

# SOUTH OF HEAVEN

Treatment for a one-hour comedy/drama series

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## CONCEPT

Summer Bentley's carefully planned life is spinning out of control. While her “Life Calendar” shows she should have a 18-month old girl by now with a baby brother on the way, Summer, 32, can't seem to get pregnant, though her bill of health shows her ripe for cashing. Her job as buyer for a chain of department stores is in jeopardy after a corporate restructuring. And she's just discovered that her husband's twice yearly fly-fishing trips out West were nothing more than covers for his trysts at the cabin in Montana. Mara, Summer's life coach, convinces Summer that the only way she'll ever get over the betrayal she feels about her husband's infidelity is for her to go to the cabin in Montana and confront the reality of the place.

“You need to see it, to absorb it,” Mara says, “You need to own it. There is a car waiting to take you to the airport. Go now.” What no one expects is that Summer falls in love with the place, located just south of a small town named Heaven, and that she never looks back.

“South of Heaven” is the story of a woman starting over in a strange place. Think “Ally McBeal” meets “Ed” under the Western skies, all wrapped in the cocoon of a “Northern Exposure”-like town with a character—and characters—all its own.

The town, originally named “Theaven” after Angus Theaven, the pioneer cattleman who settled the place in 1879, is changing. Someone keeps stealing the “T” from the WELCOME TO THEAVEN sign at the outskirts of town. The main suspect in the crime, real estate agent “Mac” McCaslin argues, “Hell, Ismay up in Montana changed its name to Joe and tourists flock there every year to celebrate Joe Montana Days. When people hear about this place being Heaven, we'll have to beat ‘em off with sticks. We'll all get rich.”

Heaven, like Cicely, Alaska, in “Northern Exposure,” is populated with quirky characters. Young people growing up in Heaven think the world must be flat because once people leave town, they never come back. Located at the end of a dead-end road, the town attracts people who are looking to get away, as well as people who are utterly lost. But the newcomers are never fully embraced as natives, as even those who have been there for a half-century can be regarded as “outsiders” by the locals with roots longer than memories.

Each week Summer emails her journal entries back to Mara, her life coach. Mara forwards them on to a graduate of her life skills program, a woman who now works as the managing editor for *She* magazine. Summer's writing is eventually turned into a monthly magazine column, “Dispatches from Heaven,” and each episode of “South of Heaven” opens with Summer's voice-over as she reads the opening section of her column.

Each episode focuses on Summer's attempts to become her own person, to find her place in the world, to find herself within that place. She learns that what is important is not the kind of car you drive or your credit limit at Saks Fifth Avenue, but whether or not you know how to survive once that car strands you on the side of a desolate road in the middle of the night. It is about love and forgiveness, about finding your own way in a world that doesn't always make sense.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

**SUMMER BENTLY:** Though occasionally referring to her biological clock, Summer, 32, doesn't pass time via calendar. She is smart and thoughtful, yet vulnerable and naive. After giving away the best years of her life to a man who did nothing but take, Summer literally finds herself in the middle of nowhere. On an assignment from her life coach, Summer finds her lifestyle taking a 180-degree turn, from the hustle, bustle and anonymity of a big city to the serenity, sudden familiarity and quirkiness of a small town.

**ALICE FEENEY:** Alice, 35, runs the small library in Heaven, as well as acting as the town's unofficial historian. Alice is afraid of bright lights and loud noises and she wears old person cataract sunglasses over her constant eyeglasses when she ventures outside. Picture a bookish Renee Zellweger, though underneath is a woman that could turn heads and break hearts with a dimple a mile deep. Alice lives for the written word, but she exists between the lines. Alice and Summer become fast friends, enjoying silence together as much as girly gossip. Alice is married, her husband is a truck driver, and she has two young sons. Alice has always wondered what life would be like at the New York City Public Library. In season two, Summer “kidnaps” Alice and takes her on a whirlwind tour of the Big Apple. Alice’s husband tells her to watch out for that city gal, so Alice has a hard time trusting Summer from the beginning. Once they meet on equal footing, however, their relationship provides comic relief and insight into the incredible history of this little town that “until 1992,” Alice says, “wasn’t even on most maps.”

