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# Just Like Heaven

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Extract

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# Part ONE

## June

# *Chapter* ONE

The alarm clock sitting on the pale wood nightstand sounded at five-thirty. Curled under a down comforter in the middle of her large iron bed, Lauren opened her eyes to the clear golden dawn light that is so rare in San Francisco.

Lauren's apartment had an unusually pleasant air to it. Set on the top floor of a Victorian house on Green Street, it had an open-plan kitchen and living room, a big bedroom, a walk-in closet, and a vast bathroom with a large window. The floor was laid with wide slats of parquet; in the bathroom, this had been bleached and stenciled with a black checkerboard design. The white walls were hung with old drawings that Lauren had picked up in the galleries on Union Street. The ceiling was edged in wooden moldings finely carved by a skilled carpenter in the late 1900s; Lauren had stained them the color of light tea.

Coconut-fiber rugs edged in jute lay in the dining area

Lauren's dog, Kali, leaped onto the bed as she felt her mistress stir. "Don't look at me like that—I don't even feel human yet!" she told the dog. "And, honey, I'm abandoning you for two days. Mom will come by to get you around eleven. Move over. I'll get up and make breakfast."

Lauren uncurled her legs, stretched out her arms, yawned widely, pulled on a T-shirt, and jumped to her feet. Rubbing at her hair, she moved behind the kitchen counter, opened the fridge, yawned again, and took out butter, jam, crispbread, a can of dog food, an open packet of Parma ham, a chunk of Gouda, coffee, two cartons of milk, a bowl of applesauce, two plain yogurts, cereal, half a grapefruit; the other half remained on the bottom shelf. Kali watched her, nodding her head urgently. Lauren glared back and exclaimed, "I know—but I'm hungry!"

As usual, she made Kali's breakfast first, in a heavy earthenware bowl. Then she assembled her own tray and headed for her desk.

From the window, if she tilted her head a little, she could see the Golden Gate Bridge, suspended like a hyphen between the two sides of the bay, and beyond it the houses that clung to the hills of Sausalito, and the marina of Tiburon. Directly below her, roofs descended like steps toward the Marina. She opened the window wide: the city was still sleeping. Only the booming foghorns of the big freighters shipping out to China, mixed with the cries of seagulls, disturbed this languid morning. She stretched again, then tucked into her breakfast with a hearty appetite. She had had no time for dinner last night. Three times she'd tried to take a bite of her sandwich, but each time her beeper had shrilly summoned her to a new emergency.

When people asked Lauren what it was like to work in the ER, she invariably quipped, "Relaxing."

After devouring most of her feast, she put the tray in the sink and headed for the bathroom. She slid her fingers down the Venetian blinds to push the wooden slats shut, let her cotton T-shirt fall to the floor, and stepped under the powerful warm jet of the shower. Now she was properly awake.

Lauren wrapped a towel around her waist, looked in the mirror, made a face, and decided in favor of a little makeup. She threw on a pair of jeans and a polo shirt, took off the jeans and put on a skirt, took off the skirt and pulled the jeans back on. She took a canvas bag from the closet and stuffed in a few toiletries and some clothes. She was ready for the weekend. She eyed the hopeless disorder around her—clothes on the floor, towels scattered, dirty dishes in the sink, the bed unmade—and glared at her household objects decisively. She said aloud, "Not a word! No complaining! I'll be back tomorrow evening and I'll straighten you all up for the week."

Then she took a pencil and paper and wrote a note, which she stuck to the refrigerator door with a large frog-shaped magnet:

*Mom*

*Thanks for looking after the dog, please don't clean up, I'll take care of it when I get back.*

*I'll pick up Kali from your place Sunday around five.*

*Love you. Your favorite physician.*

She slipped on her coat and patted her dog tenderly. "Sorry, Kali. I need a break. Be good!" She planted a kiss on Kali's forehead and slammed the door shut.

She walked down to the main door, took the outside stairs to the garage, and jumped into her aging convertible.

"I'm off, I'm really off!" she said to herself and her car. "I can hardly believe it—what a miracle. Now you have to agree to start. And I'm warning you, if you cough just one time I'll drown your motor in maple syrup and turn you over to the junkyard. I'll replace you with a young car loaded with electronics, with no choke and no tantrums on cold mornings. Got that straight? Go!"

