

Surviving Haley

Brenda Baker

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

Watershed Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First Watershed Edition, 2015

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-482-4

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-481-7

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

In memory of Beatrice Andrews and Gretchen Baker
who were always there for me.

This novel would never have been completed without
the encouragement, dedication, and insights offered
by: Helene Prevost, Diane Owens, Donna Koppelman,
Janet Skoog, Dorothy Ray, Becky Berg, Paula Jolin and
Barbara Ostguard. I appreciate all of you!

Thank you to my agent, Steven Hutson for believing in
my work, and to Ruth Hutson for her assistance.
Special thanks to Nicola Martinez, Editor-in-Chief at
Pelican Book Group, for wanting to publish the story,
and to Jamie West, my editor, who was just an email
away, and whose suggestions improved the book.

To my family and friends, thank you for standing by
me. And thank you, God for making this all possible.

1

The first night in our new house, my mother watched every sporkful of food I lifted to my mouth. This was her new mission: controlling my diet. Make that: controlling my life. I had gained some weight since the accident. OK, I was fat. Blimp status fat. But my mother had appointed herself the food warden, and I hadn't even advertised the position.

We sat on boxes labeled "kitchen," printed with black marker in my mother's neat handwriting. We'd scooted them next to our rickety card table because our furniture hadn't arrived yet, even though the moving company promised it'd be here by now. The kitchen was smaller than our old one. The whole house was smaller. But so was our family.

I reached tentatively for another piece of chicken, waiting for my mother to say something. Right when my fingers closed around a drumstick—baked not fried—she said, "Lauren, don't you think you've had enough?"

Yes, if I had a stomach the size of a gerbil's.

I dropped the chicken and snatched a carrot stick instead. Vegetables were acceptable. I could eat all the veggies I wanted, as long as I didn't dip them in anything that tasted good, like ranch dressing.

Dad cleared his throat and shook his head, barely enough to notice, but Mom caught it.

She crumpled her napkin and flung it on her

Styrofoam plate, then pushed her “fragile, handle with care” seat away from the table, folded the flaps in on the Crispy Chicken box, and shoved it out of sight in the refrigerator abandoned by the previous owners.

I’d bet a hundred dollars Mom had counted the remaining pieces of chicken, so a middle-of-the-night raid was out.

“Well,” Dad said, smiling and looking straight at me. “I’ll do the dishes.” He dumped the chicken bones, napkins, and sporks onto one plate, stacked the other two beneath it, and stuffed the whole mess into the brown paper chicken sack. “I think I saw the Wii someplace. How about it, Lauren? You up for a game?”

Mom sighed and stopped wiping the card table in circular strokes with a dampened paper towel. “Tell your father we have to finish unloading the truck. Then you need to take a shower and get to bed. You don’t want to be late for your first day of school.”

This was how she talked to him now, “tell your father,” like I was the interpreter. It had been like this ever since Dad decided we were moving. He said it would be the best thing for all of us. We needed to start over in a new place, so we could move forward with our lives.

Dad opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off. “It’s fine. We can play tomorrow. I’ll start hauling in stuff.”

Before we left Minnesota, we’d crammed everything we could into the back of Dad’s pick-up truck.

“Be out in a second to help you,” Dad said.

I pushed through the back door and meandered to the truck. Yanking the tailgate open, I stared at the ten-plus plastic bags and the tape-sealed boxes. The wind

caught my hair and it whipped around my face. Mom had tagged the twist-tied sacks, and I shoved two marked “bedding” toward the tailgate. The sacks were extra-capacity size and incredibly heavy.

“Toss them down to me,” Dad said. “We’d better hurry, looks like a storm’s coming.” Black clouds hovered overhead. The temperature had dropped since we’d arrived, and a cool breeze carried the scent of rain. Dad bent over and grabbed the sacks. For the zillionth time, I saw the rose tattoo on his upper arm with three names on it: “Lydia, Lauren, Haley,” but I turned away, because seeing Haley’s name hurt too much.

He carried those sacks inside and Mom plodded over to take the next ones. My parents hauled, and I kept shoving our belongings to the end of the truck bed.

The maple tree in the front yard bowed in the wind. Raindrops plopped on my forehead as I picked up a box and carried it to the tailgate. A flash of lightning slashed a jagged white line through the darkened sky. Ten minutes later, rain pelted us, but we kept working until only three boxes remained. We each carried one, me leading the way. When I’d almost reached the door, I slipped on the slick concrete and my box hit the porch. That was when I noticed the label: “Haley’s things.”