**BARRY “MAC” McCASLIN:** Originally a disbarred attorney from Boston, Mac, 62, dresses in ostrich-skin cowboy boots and a twenty-gallon Stetson, despite the fact that he doesn't know which end of a Holstein to milk. Though Mac is an outsider to many locals who believe a person to be an outsider if they trace back five generations, he likes the idea of outsiders coming into the area because they are used to much pricier real estate, whereas locals want homestead rates. “I wouldn’t be so proud of the fact that my family never went anywhere or did anything,” Mac’s been known under his breath when in his cups. Mac has to walk a fine line because while people don't mind the outside money, they don't like the outside influence. He is after Chance to sell off some of the Parker Ranch as a development. Mac says he wants to make Heaven a place where young people won't have to move away to find work. To this end, he convinces Jakob to front some oddball schemes. Mac is a modern-day land speculator, a snake-oil salesman. And once the town officially adopts the name of Heaven, he can stop prying the “T” off the WELCOME TO THEAVEN sign.

**LIBERTY “LIBBIE” PAGE:** Libbie, with her spiked blonde hair and pierced nose, stands out in a town where conformity and conservatism are still the norm. Libbie, 27, has never been married, but she is waiting for the return of her fiancé, a cowboy, who left one day and never came back. Libbie waits tables at the Four Corners Café. While Libbie and Summer seems like polar opposites, they discover they share many similarities. After a rocky start, the pair find common ground through kinship and spirit. Libbie is hiding from who she is, but at the same time putting out a façade for everyone else to interpret as they please. She is eager to please under the surface, but extremely hard to reach. Libbie has a unique take on what she calls Heaven's “short-man's complex” and offers up her own solutions. Though she's off the mark as often as she is dead-on, Libbie always makes opinions clear. Suffice to say, some people think having “Liberty” in Heaven is overrated at times.

**CHANCE PARKER:** Chance, 38, is a quiet man who favors his right leg when he gets off his horse. The town of Heaven was originally settled by Chance's great-grandfather (on his mother's side), Angus Theaven, when the old man's mule died in 1879 and he figured the place was as good as any to settle. Though Chance is quiet and reserved, he has a sarcastic wit that can bring down the house, literally make people laugh to tears with honest observations phrased in a way that bring honesty and humility together with a turning of a single phrase. Chance runs the family homestead, now a 10,000 acre ranch, while his parents reside in the town nursing home. Chance only speaks “when I have something to say, which ain't a whole hell of a lot of the time.” At the same time, he is a very caring and compassionate soul who is simply trying remain an unchanged man in a changing world. He is strong and wiry, but has “kind eyes,” the rough-edged Libbie notices to Summer. Once deemed “the future of Montana rodeo” after leaving college and pursuing his goal of winning the National Finals Rodeo, Chance lost his love of competition when his closest friend was killed by a rank bull. When Summer, in season four, writes about her rodeo friend, Chance gets some much needed closure, even though the “Cowboy law” is violated by opening up and letting the floodgates release pent-up emotion and hurt.

**JAKOB YODER:** Also known as “Jake” when he ventures outside Heaven, Jakob is 20, a young Amish man looking to test the boundaries. Jakob doesn't necessarily want to leave his Amish roots behind, but he does want to see what the larger world has to offer. Jakob cuts and delivers firewood, plows snow, and does other odd jobs throughout the valley, including building fence on the Parker Ranch. Jakob is a big thinker. He tries several ventures to bring the big-time to small-town America with little success. Not until the end of the second season when what almost everyone else dubbed “another silly Yoder-ling exercise” does Jakob's ambition help Heaven become a bigger dot on the map, and in the process he shows the other Jakob Yoder's of the world to realize that their rightful, honest place is wherever their heart is. Jakob's constant conflict is realizing how his dreams and goals fit into his intellectual horizon as well as his keen sense of right and wrong.

RECURRING CHARACTERS:

**RANDY BENTLEY:** Summer's ex-husband, who works at an investment firm on Wall Street. Randy never cared one way or another about the small cabin he bought in Heaven, it was just an out-of-the-way place for his liaisons with his homosexual lover, Art. Art might become a regular character in season three when he returns to scatter Randy's ashes in the river behind the cabin.

**MARA:** Summer's Life Coach, Mara is touchy-feely, wears her hair in dreadlocks, and likes to hug people as a method of therapy. Mara, though, is not well received in Heaven, when she visits in the second season to check on her long-distance patient. Mara is eventually fazed out of the series after the fourth season, though, after a questionable dalliance with frozen bull semen salesman who is passing through Heaven. Mara teaches us that sometimes the best teachers don't always make the best students.

