

DESERT

g i f t



SALLY JOHN



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Desert Gift

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Praise for *Ransomed Dreams* and other novels by Sally John

“This inspirational [story] reminds readers that it’s never too late for second chances. And when our hope is in God, nothing is impossible.”

ROMANTIC TIMES, 4½-star review

“A thoughtful and engaging novel.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“John has penned an exciting, faith-based story. . . .”

BOOKLIST

“Sally John has penned another moving tale. *Ransomed Dreams* asks hard questions about faith and forgiveness . . . but it also offers hope. It’s worth reading to discover the answer.”

CROSSWALK.COM

“John’s story is surprisingly refreshing and completely upholds biblical truths of faithfulness in marriage. Readers of this book will not only enjoy a good story, but they may also learn valuable truths along the way.”

CHRISTIANBOOKPREVIEWS.COM

“*Ransomed Dreams* is another wonderful weave of compelling characters, poignant pacing, and the twin truths that forgiveness is costly but love can meet the expense head-on. Sally John is an insightful, inspiring storyteller.”

SUSAN MEISSNER, author of *The Shape of Mercy*

“Sally John has done it again—interesting characters, exotic locations, and a compelling story line. The unexpected twists in the protagonist’s life left me evaluating the sources of my own sense of security. Thought provoking.”

KATHRYN CUSHMAN, author of *Leaving Yesterday*

“*Ransomed Dreams* is another inspiring story from Sally John that profoundly touches the heart. This novel will captivate readers with its characters, intrigue, and twists and turns. A must-read for anyone who has lost their way and their dreams to discover hope!”

SUSAN WALES, author and producer

“Sally John delivers an intense and emotionally satisfying reminder that our lives can change in a heartbeat.”

ROMANTIC TIMES on *In a Heartbeat*

“Talented author Sally John weaves a web around her readers, drawing them into her characters’ world. . . . Oh, what a satisfying read—one of the best of the year.”

NOVEL JOURNEY on *The Beach House*

“[Sally John] writes an enthralling story with fully developed characters that are experiencing problems that many women of faith face daily. And she does it with warmth, realism, and sensitivity.”

ARMCHAIRINTERVIEWS.COM on *The Beach House*

“Once in a very long time, a book comes along that has the ability to touch hearts, change lives, and inspire hope. *Castles in the Sand* is one such book . . . a profound, inspiring read of a family torn apart and the long road home.”

READERVIEWS.COM

*For Troy and Elizabeth,
now Mr. and Mrs.*

*Give honor to marriage, and remain faithful
to one another in marriage.*

HEBREWS 13:4

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Prologue

CHICAGO

At precisely twelve minutes and thirty-five seconds past ten o'clock in the morning, Central Standard Time, Jillian Galloway's world ceased to exist.

She noticed the time because she was a clock watcher, a habit born of working in radio, where fractions of moments truly mattered. When her mike was on and the clock's second hand swept up toward the twelve and listeners were staying tuned in because they wanted to hear the national news at noon, she wasn't about to introduce a new subject.

But there stood Jackson, her husband, introducing a new subject while at the front door, buttoning his black wool overcoat. An assortment of luggage was at his feet, packed and ready to go. Outside, a cab waited at the curb. Somewhere up in the stratosphere a jet soared, making its way to O'Hare airport, where, in a very, very, very short while, they would board it.

She shifted her gaze from the large wall clock beyond his shoulder and made eye contact with him. "What did you say?"

"I said I'm not going." He repeated the words that simply did not fit into that morning's time frame nor anywhere in her comprehension.

"Jack, what are you talking about?"

With a sigh—the exasperated one he seldom emitted except in the

kitchen when one of his gourmet concoctions failed—he lowered his shoulder bag to the floor. “I can’t keep this up. I just can’t.” A wince settled into the lines around his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Honey, you’re not making any sense. We’re on our way out the door. What on earth . . . ? What can’t you keep up?”

“Us, Jill. Us. I can’t keep us up.”

Beneath her wintry layers of blouse, sweater, silk scarf, and wool jacket, perspiration trickled down her sides. Her gloved fingers ached around the handle of her laptop bag. Her ears burned from the slap of his words, forcing her to let them inside.