“Be careful with that!” My mother handed off her box to Dad. She dropped to her hands and knees and slid Haley’s box close to herself. It was pouring now, the rain drenching our hair and clothes, but Mom slumped against the house, cradling the box and blocking the doorway so we couldn’t get past her.

Dad set down his load and lay a hand on her back.

She pushed him away without even looking at him.

“Lydia,” he said, “let’s go inside.”

Without a word, she rose and gathered the box in her arms. Dad opened the door for her and she shuffled through it.

Dad and I crossed the threshold, our sandals wet, our cargo soggy and damp smelling. Puddles collected around our feet on the tiled entryway.

Upstairs, a door closed, and I knew we wouldn’t see Mom for the rest of the night.

“She hates me,” I said. “When is she going to stop hating me?”

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. The skin around his eyes crinkled. “She doesn’t hate you. Don’t ever think that. Just give her some time, OK?”

How much time? It had already been a month since the accident. I chewed my thumbnail down to a stub. I needed chocolate and I needed it now. Something gooey. Knowing my mother, she’d pitched everything remotely sweet, but she didn’t know about the crunch bars I’d bought at the Gas ‘N’ Go and hidden in my purse.

Dad wrapped his arm around me and tightened his fingers against my shoulder. “We love you, honey. Remember that. Now, find a towel and go take your shower. I’ll call you for school in the morning.”

“OK.”

He loved me, yeah. But Mom, well, I’d changed her life forever. For Mom, there was no magic left...no more Santa Claus or Tooth Fairy or Easter Bunny. Without Haley, she couldn’t buy toys or play at the park or watch cartoons or animated movies, because she had no reason to anymore.

I ripped open a garbage bag, thankful our bedding and towels were dry, and headed upstairs. A narrow line of light glowed under the master bedroom door. No sound came from the room. Was Mom sitting in there on the floor, hugging Haley's box?

After showering, I trudged to my room across the hallway, closed my door, and spread a blanket on the floor before I dumped out the contents of my purse. A cellphone, a coin purse, sticky notes where I'd scribbled down reminders to myself, a billfold with a meager amount of cash, and of course what I was really searching for: a crunch bar.

In less than thirty seconds, I'd devoured a whole bar, swallowing the creamy rich chocolate, the taste lingering on my tongue. I had four more, but I couldn't afford to eat them all tonight. They were my insurance for the next week or so until I had a chance to buy more. For several minutes, I felt better. Good, almost. But it didn't last. It never lasted.

Gathering my stuff into a pile, I shoved it back inside my purse and collapsed against the blanket. The new carpet smell made my eyes water. This was usually a good smell, but not when it was right next to my nose. The floor pressed into my back, and my stomach bulged above the waistband of my pajamas.

Were Mom and Dad in the same room? Doubtful. As far as I knew, they hadn't slept together since the accident.

Outside, rain spit against the windows. Thunder rattled the glass panes. The streetlight blinked off along with every light in our house. Darkness swallowed my room. *Welcome to Nebraska.*

2

My new school sprawled across a straw-yellow lawn. According to the weather guy on Channel Seven, the late-summer heat spell would end soon, and people didn't need to water their grass, because it was dormant, not dead. An American flag capped a Goliath-sized pole; red, white, and blue fluttered in the wind. Inside, students streamed past the glassed-in hallway visible from the street.

Even though it was only 7:30 a.m. and about sixty-five degrees outside, sweat ran down my back. My hair clung to my neck.

Dad killed the engine and pressed the volume control on the radio until the song faded away. Leaning back against the headrest, he closed his eyes and sighed. "I know this is hard. You want me to wait?"

"For what?" Did he think he needed to take my hand and walk me to the door? I was starting ninth grade not kindergarten. Still, it was sweet of him to offer.

"Well, OK, then," he said smiling, "I guess you're fine."

Fine. Right. I could do this. I grabbed my book bag, rested my fingers on the door handle, and cracked the truck door open. So what if I didn't know anybody? That was the whole point in moving...nobody knew me either.

“Good luck, kiddo. Have a great day.”

Dad has always called me “kiddo.” But he’d called Haley “Princess,” because she was—Mom and Dad’s little princess. Whenever I closed my eyes, I pictured her long blonde hair with a touch of curl at the ends, and her huge green eyes fringed with dark lashes like she’d used lots of mascara, but of course, five-year-olds didn’t use make-up. *Stop it. Don’t think about Haley. Not today.*

Lines creased Dad’s face, more lines than a thirty-five-year-old guy should have. He looked so...old. The dark circles under his eyes. The streaks of gray in his hair.