The ring of conviction in her voice must have impressed the old English car, for its engine came alive on the first twist of the key. It was going to be a beautiful day.

# *Chapter* TWO

Lauren eased the Triumph onto the street quietly. She didn't want to wake her neighbors on Green Street, on this pretty block lined with trees and old houses, where people knew one another by sight, as in a village. Six crossroads before Van Ness—one of the two main arteries through the city—she tuned her radio to 101.3 FM and sped up. The pale morning light shifted color every few minutes, progressively illuminating a series of spectacular views of the city. Lauren loved the thrilling vertigo of racing across San Francisco's steep hills.

As she made a tight left onto Post Street she heard an odd noise—a rattling—stemming perhaps from the transmission. Probably nothing, she thought as she zoomed down the steep slope toward Union Square. It was six-thirty in the morning, Bruce Springsteen was blaring—Lauren was happy, happier than she had been for a very long time. Good-bye to stress;

good-bye to the hospital. She sang along with Bruce. This would be a weekend of her very own, and there wasn't a minute to lose.

Union Square was quiet. In a few hours the sidewalks would be spilling over with tourists and locals, shopping in the department stores around the square. Cable cars would file up and down, shop windows would light up, and a long line of cars would form at the entrance to the parking garage under the public gardens, where bands of street musicians would be playing for quarters and the occasional dollar.

But for now, on this early weekend morning, calm reigned. The storefronts were dark. A few homeless people slept still on their benches, and the parking-lot attendant dozed in his booth at the entrance to the underground garage. The Triumph was sailing as Lauren shifted gears. The lights were green all the way. She felt exhilarated as the morning air buffeted her head scarf. She shifted down to second gear as she approached her turn onto Geary in front of the vast facade of the Macy's building. A perfect turn, the tires squealing softly, and then a strange noise, a series of clicks, everything moving fast now. The clicking became a blur of conflicting metallic sounds.

A sudden bang! Time stopped. All dialogue ceased between the steering and the wheels. The car swerved and skidded on the damp surface. Lauren's face tensed; her hands gripped the useless steering wheel. It offered no resistance, spinning in a limbo of its own. The Triumph continued gliding. Time seemed to ease into its own rhythm, stretching out now into an infinitely long yawn. Lauren felt her head spin—no, it was the scene around her that was spinning—at astonishing speed. Then the Triumph's wheels slammed into the curb. The front of the car rose into the embrace of a fire

hydrant. The hood arched up further still. In one last effort, the car rotated on its axis and ejected its driver, by now much too heavy for its gravity-defying backflip. Lauren's body was hurled into the air, then crashed back down against Macy's huge display window, which exploded into thousands of glass shards.

Lauren rolled on the sidewalk, then came to rest on the blanket of glass and debris, while the old Triumph ended its performance, and its long career, on its back, half on the sidewalk. A plume of steam rose from its entrails, and it breathed its ladylike last.

Lauren lay still. She was peaceful, almost serene. Her features were smooth, her breathing slow and even. There might have been a small smile on her slightly parted lips. Her eyes were closed—she seemed to be sleeping. Her long hair framed her face; her right hand lay across her midriff.

In his booth, the parking-lot attendant blinked hard. He'd witnessed it all, "just like in the movies," only this time "it was for real," he'd later say. He rose, ran outside, then changed his mind, turned around, frantically pulled at the phone and dialed 911.

Help was on its way.

The dining hall of San Francisco Memorial Hospital was a large room, with white-tiled floor and walls painted yellow. Several rectangular Formica tables lay along a central path leading to machines dispensing soda, coffee, and sandwiches, and Dr. Philip Stern sprawled over one of the tables, a cold cup of coffee near his hand. A little farther away a colleague was rocking on a chair, eyes lost in thought. The beeper rang deep in Stern's pocket. He opened one eye and looked at his

watch with a groan; his shift would end in fifteen minutes. "Damn, I have the worst luck—Frank, call reception."

Frank caught the wall phone beside him, listened for a moment, then turned back to Stern. "Up you get, pal. It's ours, Union Square, code three, seems serious." The two ER residents got up and headed for the entryway, where the ambulance was waiting for them, its lights dazzling and engine running. Two short blasts of the siren marked the departure of Unit 2. It was 6:45 AM; Stockton Street was completely deserted, and the ambulance raced through the early morning.

