

Heaven
Help
Heidi

SALLY
JOHN



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*For
Cindi Cox and Jeff Carlson
Thank you for being there*



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Residents of the Casa de Vida Cottages

Olivia “Liv” McAlister, owner

Riley and Tasha Baker

Noah and Déja Grey

Sean Keagan

Piper Keyes

Charles Chadwick Rutherford IV

Inez and Louis Templeton

Coco Vizzini

Samantha Whitley

Jasmyn Albright

Beau Jenner, maintenance man



I have taken you by the hand...
ISAIAH 42:6



One

Losing control of her car at eighty miles per hour had not been on Heidi Hathaway's to-do list for the first day of February.

Up until the moment she skidded off the freeway, her schedule had been ordinary. After a late lunch meeting, she checked half the items off her list and headed south on the 5 out of Orange County into San Diego, a routine drive that required no extraordinary measures. As usual, she zigzagged around slowpokes. She phoned clients—of course using the hands-free device niftily located on the steering wheel. She drank coffee, changed the radio station from jazz to news and back again, applied lipstick, unclipped her hair and brushed it.

It was a typical scenario for a Southern Californian. As a matter of fact, her friends thought of her as so typical, they said she was a SoCal cliché: blonde, blue-eyed, beach volleyball ace, San Diego State grad with a major in Party Girl, owner of a red convertible.

She didn't mind the teasing, although she had outgrown the party girl phase and for many years had driven a hardtop. Currently her car was a high-end, late-model German beauty, more crimson sparkle than plain old red. She'd chosen the five-door model, better suited to stowing kayak paddles and open-house signs. It was a breeze to maneuver through heavy traffic.

All in all, her life and the forty minutes on the freeway on the first of February were ordinary.

And then they weren't.

The mid-afternoon winter sun dipped at an odd angle. Ocean and sky blurred into one unbroken expanse of hazy blue. The rugged terrain

of Camp Pendleton smudged into the color of brown desert camouflage fatigues. A blinding shaft of light sliced beneath the car's visor, penetrating her sunglasses.

A white van sped up on her left and hovered alongside her like a shadow. A semi in front of her reduced speed. A black SUV lingered at her right rear.

She was boxed in.

Except for the small opening on the right, shrinking by the millisecond, just ahead of the SUV.

Her father loved cars. It seemed an odd passion for an egghead of a professor, but it became their common ground from the time she was a little girl. He taught her everything about cars and how to drive. They watched races and paid to drive exotic cars at a track in Las Vegas. He cautioned her to save her competitive streak for selling real estate. The freeway was not a raceway.

The semi in front of her braked.

Her dad's words had never made total sense. If there were six lanes full of vehicles clipping along at high speeds, a little aggression seemed necessary in order to do her part to keep traffic flowing. Getting boxed in was to be avoided. She used all six lanes when necessary, which explained why she was now one lane away from the right shoulder, behind a semi.

Instead of braking, she signaled, sped up, and went for the narrow opening on her right.

And then she had a clear view of red brake lights.

Immediately, dead ahead in front of her.

She had nowhere to go but the shoulder. She torqued the steering wheel and jammed both feet onto the brake pedal. The high-end, late-model crimson beauty hit gravel and spun.

"Help me, God! Help me, God! Help me, God!"

The car flew. It flipped. It bounced. It rolled. Again. And again. And again.

Time ceased to exist. An eternity and a heartbeat melded into one indistinct flow.

Metal crumpled. Glass popped. Air bags burst. Sharp edges sliced and heat seared.

The world vanished.

Two

Along with every other driver around her in the southbound lanes of I-5, Piper Keyes braked. She did not simply slow down; she stopped. Not a good sign for keeping to a schedule.

“Life in Southern California, Pipe,” she said aloud to herself. “What are you going to do? Move back to Wisconsin?”

She pooched her lips in a happy-sad smile. The joke was old and private, her favorite Jared-ism.

On the radio a traffic update cut into the Sixties music and she turned it off. Traffic was obvious. She partially lowered the windows of her small sea-green hybrid car. The sun-kissed February ocean air seeped inside. After seven years its warmth in the dead of winter still enchanted her. If she moved back to the Midwest, she would miss it something awful. But then, she'd miss everything.

Oh, right. She imagined her mother's voice asking the obvious. *You'd miss sitting on the highway in the middle of no-man's land?*

Absolutely, Mom, because it's not a highway or no-man's land. It's the Gunnery Sergeant John Basilone Memorial stretch of the I-5 Freeway and it runs through Camp Pendleton, the base where Jared was stationed. I like driving on it and I like sitting on it. I feel close to him here.

And that's a good thing?

What was it about a mother's voice? Darlene's could nag and provoke, encourage and love all at once, even in Piper's imagination. Like any dotting mom with a hurt child, she simply wanted her daughter back in the nest, safe and sound and pain free.