Last night, I’d woken to the sound of floorboards creaking in the hallway. Someone had switched on the hall light—probably Dad. He couldn’t sleep again. Insomnia must be contagious, because after I woke up, it took me another hour to fall back asleep.

“Bye, Dad.” I heaved myself out of the passenger seat and turned to slam the door shut.

He leaned forward and peered out at me. “Lauren?”

I bit my lip. *Please don’t say it. Don’t say it wasn’t my fault, because it was.* “Yeah?”

“You look beautiful. I love you,” he said.

Truth: Dads, if they love you, will lie about your appearance. I knew this was the case, because two new zits studded my forehead, my hair was a tangled mess, and my clothes had more wrinkles than an octogenarian. “I love you, too.”

When the truck pulled away from the curb, it traveled several blocks before it turned left and disappeared from sight. I was on my own. New school. New life. I didn’t deserve either.

As I ambled to the front double doors, I felt my stomach hanging over the waistband of my jeans like an over-inflated inner tube. I swallowed, forced a couple of deep breaths, and headed for the building, my pulse racing. I'd almost reached the door when the button on my jeans popped off and rolled several feet across the sidewalk. It came to rest beside a guy who leaned against the building, talking with a friend. The guy wore a gray tee-shirt with a small cross logo and the letters "WWJD." I'd been around enough church kids to know what it meant: "What would Jesus do?" Answer: Absolutely nothing. He didn't save Haley.

"Dude, you lose something?" the guy's friend said. He stooped and plucked the button from the sidewalk.

"Don't think so," the guy said. He pivoted and faced me.

For one second our eyes locked, and I thought I might melt like the Wicked Witch of the West, even though nobody had doused me with water. Water was exactly what I needed though, because my face felt like it had a first-degree burn. His eyes—think cerulean blue—made my breath catch in my throat, and then he smiled at me, and my knees turned to gelatin. His light brown hair was streaked with blond strands bleached by the sun, and it brushed the tops of his shoulders.

Do not look at the runaway button. Think chameleon, blend in. Not easy when my zipper was inching downward, and I didn't have a clue where I was going. Ducking my head, I scuttled past the guys and went inside.

Kids clustered in the hallway. Random conversations bounced off the walls. Everybody had somebody to talk to except me. My feet felt like

hundred-pound weights. I pulled the schedule they'd mailed me from my backpack and scanned it. First period, History, Room 110. Luckily, the room was easy to find. Most of the seats were empty when I got there. I skulked to the back row, keeping my head bowed because my face was still warm from the lost button fiasco. Zipper teeth bit into my stomach.

After squeezing into a chair, the kind with an attached desk, a scary scenario flashed through my mind: What if my hips wedged tight between the chair and the desk? What if the teacher had to call the janitor to come and pry me out?

A girl sauntered in wearing tight-butt, low-rise jeans, a stretchy tee shirt and a deep purple pedicure with tiny white flowers on her big toes. Every boy in the room gawked and practically drooled as the girl model-walked her way to the front of the class.

"Hey, Tiffany," a tall, preppy-looking girl said. "Sit here." She pointed to an unoccupied desk next to her.

An easy smile played across Tiffany's lip-glossed mouth. She sank gracefully into the seat and sat reed-straight in the chair, her head held high, and one long jean-clad leg bobbed up and down.

"OK, people, listen up." The teacher rapped a pointer stick against the whiteboard. Then he crossed his arms, still holding the stick as if it were a weapon, and slid onto a corner of his desk, causing a book to thud against the floor. When he looked momentarily frazzled and stooped to retrieve the book, I smiled, until Tiffany shot me a glare that would have withered a plant. In every school, there were kids who thought they belonged to a superior species. This concept was completely alien to me, but whatever. No amount of

deodorant could have stopped the sweat that broke out under my pits.

“This is Room 110,” the teacher bellowed, slamming the book back onto his desk. “American History. If you do not see Room 110 on your schedule, leave. Now!” The guy had a thick neck, deep-set, dark eyes, and he stared at us like a buffalo ready to charge because we’d invaded his space. The overhead lights reflected in the bald spot on the top of his head.

Tiffany glanced at the friend who’d saved her the seat, both of them struggling to hide their laughter.

I didn’t smile this time. With one look, Tiffany had put me in my place, as in, I was not in her league and never would be.

“Nobody?” the teacher said. “Very good. You can all read. That’s a start. My name is Mr. Hazzard. I will call out your assigned seats. When you hear your name, please move.”

Great, assigned seats. This usually meant sitting next to people you couldn’t stand for an entire school year. Plus the hypothesis was about to be tested: Could I slide out of my seat without getting stuck?