"Shit, and it looks like it'll be a nice day."

"What's with the whining?"

"I'm beat, and I need sleep, and I'm not going to get it."

"Turn left, there's no one on the road, we'll go up the one-way street."

Frank turned, and the ambulance headed up Post Street toward Union Square. "Hey, speed up, I can see it." When they got to the square, the two doctors spotted the carcass of the old Triumph splayed across the hydrant. Frank cut the siren.

"Wow, he really totaled that," Stern said, whistling, jumping out of the ambulance.

Two policemen were already on the scene, and one of them directed Stern toward the broken window.

"Where is he?" the resident asked.

"There, in front of you, it's a woman, and she's a doctor, in the emergency room apparently. You recognize her?"

Already kneeling beside Lauren's body, Stern yelled at his colleague to come quickly. Using scissors, he cut through jeans and T-shirt to the naked skin. Her long left leg was

twisted and bruised, indicating a fracture. The rest of the body had no apparent wounds.

"Let's get an EKG and start an IV. I've got a thready pulse and no blood pressure, respiration forty-eight, head wound, looks like a closed fracture of the left femur with internal hemorrhage. Get me two units. Do we know her? Is she one of us?"

"I've seen her. She's a resident in ER—works with Fernstein. A tough cookie. Stands up to his bullying."

Philip didn't react to this last remark. Frank pasted the seven electrodes onto the young woman's chest, connecting each one with a different-colored wire to the portable electrocardiograph. He switched it on, and the screen instantly leaped to life.

"What's it show?" he asked Philip.

"Nothing good; she's going. Pressure, eighty over sixty; pulse, a hundred and forty; lips are blue. I'll start preparing a number-seven endotracheal tube. We'll need to intubate."

Dr. Stern finished hooking the IV catheter into Lauren's arm and handed the bag of saline solution to one of the policemen.

"Hold that good and high, I need both hands."

Turning briefly to his partner, he directed him to inject 5 milligrams of epinephrine and 125 milligrams of Solumedrol into the IV, and to prepare the defibrillator. Lauren's temperature now began to fall rapidly. The tracing on the EKG was becoming erratic. A small red heart began to blink at the bottom of the green screen, accompanied instantly by a short, urgent beep—a warning that heart failure was imminent.

"Hang in there, sweetie! She must be pissing blood inside. How's the belly?"

"Soft. She's probably bleeding in the leg. Ready to intubate?"

They secured an airway in under a minute. Stern asked for a report on vital signs; Frank replied that respiration was still stable, but pressure had fallen to fifty. He had no time to finish his sentence: the short beep was replaced by a shrill alarm from the machine.

"That's it, she's in V-Fib. Give me three hundred joules."

Philip picked up the two paddles of the apparatus and rubbed them together.

"Go ahead, you have the juice," yelled Frank.

"Pull back, I'm hitting her."

Jolted by the electric shock, the body arched brutally before falling back.

"Nope, no good."

"Try three-sixty, let's go!"

"Three-sixty it is, go ahead!"

"Pull back!"

The body again rose and fell back lifelessly. "Give me another five of epinephrine and reload to three-sixty. Pull back!" Another jolt; another spasmodic leap. "Still fibrillating! We're losing her: inject one unit of lidocaine into the IV and reload. Pull back!" The body heaved upward. "Give her an amp of bicarb and reload to three-eighty stat!"

Lauren received yet another shock. Her heart seemed to respond to the drugs. It returned to normal rhythm; but not for long. The alarm signal, which had briefly ceased, shrilled out louder than ever. "Cardiac arrest!" Frank yelled.

Immediately, Philip began cardiac massage. He was unusually determined to save this patient. As he worked to bring her back to life, he begged her, "Don't be an idiot. It's a fine day. Come back. Don't do this to us!"

He ordered his partner to reload the machine once more. Frank tried to calm him down. "Let her go, Philip, it's no good." But Stern would not give up; he yelled at Frank to reload the defibrillator. His partner yielded. Yet again Philip shouted, "Pull back!" and once more the body arched. But the electrocardiogram remained stubbornly flat.

Philip went back to cardiac massage, his forehead beaded with sweat. A sense of despair at his powerlessness was made worse by his sheer exhaustion. As Frank looked on, it occurred to him that Philip was losing his grip on reality. He should have stopped everything minutes ago and pronounced the time of death. But nothing, it seemed, could stop him: he went on massaging Lauren's heart.