STORY LINES/EPISODES:

“Pilot”

*(Episode 101) Voice-over* while we see SUMMER step off the plane, down the portable steps, and across the tarmac to the tiny terminal. Blue sky and mountains all around. A man is unloading bags directly on the pavement, baggage claim western-style. But Summer has no bags. She passes under the hand-painted sign that reads WELCOME TO MONTANA, WE LIKE IT HERE, into the tiny cinderblock building.

*Twelve years ago, I gave my heart and my life to a beautiful man, and last week, he gave it back to me in dozen pieces. The man of my dreams had found the woman of his dreams, and she was no longer me. Why couldn't I see all of the tiny falsehoods that added up to the big lie? Why do we need to be needed? I said my goodbyes, to the man I once loved, to the Manhattan apartment with the big closets, and to the lifestyle that I had—at least for a while—adored. I gathered my things and left.*

Inside the terminal there aren't any rental car counters, no airport shuttle buses. Summer, with her designer sunglasses and outfit, looks so lost. She finds a man cleaning up the terminal with a broom and dustpan and asks him, “Excuse me. Can you tell me how to get to Heaven?” The man squints, concentrating, and says, “You need to get to Pray first.” “No,” Summer fumes, “The town of Heaven. How do I go about getting there from here?” The man smiles. “It's twenty miles west of Pray, Montana. The town. Get to Pray and you're almost there.”

There's a young man in chin whiskers and blue knit cap standing near the vending machines, gobbling a candy bar. “I can drive you,” he offers. Summer looks up and down the length of the deserted building. “Or, I think the Ford dealership over to Livingston rents cars on the side, but they'd haveta drive one out for you. My car's right outside.”

*Voice-over. I ended up on Mara's doorstep in Brooklyn. I'm not sure why she wanted to get rid of me so fast, maybe she had someone over, but she told me to get back in the cab and go to the airport. Go and embrace the sins of the past, she said, and only then can you get on with your life's work. All of my carefully planned life strategies falling by the wayside. I was supposed to have an eighteen-month-old baby girl by now, named Elizabeth Ann, and another, a boy, on the way. The milestones that I placed like marbles on a game board, never being attained. And now I'm in Montana, accepting rides from alternative country boys. What the hell, roll the dice and move.*

Outside, JAKOB walks up to a battered green car, holds the passenger door open for Summer. She climbs in reluctantly. The car doesn't start when Jakob grinds the ignition. “You smell gas?” he asks. Summer looks shocked. “I think it's flooded,” Jakob says, “I gotta get the carb cleaned. C'mon.” He gets out of the car, Summer following, and he walks over to a rusty pickup in the far corner of the parking lot. He bends down, grabs a string hanging out of the exhaust pipe, and fishes out a set of keys.

They drive through the landscape, past cattle grazing, mountains hanging in the background, fishermen casting for trout in the river that parallels the road. A highway sign reads ENTERING PRAY, POPULATION 88, ELEVATION 4,491 and below that, another sign with an arrow pointing to a road that takes off to the west announces HEAVEN.

Jakob turns onto the road leading to Heaven and, steering with his knees, sheds his hemp shirt. Underneath he's wearing a pale green dress shirt. In one moment Jakob turns from "alternative" to Amish. Summer fishes into her handbag and comes out with an expensive digital camera. "I was going to take your picture," she says, "for an assignment I'm doing. Can I still do that?" Jakob looks at her, confused. "I mean, it's not against your religion or anything," she asks, "is it?" Jakob smiles and says, "No, it's not against my religion. Are you a reporter?" "Why would you think that?" she asks. "You said you were on assignment," he explains.

*My assignment was Mara's big idea. You must confront the past, she said. Embrace Randy's infidelity. Go to the cabin, see it, smell it, absorb it, own it. As proof I had completed the assignment, I was to take a photograph of me standing in front of the cabin. Only then could I get to sleep without the twin comforts of expensive Pinot Noir and cheap pharmaceuticals. Only then could I move on. It was the only way I could get myself back, Mara said, but now, I'm not sure I know what any of that means.*

"A cabin on the river?" Jakob asks. "There are a lot of them. Do you know which one it is?" "I've seen pictures of it," Summer says, "but I've never been here before. It's my husband's cabin, for...fishing. There it is," Summer says, as they round a bend in the road and see a small cabin set along the river's edge. Jakob pulls down the dirt road leading to the small log cabin and parks. "If you wait for me and then drive me back to the airport, I'll pay to have your carbs cleaned or whatever you need to do, buy you some real dinner. I'll only be a minute."