Mr. Hazzard droned through the alphabet and when he got to the V’s, and said, “Vanceleave,” Tiffany stood and did a runway walk to the back row.

Not good. Because the odds were excellent the next name the teacher read would be mine.

“Werthman,” Mr. Hazzard said, pointing a stubby finger at the seat behind Tiffany’s.

I managed to stand and move away from the chair without it gripping my hips in a jaws-of-life hold.

For the next twenty minutes, Mr. Hazzard lectured us about the importance of following directions, handing work in on time, and being respectful. I drew

squiggly lines with a ball-point pen, thinking about the candy bars in my book bag, the ones Mom had no idea I'd bought before we left Minnesota.

Finally, the bell rang. My tee-shirt brushed against bare skin as I walked, because without the button, the zipper on my jeans splayed open. I had to do something about the jeans. I felt half-dressed. Ducking into a restroom, I locked myself inside the last stall (people didn't tend to notice anybody there) and dug through the zippered side pouch in my book bag. I found a safety pin and pulled the waistband together. With my luck, the pin would pop open and stab me.

Seizing a candy bar, I tore off the wrapper and bit into a huge chunk of chocolate. As I was chewing, I noticed the graffiti on the stall door, scrawled with a black—probably permanent—marker and intended to ruin the reputation of somebody named Alexis A. The smell alone would have driven any normal person out of that stall in a hurry. But not me. I stuffed my face with more bites. There was something seriously wrong with me. Who sits in the john, a dirty, stinky one, and eats chocolate?

The restroom door opened. Purple toenails with white flowers on the big toes came into view. Tiffany. Standing in front of the center sink. She probably needed to spend some quality time with her own reflection. I huddled inside the stall, holding my breath, hoping she wouldn't see it was occupied.

She turned and I thought she was leaving, but instead, she walked toward me, and I hate to admit this, I closed the lid and stepped up onto the toilet seat, so if she peered under the stall, she wouldn't see my feet. The stall door next to mine squealed open and banged shut, and then I heard gagging sounds. Was

she sick? On the first day of school? People didn't usually have the stomach flu at the end of summer vacation. Something was off.

The retching sounds continued for a couple of minutes before the toilet flushed. Tiffany crossed to the sinks again. A zipper sound. A click, like a make-up case being opened. Finally, she turned and walked out of the restroom.

Maybe I'd stumbled upon a scandal. Maybe Miss Popular was pregnant. Well, it wasn't any of my business. I was glad she hadn't seen me.

Wadding up the candy wrapper, I lumbered to the sink and washed away the chocolate evidence. I yanked out a handful of paper towels, opened the hinged lid on the trashcan, and dropped the candy wrappers inside.

Out in the hallway, I joined the human current heading for my next class, gym. Even that didn't seem so bad, since a sugar-induced high had kicked in. Weaving through the crowded hallway, I hung a right and...Oh, God, the smell. Chlorine. A swimming pool, behind a glass wall, next to the girls' locker room. All that water. Splashing sounds.

My legs stiffened. I couldn't move. I couldn't bend my knees. Someone was whimpering. Was it me? The floor seemed to float out from under me. The lights were too bright, the white tiles too shiny. I was afraid I'd pass out, or worse, puke. When I tried to scream, the sound died in my throat, the same way it had that day. *Run. Now.*

I turned, too fast, right in the middle of the hallway and collided with someone. My book bag flew out of my hands and landed with a *thunk*. A boy tripped over the bag, a girl bumped into him and fell,

causing a three person pile up.

“Hey, loser!” The boy scraped his stuff together and stood.

“What’s wrong with you, Lard Butt?” Tiffany, the second human domino.

Clutching my book bag, I struggled to stand and barreled toward the exit at the end of the hallway.

“Freak!” Tiffany’s voice sounded far away.

My hands slammed against the door and I rushed outside.

3

The exit opened to a loading dock with a parking lot below it. Too bad the dock wasn't higher, because if it were, I could hurl myself off of it. I was an A+ screw-up. I didn't deserve a second chance. I didn't deserve a life. Why did Dad think things would go back to normal if we moved to another state? No matter how far away we'd moved, my memories were still with me. Truth: There is no escape from yourself.

Holding onto the steel railing beaded with raindrops, I raced down the stairs. At the bottom, a row of dumpsters stood off to the side, overflowing with black garbage bags. I slid down next to the last dumpster, sat on the hard cement. Drawing my knees up, I wrapped my arms around my legs. Rotten food smells wafted in the air. Flies buzzed my face. I swatted them away.

