her body perfectly still--too still.

Maybe he could forget the biggest mistake of his life.

Continued in *Breathe* by Sloan Parker

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