Jack’s grimace tightened until his hazel eyes were all but seamed shut. “I’m sorry.” He spoke in his professional doctor tone: soft, gentle, giving an unpleasant prognosis to an unsuspecting patient. “I can’t explain it. It just is.”

She swallowed, gulping around the sudden lump in her throat. “You’re tired. You haven’t had a real vacation in forever. We both need this trip. A little downtime in the sunshine. A little rest. Then we’ll talk. We’ll decipher whatever this is all about.”

“We *will* talk, but not now. I need some space, some serious space.” He shook his head. “The truth is, I want a divorce.”

The clock’s pendulum ticked and tocked, back and forth, back and forth. It carried off irretrievable moments. It divided time into a before and an after.

Jill blinked. She cleared her throat. The lump remained. She blinked again. “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I.”

“Try.”

“I have been trying since I woke up this morning.”

“Since you woke up this morning? So it’s out of the blue, this . . . this . . . this need for space. That can’t be. People don’t wake up and say they want—want . . .” He hadn’t said it, had he? Not the *D* word. Not really. He didn’t mean it.

“Don’t, Jill, please. Don’t analyze. Don’t stick a label on it. It just is.”

His face smoothed, the creases unfolding as if the burden of the prognosis were no longer his to carry. He opened the front door and grabbed hold of her two bags. "I'll walk you out to the cab."

"Jack! This is crazy! I can't leave now."

"Yes, yes, you can. So many fans are counting on you. Let this go for now and focus on your work. You don't want to disappoint them."

"We need to talk!"

"We will. When you get home." He hurried outside, down the porch steps, and along the sidewalk he had scooped clear of snow before breakfast, knowing the whole entire time, with every shovelful thrown aside, that he wasn't going with her.

They would talk when she got home. When she got home.

She wouldn't be home for five weeks.

Jill stood, motionless. Her loving husband of twenty-four years had just announced that he wanted a divorce.

Behind her the clock chimed a quarter past the hour.

PART

one



CHAPTER I



ABOARD A FLIGHT FROM CHICAGO TO LOS ANGELES

When Jill was a little girl, her father nicknamed her Jillie Jaws. He asked, What choice did he have? Not only were her initials JAW, she was also without question, from birth, a motormouth. When air first hit her lungs, she never even cried. She yammered. Yes sirree, Jillian Autumn Wagner always had something to say.

Until now.

Four hours into it and she had nothing to say.

Not that anyone would have listened. The flight attendants had spent more time buckled in than not because of air turbulence. A sullen thirtyish woman in the window seat wore a headset and kept her nose buried in a novel that sported a strikingly handsome Fabio-type on the cover. The aisle seat remained empty.

Of course it remained empty. It was Jack's.

Her jaw quivered. The movement had no relationship to yammering.

What would her father think? Skip Wagner thought the world of his son-in-law.

Her dad? She was concerned about her dad? What about her audience?

Don't even start, Jillian. Do not even start.

But of course she had started, thanks to Jack's introduction of the subject. He had said her fans were counting on her.

Jack was a kind man, a physician in the classic sense. He was a gentleman who wanted nothing more than to help his patients feel better. That he actually said he wanted a divorce was inconceivable. As if that weren't enough, he had added insult to injury by mentioning her fans. Moments later as they stood at the curb, he'd done it again. At the echo of his voice in her head now, she could scarcely breathe.

"You will be all right," he had said. "This trip is about you meeting your fans." He gave her a quick hug, the stiff-armed sort he used for his elderly, frail mother. Then deftly, one hand under her elbow, the other on the open car door, he ushered her into the backseat of the cab as if she were another scoop of snow tossed aside.

"Jack, I'll go later. I'll get another flight—"

"No!" He shook his head vehemently. "No. I must do it this way. I'm sorry." He shut the car door.

Before the driver pulled from the curb, Jack had scurried away, making it halfway up the sidewalk without a wave or backward glance.

And that was that.

At breakneck speed he had detonated three explosions: He wanted a divorce. He didn't want to talk about it for weeks. He mentioned her fans.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Her fans were women who listened to her radio show and planned to read her new book. They were women from across the country who trusted her advice on how to prevent a husband from doing exactly what her husband had just managed to do.