Summer walks up to the cabin then turns and holds the digital camera up and takes a few photographs of her face with the cabin beyond. Then she walks to the front door and tries the door knob. It's locked. She peers in a window but it is all shadows. Summer walks around back to where the river flows past the back deck. She walks up the few steps and looks in the window of the door. More shadows. She sits on one of the wooden chairs on the deck and watches the river flow past. Something catches her eye. It's the curtain over the window, fluttering. There is a tiny gap at the bottom of the window. Summer hooks her fingers under the pane and it glides upwards easily.

Jakob, back in the truck, drums his fingers on the steering wheel, listening to a pop diva singing about bad boys.

Summer walks through the deserted cabin. It's decorated with old fly rods on the wall, mounted trout, a few sprung mousetraps. There is a small kitchen, a living room, a tiny bathroom, and the bedroom. Summer hesitates at the bedroom door, then pushes it open. There is the a double bed and a dresser and a closet. There's no sign of any women's touches, no forgotten lingerie or scented candles. In the closet, flannel shirts and pressed jeans in plastic drycleaner bags. She reaches out, takes one of the flannel shirts down from a hanger, and smells it.

Jakob turns off the radio and listens. There is only the sound of the river rushing past. He gets out of the truck and walks up the stairs to the cabin and knocks softly. He peers in through the window, like he saw Summer do, then he heads around back. Jakob knocks softly on the back door, then sits in the wooden chair, watching the open window for movement from within. After a while, he climbs in through the window and finds Summer asleep on the tiny bed clutching her husband's shirt.

*Voice-over. I hadn't slept like that since I was a girl, since before school, college, my career. It felt so peaceful and I had dreams of nothing, but all good dreams have an end, even empty ones..*

Summer wakes in the morning. She changes into husband's old clothes and walks north down the road a short distance into town, trying to get reception on her cell phone the entire way. Summer finds a pay phone outside the Four Corners Café. She leaves a message on Mara's answering machine, saying, "I'm here and I took a photo of the cabin, so I guess that assignment is done. I don't know how to get them to you, or if you have another assignment for me or what's going on. I guess I'll be coming back as soon as I can find a ride to the airport." She holds the phone, looking around at the mountains and the sky, and says, "It's so beautiful here."

A late-model pickup pulls up to the café and a rugged cowboy gets out and enters the restaurant.

Summer eyeballs him then finds herself staring at the door to the café and holding the receiver in her hand. She hangs up and walks past the pickup, a small cowdog panting at her from the bed of the truck. Summer walks down the main street of Heaven and stops outside a drug store, then she pushes open the door. An old man stands behind the counter. It looks like no one's been in to buy anything in years. Summer digs into her handbag, then holds up her digital camera and asks, "You wouldn't have a place I could download my memory card and print some photos, would you?" The man points across the street and says, "I think the library has a computer. Alice is over there from two to four every day but Sunday." The clock on the wall behind him reads 10:15. Summer thanks the man then walks down one end of the street and back up the other. Hardware store, Laundromat, real estate office, town hall, post office, library. She finds herself back at the café.

Inside, there is a long table with a half-dozen old-timers playing cards and drinking coffee, making jokes about limp-wristed tourists from back east. "I come around the bend in the river and they're laying out on the river bank and I says to myself, I see rods and flies, but that ain't what I'd call fishing." The others nod their heads knowingly.

Summer watches Libbie waiting tables, wondering if she could do that sort of work. She studies Chance, the cowboy, who is brooding over his newspaper. Summer imagines what it would be like to live here, to have these be your people. Summer walks back to the cabin and Jakob pulls up alongside in a different jalopy and asks if she needs a ride back to the airport. Summer says she's sticking around for a while. She opens up the cabin, lets in the light, gets rid of cobwebs. Summer hears a car pull up and when she opens the front door, her husband, RANDY, is on the front porch, holding hands with another man. Summer's mouth drops open, then she starts laughing hysterically.

Later, Summer is at the library. She meets ALICE and sends an email to Mara and one to her lawyer back in the city. She tells them she is staying for a while, working things out. "It's so beautiful," she says again. "I can sleep here. It's like home."

She gets a job in the café, learns how to clean and cook and take care of herself. Jakob loans her a Jeep to drive around. Summer gets involved in a back and forth

almost-romance with Chance, neither one wanting to make the first move or go too fast, each one re-learning what it means to trust someone with their hearts.