"Give another shot of epinephrine and go up to four hundred joules."

"Philip, stop it, it makes no sense. She's dead. This is a waste of time."

"Shut up and do what I tell you!"

The policeman looked questioningly at the doctor kneeling beside Lauren, but Philip was focusing on his patient. Frank shrugged, injected another dose into the IV tubing, and reloaded the defibrillator. He called out the threshold level of four hundred joules, and Stern delivered it, without even giving the warning to pull back. Jolted by the current, the torso jerked violently upward. The EKG remained hopelessly flat-line. The resident did not look at it. He pounded his fist on Lauren's chest. "Damn! Damn!"

Frank grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Philip, you're losing it, buddy. You're cracking up here. You need a rest. Calm down. Give me the time of death and we'll pack up."

Philip was sweating, his eyes haggard. Frank raised his voice, gripped his friend's face in his hands, forced him to stare him in the eyes. He ordered him to calm down; when Philip didn't react, he slapped him. When the young doctor finally focused, Frank said calmly, "Come back to me, buddy. Get a grip." Then, at the end of his rope, he let go of his partner and got up, his eyes as vacant as Philip's. Spellbound, the policemen gazed at the two doctors. Frank was walking in circles, apparently at a complete loss. Philip, crumpled over on his knees, slowly raised his head and said in a low voice, "Time of death: seven-ten." He turned to the policeman who was still awkwardly holding the IV bag and said, "You can take her now. It's over. There's nothing more we can do for her."

Frank laid his arm across his partner's shoulder and walked him toward the ambulance.

The policemen gawked as the medics climbed in. "Those guys—they're not all there," noted one of them.

The second policeman stared at him. "You ever been on a job where one of us got killed?"

"No."

"Then you can't understand what those two have just been through. Come on, give me a hand, we'll get hold of her gently and put her on the stretcher in the van."

The ambulance had already disappeared around the corner. The two policemen lifted Lauren's inert body, set it on a stretcher, and covered it with a blanket. The few passersby who had stopped to view the scene wandered off.

Inside the ambulance, the two partners still hadn't said a word.

Frank broke the silence. "What got into you, Philip?"

"She's not even thirty years old—she's a doctor—she's drop-dead beautiful."

"And that's just what she did, she dropped dead. So what if she's a pretty doctor—she could have been ugly and worked in a Seven-Eleven. It's fate, and you can't do a thing about it. It was her time. When we get back, you grab some sleep and put all this shit behind you."

Two blocks behind them, the police van was headed for an intersection when a limo raced through a red light. Furious, the policeman braked sharply and sounded his siren. The limo driver stopped and babbled an apology. Lauren's body had been thrown off the stretcher by the sudden halt, so the two men went around to the rear of the van. The younger cop grabbed hold of Lauren's ankles while the older man took her arms. His expression froze when he looked at the young woman's chest.

"She's fuckin' breathing!"

"What?"

"She's breathing, I tell you. Get behind the wheel. Move it. We've got to get to the hospital."

"Jesus! I told you those two medics didn't look right."

"Shut up and drive. I don't know what's going on, but they're going to hear about it from me."

The police van overtook the ambulance under the startled eyes of the two medics. Weren't those "their" cops? Philip wanted to turn the siren back on and follow them, but Frank refused—he was finished.

"Why are they driving like that?"

"Who knows?" said Frank. "Maybe it wasn't them. They all look alike."

Ten minutes later they pulled up at the entrance to the emergency unit and parked alongside the police van, whose doors were still open.

Philip went into the hospital and hurried toward the ER check-in desk. Skipping any preliminary greeting, he blurted out, "Did they just bring someone in?" Not waiting for a reply, he insisted, "Where is she?"

"The woman in the car accident?" asked the receptionist. "Area three. Fernstein's with her. Apparently she's one of his team."

Behind him, the older policeman tapped him on the shoulder. "What shit were you medics playing at?"

"I beg your pardon?"

How could he have pronounced a young woman dead when she was still breathing in his van? "You realize that if I hadn't noticed, we'd have put her into cold storage alive? You haven't heard the last of this."

Just then, Dr. Fernstein emerged from surgery. Seeming not to notice the officer, he spoke directly to the young doctor. "Stern, how many doses of epinephrine did you give that woman?"