Piper's eyes stung. Yes, it was a good thing to feel close to Jared,

especially this week, this weepy week. It had begun already, the unavoidable mistiness and tight throat.

The car in front of Piper inched forward all of three feet and stopped again. She followed suit. Ahead she saw creeping vehicles and brake lights, but nothing that explained the jam. Typical. They came and went. In her rearview mirror she glimpsed flashing lights far away. Not typical. It meant something serious had happened.

Sirens wailed now, growing louder. She tensed. Drivers were supposed to move, but getting out of the way was not an option. Emergency vehicles came into view along the shoulder. Police cars, an ambulance, and fire trucks eventually lumbered past, not quite at top speed. The noise of their sirens deafened. She watched as they disappeared in the distance.

Obviously there had been an accident. She wasn't going anywhere soon.

Piper eyed the stack of magazines on the passenger seat. Normally she passed her free time by skimming through photos of famous people. It was her job to know their latest fashion choices. But then, this weepy week did not fall into the category of normal.

She held her breath, keeping the tears at bay. She really did not want to sit there and bawl, though she easily could have.

"Excuse me!"

A shout came from her left and Piper turned toward it.

A guy behind the wheel of a red convertible Corvette, top down, grinned. He pushed up his sunglasses and leaned over his empty passenger seat. "Don't I know you?"

She smiled tightly, shook her head, and waggled her left hand. The diamond caught the sunlight.

He shrugged. "Hey, can't blame a guy for trying."

She pressed the window control and turned away so he wouldn't see the roll of her eyes. Jared would say that she could at the very least blame the guy for being a stereotype, for adding further proof that men who drove red convertibles deserved their bad rap.

In a comic book hero sort of way, her fiancé had been a stereotype. Square jaw, dark brown eyes full of twinkling light when he smiled, broader-than-broad shoulders, muscular but huggable, ruggedly handsome even in pajama-like fatigues. But his persona? Now that didn't fit into any sort of typical guy category.

A horn tooted behind her, startling Piper. She pulled forward another few feet, braked, and folded her hands primly on her lap. The driver back there had no idea who she was messing with. The woman could not imagine the effort it took Piper not to make a disgusted gesture or to scowl in the rearview mirror.

Nuts, nuts, nuts. She muttered the closest thing to profanity that she had in her vocabulary. Jared had thought it cute. She said it was the lingering taste of soap on her tongue.

Maybe she shouldn't be near people right now. She could cancel her next appointment, go home, take some R and R. An emotionally healthy woman would do that. She'd sit in the quiet courtyard, listen to the fountain trickle, and snuggle with Tobi, the landlady's cat.

The mere thought gave Piper the willies.

The willies had nothing to do with her apartment, a cozy cottage in a peaceful complex. They had nothing to do with the people there, least of all Liv, the landlady who lived on the property.

Some called her Mama Liv, but to Piper she was nothing like a Darlene mom with a Darlene voice. Saint Liv fit better. She prayed about everything. Best of all, she had only needed to ask once why Piper sometimes wore the diamond ring on her left hand, sometimes on her right.

"Depends on the week," was all Piper said. Liv never pressed for more.

No, home and the chance of running into Liv or other neighbors did not give her the willies. It was sitting still in the midst of a weepy week that brought them on.

Tearful weeks accompanied Jared's birthday in May, the date of their should-have-been wedding in July, and now, in February, the anniversary of his death. At least they were no longer weepy *months*. At least *life* was no longer one unending crying jag.

She had learned the secret of whirligigging, packing the hours with enough activity to make her spin, round and round. She lost interest in being obnoxiously rude or going on dates with strangers who drove red convertibles.

Her therapist had thought it an unwise system, but she'd retired almost two years ago and Piper never replaced her. The system worked.

She blew out a noisy breath. Glitches were to be expected with any system, though, especially when the unexpected—things like traffic jams—shut it down.

Ask for help, Piper. Her ex-therapist's voice soothed. *You're not in this alone.*

The downside to her Whirligig System was that it did not allow time for making and keeping friends. Even sisters grew distant. There remained only one person to ask for help.

By the time Piper reached the scene of the accident, Darlene's voice coming through the speakerphone had created a bubble inside the car. She yakked about this and that. Piper listened intently to the gossip from Wisconsin, and the world stayed outside.

The *whomp* of a helicopter, the huddles of people, the dented cars, the tow trucks, the lone red car way off the shoulder and pancake flat... they were all blips on a screen already too full of ugliness.

Three

Heidi woke up and immediately wished she hadn't.

Given her can-do attitude toward anything physical, she was not a stranger to pain. Her medical history included a broken collarbone, a broken arm, several cuts deep enough to require stitches on various parts of her body, and a concussion—all before she turned twelve. The injuries were the results of never saying *no* to a dare from her twin brother and his buddies.