More specifically they were women in Los Angeles who had already paid money to eat lunch with Jill Galloway. They had paid money to hear her speak about how to communicate in marriage. They had scheduled it on their BlackBerrys for *tomorrow*.

Before the cab had reached the end of the block, her jaw quit working. Except for the tremble.

She was supposedly an expert in marital discourse. How did it happen that in ten words or less, with absolutely no forewarning, her own husband had exploded their world with “*I want a divorce*” and then sent her off to the airport?

The scene was so totally out of character for him it made her head swim. The Galloways were the poster couple for a healthy marriage. They had worked hard for over twenty years at keeping it healthy. She had taught on the subject for a dozen years. She had a solid grasp of the ins and outs—

A sharp jab against her arm startled her.

Her seatmate moved her elbow from the armrest. “Sorry.”

Jill nodded and then shook her head and hoped it was a universal sign for “no problem.”

“Excuse me.” The woman pushed the headset from her mane of dark hair. “No one is sitting in the aisle seat. You could use it.”

Jill gazed at the empty seat.

“Uh, are you all right?”

She nodded, shook her head, and nodded again. *You don't want to know.*

“Do you need the attendant?”

Jill's lungs craved air. Her chest felt like it was on fire. Maybe words were piled up inside. Instead of their usual flight off her tongue, they had lumped themselves together and now spontaneous combustion was occurring.

Maybe she was having a heart attack!

Miss Sullen reached up and snapped on the call light.

Jill blurted, “It's my husband's seat.”

“Okaaay.” Her voice rose on the last syllable.

“He's in Chicago.”

The woman's eyebrows twitched.

“And I think he just left me.” Jill unbuckled her belt, snapped off the

call light, and moved into Jack's seat, affirming that he really and truly was not coming.

The burning sensation lessened. Maybe speaking aloud had released some of the pressure. Maybe what helped was giving voice to truth, the hard truth that she was on a plane somewhere over the Rockies and her husband for no conceivable reason was not.

She shut her eyes. She couldn't even articulate a prayer. Where was God in all this anyway? A simple answer was that He allowed this situation for a reason. A reason she could use someday. Something like a new insight to share with other women or like material for a lesson plan.

Her chest went all hot again. The simple answer did not resonate. No way, nohow.

She pressed her fingers against her breastbone. Was it heartburn? Not the kind that plagued her when she was pregnant, but the kind inflicted by such emotional pain it felt like her heart was being seared.

"Maybe he didn't leave you," her seatmate said.

Jill opened her eyes.

Miss Sullen shrugged. "You said you 'think' he left you. If you don't know for sure, maybe he didn't."

"Maybe he didn't." Jill sighed. "Out of the blue he said he wanted a divorce."

"Out of the blue?"

"Yes. The thing is, I can't figure out why he would. I mean, of course I've gone over my obvious, most glaring faults. I talk too much. I drag him to events he doesn't give a hoot about. He wanted four kids but I said no after one. I ignore his parents a lot. I don't cook. I really don't like his office manager. I threw his baseball cards into the trash. It was a mistake—I didn't mean to, but I did it. And I spend an arm and a leg every three weeks for this." She grabbed a fistful of frosted blonde hair. Its carefree style cut exactly one inch below her earlobes remained undisturbed.

Miss Sullen's brows inched upward.

Jill went on. "But that's just everyday life, you know? It's what he

married. Piled up for twenty-four years with no serious complaint out of him, do they create a motive? I don't think so. But what about the big-deal stuff? the stuff that really matters?"

The woman's eyes were wide open now.

Jill slid into familiar territory, her tone confident. "The big-deal stuff is definitely in the plus column. Jack and I talk openly about everything, and I mean everything. We always have. We like each other. Physical intimacy is very good. We attend church together. We go on dates regularly. We spend time with mutual friends. He loves his work. I love mine. Our son is a mature young adult. As far as I know, that covers it. And trust me, I know a lot about marriage."

The brows disappeared behind Miss Sullen's bangs. "You sure sound like you do."

"Well, I've studied it for years. I speak at women's conferences about it and teach it to a women's Sunday school class. Have for years." Instantly her jaw locked again. Her cheeks flushed. The gush of boldness ebbed, like water circling a drain. She heard its sickening slurp.