"Five milligrams, four times."

The professor reprimanded Philip. There had been absolutely no call for such intensive resuscitation techniques. His conduct had been wantonly overzealous. Then Fernstein turned to the police officer and told him that Lauren had died well before Dr. Stern had announced the time of death. He added that the emergency team's only error had been an overeager attempt to revive the heart, at taxpayers' expense. To put an end to further discussion, Fernstein explained that the injected drugs had pooled around the pericardium. "When you slammed on the brakes, the medication flowed

into her heart, which reacted to the chemicals and started to beat again." Unfortunately, that did not alter the fact that the victim was brain-dead. As soon as the cardiac drugs wore off, the heart would stop again—"if it hasn't already."

Fernstein suggested that the officer apologize to Dr. Stern for his inappropriate comments, then asked Stern to come and see him. The older cop turned to Philip and growled, "So it's not just cops who close ranks to protect their own. Don't bother to show me out." He turned on his heel and left the hospital building. Even though the double doors of the emergency bay had closed, you could hear the slam as he shut the van doors.

Stern remained standing, with his arms resting on the reception desk, squinting at the duty nurse. "What the hell's all this about?" She shrugged and reminded him that Dr. Fernstein was waiting.

Philip knocked at the half-open door. Fernstein told him to come in. Standing behind his desk, his back turned to Stern as he gazed out the window, he was obviously waiting for Stern to speak first. Philip admitted that he was puzzled by what the professor had told the policeman.

Fernstein interrupted him coldly. "Listen, Stern. I gave him an explanation to set his mind at ease, and to keep him from filing a report that might ruin your career. The way you handled that resuscitation was unacceptable for someone of your experience. You should know how to deal with death when it has to happen. We're not gods, and we're not responsible for destiny. That young woman was dead when you arrived on the scene, and you were trying too hard, for too long."

"But how do you explain that she started breathing again?"

"I can't explain it and I don't have to. We don't understand everything. She's dead, Dr. Stern. I can see you don't like it, but she's gone. I don't give a damn if her lungs are moving and her heart is beating on its own—her electroencephalograph is flat. This woman is irreversibly brain dead. We'll let things take their course and then send her down to the morgue. Period."

"But you can't do that—not with so much evidence! We have to try!"

Fernstein shook his head and raised his voice. Was Stern telling him what to do? Did Stern know how much it cost to keep a person in intensive care, even just for a day? Did he think the hospital would block one of its beds just to keep a vegetable artificially alive? He told Stern to grow up. He, Fernstein, would not force this woman's family to spend weeks at the side of an inert and brainless life-form that was being kept going only by machines. He would not be responsible for making such a decision, purely to satisfy one doctor's oversize ego.

Fernstein ordered Stern to get out of his sight and take a shower. The young doctor stood his ground and restated his argument with renewed vigor. When he had declared Lauren dead, the patient had been in cardiorespiratory arrest for several minutes. Her heart and lungs had stopped functioning. Yes, he *had* kept trying to bring her back, because for the first time in his medical career he had felt that this woman did not want to die. He told Fernstein that behind Lauren's open eyes he had sensed her struggling, refusing to go under.

And so he had fought alongside her—fought beyond reason—and, ten minutes later, against all logic and everything he had been taught, her heart had started beating. Her

lungs had begun to inhale and exhale again. There had been a breath of life. "You're right, we're doctors, and we don't know everything. And she's a doctor, too."

He begged Fernstein to give Lauren a chance. There had been cases in which coma victims had come back to life inexplicably, after six months or more. The way she had recommenced breathing was already miraculous. Who cared how much it would cost? "Don't let her go," he pleaded. "She doesn't want to go—that's what she's telling us."

After a moment's silence, Fernstein replied, "Doctor Stern, Lauren was one of my students. She was a tough lady and a fine doctor. I had a lot of respect for her, and I thought she would go far. I also think you will go far. This conversation is now over."

Stern left the office without closing the door. Frank was waiting for him in the corridor.

"What are you doing here?"

"What the hell is wrong with you, Philip? Do you know who you were yelling at?"

"Yes. And?"

"He was that woman's professor. He's known her for fifteen months. He's saved more lives than you may in your entire career. You've got to get a grip on yourself, you're out of control."

"Give me a break, Frank. I've had enough lectures for one day."