After age twelve, Hudson turned to books and she turned to sports. Even without his goading, she was never without a bruise or sprain or ache or pain of some sort.

But this...this was different. Every single nerve ending, inside and out, cried for relief.

"There she is." The calm, disembodied voice belonged to her father.

Heidi heard other muted voices. Faces came into view, blurry and spinning. Her stomach reeled.

"Heidi Ann!" Her mom's voice. "What on earth were you thinking, racing like a chowderhead on that freeway?"

"Rita," her dad chided. "Chowderhead?"

Her mother *tsked*. "This is all your fault, Ethan Hathaway. Forever putting crazy notions in her head about driving. Mark my word, in her mind she was in Vegas, on that racetrack in some extravagant racecar. Am I right or am I right, Heidi?"

She tried to make a silly face. They usually defused Rita's pointless rampages and make her laugh. But Heidi's face felt like a contorted, frozen mess. Her mother ranted on.

“Heidi.” That was Val. Her closest friend and business partner said nothing else.

Something was either very good or very bad. Either way, Val would be there with her mom and dad. But so would Hudson. Where was her brother?

Where was *she*? Why the pain? The floating sensation?

What had happened?

“You were in an accident on the freeway.” Her dad’s voice soothed, in spite of the awful words.

Accident.

“Do you remember it?”

She remembered...bits. Veering the car onto the shoulder. *Off* the freeway. The car...the car flew. Literally. Deafening noises. Pain. Her right leg turned at an unbearable angle. Darkness. Quiet.

She remembered there were voices then, asking her name. Another, a gentler, whispery one. *Take my hand, Heidi. Take my hand.* She was lifted. She screamed. Darkness came again.

She let the disjointed bits of memory go. Sobs gathered in her chest now. They grew and hardened, a solid lump that had nowhere to go. Questions formed, but her tongue refused to take them.

Something was in the way. Something was in the way!

Her father caught her hand midway to her mouth.

“Shh, shh.” He leaned close and dabbed a tissue at the corners of her eyes. “It’s okay. It’s okay. Relax, princess. Just relax.”

She saw an image reflected in the lenses of his rimless square glasses. Bandages swathed her head. A huge contraption covered the bottom half of her face.

She whimpered but the sound was drowned by a *swish, whoosh, swish, whoosh...*

A respirator.

“They had to intubate,” her dad said softly. “Everything is going to be okay, princess. I promise. Your body’s just a little broken...”



What day was it? She smiled. It must be Saturday, a full-on, kick-up-her-heels Saturday. First, she'd present the Fentons' offer on the Ridge-wood house. Hands down, a slam dunk. Then there were two open houses—count them, two. Both excellent properties listed with her company. By evening—

“Heidi?” Val loomed close. “Are you awake? For real this time?”

She blinked. “Val—ohh!” She grabbed at her fire-breathing throat and touched something hard.

“Sweetie.” Val gently moved Heidi's hand. “Leave the neck brace alone. Here, have some water.” She put a straw to Heidi's lips. “They said you'd be really dry. But hey! You're out of ICU and that nasty thing is out of your mouth. Good news, yeah?”

Heidi swallowed, choked, and coughed. Water sprayed.

“Whoops.” Val removed the straw. “I'm a lousy nurse. But then you knew that, huh?”

Heidi took hold of the sheet and wiped her face. Her left hand did not move freely. There was an IV in it.

She touched her forehead and felt a thick patch of gauze. And then she saw her right leg.

Suspended.

“You remember that time you had the flu?” Val chattered. “I wouldn't let you stay home, just ordered takeout egg drop soup for you, day and night, delivered to the office. Actually, I think it helped.”

“How bad?” Heidi croaked.

“You were really, really bad. High fever, coughing, and—”

She whimpered.

“Okay, okay. This would be worse than the flu.”

Get to the point! Get to the point! The shout went no further than her mind.

“Oh, Heidi. Everything's fixable. Everything. Well, not counting the spleen, but honestly, if we can live without one, why do we even have one? You know what I mean? It's one of those things that makes no sense...” Her voice drifted away. Her lips settled into a single line of uneven coral.

Valerie Laughlin was not in a good way. She wouldn't be caught dead with lipstick out of place or her chin-length chestnut hair in need of a brushing. Her close-set eyes almost disappeared beneath puffy lids, their hazel color darker than usual.

Val took a deep breath. “Your mom and dad will be back any minute. They just went downstairs to get some coffee.”

Heidi heard the unspoken message. There was more to tell. There was worse to tell. Val was not going to be the one to tell it.

Maybe Heidi did not need to hear it.

She shut her eyes and waited for the magic carpet to swing by again and lift her away.