"So," the woman said, "you're like an expert."

"Um, sort of." The doubts were piling up faster than last night's snow. She wasn't about to explain that not only did she speak on the subject, she hosted a syndicated radio show devoted to it. And not only that—she had even written a book about it.

"Then you know what this is about."

Jill met the young woman's dark eyes, more somber than sullen, wiser than thirtysome years awarded. Her black cashmere sweater did not quite reach the top of low-rise jeans. Her tall boots were of soft leather. Silver bangles clinked on her wrists; a huge diamond flashed on her left hand.

Jill said, "How do you know?"

"My husband is fifteen years older. We met at the beginning of his crisis."

Crisis.

As in midlife crisis.

On any other day up until this day, Jill would have asked the woman a gazillion questions and taken notes. She must be a gold mine of information. She was the prototype of the Younger Woman whose path crossed the Older Guy's as he bounced around in a confused state of dipping hormones or dying career or diminishing whatever.

But right now Jill was not pulling out her pen and pad. Right now she was imagining Jack grinning at a beauty half his age.

"Then again—" the woman slid her headset over her ears—"maybe he just has the flu." She picked up her book and began reading again.

Jill leaned her head against the seat back and closed her eyes. "Midlife crisis and divorce." She whispered the dreaded words as if tasting a kumquat. Their unfamiliar acidic flavor settled on her tongue. Did she have to get used to it?

Tears stung.

I vote for the flu.



Agonizingly long hours later at the Los Angeles airport, Jill greeted Gretchen MacKelvie curbside with a quick squeeze. "Hi."

"Where's Jack?"

"Home. Flu."

Gretchen held her at arm's length. Taller than Jill's five-two by several inches, she was large-boned with long, wavy brown hair and full lips. "Flu."

"Yes."

Gretchen's left eye narrowed; the other flashed neon green. Her ski-slope nose twitched. She had perfected the matronly glare long before she'd turned forty-two. "What's up with the incomplete sentences, Miss Jaws?"

Jill glared back at her. "It's either flu or midlife crisis. I'm going with flu."

“Jill! What happened?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He just didn’t feel like coming.” She shrugged off Gretchen’s hands. “Is that your rental? The security guy’s heading for it.”

“Like I care. Stand still and talk to me.”

Ignoring her friend, Jill rolled her luggage hastily toward the car, calling out to the guard. “We’re here! We’re coming.”

“You can’t park there, ma’am.”

“Got it!”

Nodding, he strode past.

Gretchen muttered to herself, aiming her key ring at the car. “Can’t even park for five minutes. Curses on terrorists everywhere.” The trunk popped open. Together they loaded the cases. “What do you mean he didn’t feel like coming? I just saw him on Sunday. He was looking forward to his vacation.”

“Yeah, well, evidently his vacation wasn’t this one.”

“Is it because of his car accident on Tuesday night?”

“That was no big deal. Few stitches on his head. He put on his Cubs hat and went back to work the next morning. The thing is, he said he . . .” Lockjaw set in again. Jill forced the words through clenched teeth. “He said he wants a divorce.”

Gretchen gasped.

Jill slammed the trunk lid shut. “He got sick. Hormones, midlife gear switching, flu, whatever. He’ll get better.”

“No. Way. You’re spinning this, aren’t you? You’re making it palatable. Next you’re going to say God works all things together for good.”

“Well, He does. Meanwhile, you and I have our own work to do.”

“Jillian Galloway, this is huge. A divorce? Oh, my gosh! Why aren’t you bawling your head off?”

“I already did, somewhere over Colorado.”

“Malarkey. Your mascara isn’t smudged, not even a tiny bit.”

“Fixed it over Nevada.”

“Oh, Jillie.”

“Ladies!” The security guard neared again, making a show of flipping open his ticket pad.

They hurried around to the car doors and climbed inside.

Within moments Gretchen eased the car into the traffic. She sighed heavily. “Don’t you ever get tired of squeezing the lemons? We do not need any lemonade, sweetums. Not today.”

Jill disagreed. She would have said so, but her jaw was too busy forming itself around a wail.