### “Falling”

*(Episode 102)* Summer wears an orange poncho she found in the old Jeep that Jakob lent her, and she wears it everywhere out of fear that she is going to be mistakenly shot by a hunter. She enters the Stockman's Bar and people are dressed up for Halloween. Jakob is there, dressed as a black and white dairy cow, a pink udder sticking from his stomach. Summer convinces him to dance with her. “It's like dancing with four horny teenaged boys,” she says, the teats on the udder poking into her. And Chance is there. He dances with her. “What are you supposed to be, Pancho Villa?” And she laughs. “You know,” Chance tells her, “his dying words were, 'Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something.’” And she uses this in her journal entry. *Say what you mean. Say something, anything.*

Summer wants to fit in with the locals, so one night at the bar, she had signed her name on a day on the calendar, joining a betting pool for when the first snowflake would fall that year. That Halloween night someone looks out the window of the bar and says, “It's snowing.” They look at the calendar and see that some old-timer had picked Halloween for the first snowfall, and everyone is happy for him. But then the bartender says, “It's after midnight, though. It's November first.” They turn the calendar over and see Summer's name penciled in. But instead of making her seem like one of the gang, Summer feels like an outsider who just cheated the locals out of their hard-earned money. She goes over to the small brass bell on the wall and rings it three times, buying everyone in the bar three more drinks, spending her winnings.

*I chose the first day of November because it's the anniversary of another gamble, my engagement to Randy. The snow is falling and I am thankful to be in this place. It's okay if it ends like this.*

### “Small World”

*(Episode 103)* Summer and Chance meet for dinner at the Stockman's Bar and there, sitting on a bar stool, is a JOHN, a midget cowboy. Chance tells Summer to take a booth and he buys John a round and talks to him. When he comes back to the booth, Summer asks him, “You know him?” Chance shakes his head and says, “No, but I have a horse for him to ride.”

At Chance's ranch, a gray, potbellied pony is penned in the corral. So John the midget cowboy goes about breaking the wild pony. Summer and Chance watch from the rails of the corral. “Where did he come from?” Summer asks. “He says he's from up around Havre,” Chance says. “No, the pony,” she says. And Chance says, “I bought him for my son.” This is the first that Summer has heard about Chance's family, besides his parents in the nursing home.

Summer writes about life in the west, her working at the cafe and serving coffee to toothless cowboys, scenes of John working the pony. She is talking about the battles in life, the fights we find ourselves in, those we walk away from.

Libbie and Summer doing work at the cafe after hours, filling sugar dispensers, etc. Summer asks Libbie what she knows about Chance. "He had a wife and a little boy, but they disappeared on him." "What about his leg, his limp." "He doesn't talk about it. I always figured it was leftover from his days in the rodeo."

Scene with Summer and Chance talking (or not talking) about the things they have lost in their lives. Maybe he is teaching her how to ride a horse, going out to check cattle on range. She has lost so much, but gained this new life. More writing, journal, conclusion.

### “Founder's Day”

*(Episode 104)* It's the third weekend in July, time for the annual Founder's Day celebration, when the town roasts a pig, holds outhouse races down Main Street, and does other important things to honor Angus Theaven, the first man to settle at the head of Rock Creek. Chance dreads this weekend, as he is the only one besides his parents, who knows that his great-grandfather stopped and built a cabin here only because his mule died while he was on his way to California.

Libbie buys one of Jakob's junkers, a station wagon, and enters the demolition derby. She paints the car pink and splashes THE BITCH across the hood in purple paint. Libbie prefers to get her man-bashing out in a literal, cathartic way, rather than being passive-aggressive. She tells Summer, “The trick is to put the car in neutral just before you hit 'em, so you don't bust your driveshaft.”

Summer, who is on a romantic collision course with Chance, decides this is wise advice and—putting her emotions in neutral—she backs away from Chance a little.

### Three More Storylines:

*(Episode 105)* “The Bright Lights of Billings”

Trip to the big city with Alice to buy books for the library. Summer thinks the city is tiny, Alice gets overwhelmed. Summer thinks about everything she's left behind.

*(Episode 106)* “Ophelia, Montana”

Shakespeare in the Parks troupe comes through town at Alice's invitation. Summer helps out. Funny scenes as old guys heckle the actors, shouting out to Hamlet, “Who died and made you king?”

*(Episode 107)* “Talking Elk”

Libbie takes Summer to the place where she waits for her fiancé's return, the end of a logging road above a grassy field. She plays elk call tapes in the truck's cassette player and the elk filter into the meadow, drawn by the sound, and Summer thinks she understands. Communication, clearing the air with Chance, starting over with him, slower.