I'd caused a scene in the hallway, and now I was cutting class. Could you get a detention on the first day of school? *Way to go, Lard Butt. Nice first day.*

The boy I'd knocked down in the hallway was right about me. I was a loser. I'd been here, what, an hour? And already I'd made enemies, plus probably half the school had seen the "incident" and now thought I was crazy. Maybe I was.

Any second now, the door would swing open and some teacher would haul me inside and escort me to the principal. Or I'd win a one-way ticket to the school

psychologist's office.

Someone pushed the door open, but when I looked up, it wasn't an adult. The WWJD kid scrambled down the steps, his longish brown hair a flyaway mop, the cross necklace fashioned from two silver nails bobbing against his chest. "Are you OK?"

I so did not need this. Me, having a face-off with the Jesus kid. "Could you just leave me alone, please?"

"You're new here, right? I saw what happened."

Hello? Did you not hear me? Go away! I rested my head on my knees.

He crouched next to me, so close I couldn't ignore him because he'd set off my-personal-space-is-being-violated alarm. And then, it happened again, the first degree burn thing warming my face. The I'm-going-to-melt thing. I didn't trust myself to say a word, because there was something about this guy that made me want to spill my guts, like I was sitting in a dark confessional.

"Tiffany's always talking trash about people," he said quietly. "Don't worry about her. I'm Jonah." He shook his long hair back and reached out a hand to me.

I stared at those eyes way too long, and wished I could dive right into them and lose myself forever. Then I looked at his outstretched hand, but I didn't take it. "I'm Lauren. Why are you being so nice? You don't even know me."

Shrugging, he retracted his arm. "We're supposed to be nice to other people."

"Says who?"

He fingered the cross around his neck. "My father."

"Oh, right, God, the all-powerful Being who supposedly wants what's best for all of us." How could

He think death could possibly be what was best for Haley?

He grinned. "Well, Him too, but I meant my dad."

"Leave me alone. I didn't ask for your help, and I don't want it."

"Hey," he held up his hands as if I'd pointed a gun at him, "Just trying to be your friend. Thought you might need one after your hallway debut."

"Funny. You think I planned that?"

Jonah hooked his thumbs into the pockets of his faded blue jeans. "Nah, it was an impromptu performance. You want to talk about it?"

"It's none of your business."

"True, but I think we should go back. Tiffany has a big mouth, and she's probably told somebody by now that you made a break for it."

Right on cue, the door squeaked open. A man wearing a suit and shiny black shoes stepped out onto the loading dock, peering down at us. "What's going on, Jonah? Shouldn't you be in class?"

"The principal," Jonah mouthed to me. "Um, yeah, Mr. Bixby. I was helping a new student find her next class."

Mr. Bixby sighed, ran a hand through his silver hair. "Oh, I see, and her next class is meeting here by the dumpsters?"

"No, sir. I saw Lauren run outside, so I followed her."

"Please tell me you two aren't cutting class."

Jonah smiled. "We're not cutting class."

Mr. Bixby massaged his temple. "If it was anybody else, I wouldn't believe them." He waggled his fingers. "Come on, guys, let's get back inside. I'm sure there's a good explanation for this, but honestly, I already have

a killer headache. Miss Vancleave just finished giving me her version of the story.”

Jonah shot me an I-told-you-so look before we trailed behind Mr. Bixby, his shoes clicking against the scuff-marked floor. We’d almost reached the end of the hallway before I smelled the chlorine, and I stopped. No way. I wasn’t going past the swimming pool.

Mr. Bixby turned. “Lauren?”

Oh, God, the look. The look I’d gotten at the funeral. Mix equal parts of concern and pity and you get the oh-you-poor-kid look. Truth: you can’t escape labels from other people.

Jonah stepped toward me. “I’ll walk her to the office. We both need passes.”

“Not necessary,” Mr. Bixby said.

Yeah, so not necessary. Who did this Jesus kid think he was? My personal savior?

Mr. Bixby reached into his suit coat pocket and pulled out a palm-sized pad of paper. He scribbled on the top sheet, tore it off and handed it to Jonah, then wrote one for me. “You know, Lauren, I thought Tiffany was exaggerating when she told me what happened, but now I’m concerned. Perhaps we should call your parents.”

“No, I’m fine. Really.” I forced a wobbly smile. “It’s my first day and I’m nervous, you know?”

My parents couldn’t find out about this, especially Mom. She’d have me back in therapy before the end of the week. Therapy stank. The last therapist she dragged me to resembled a Bassett Hound. First thing he did was shove a tissue box at me, like crying was mandatory, and then he expected me to tell him—a total stranger—how I felt. No thank you. I was done with therapy.