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I got California on my mind I'm leavin' this old town behind...

—“CALIFORNIA ON MY MIND,” MERLE HAGGARD & THE STRANGERS

chapter 1

My new husband was packing and unpacking all of our belongings onto a dirty snowbank. It was the 30th of March, 2008, and unseasonably cold. Even though the sun was brilliantly shining, the temperature hovered around thirty degrees before windchill. From behind our living room window I could hear Dan swearing a blue streak. For two hours I'd been watching him reach in, shove things around inside the car, rip at our bags and throw them out onto the snow, then shove them in again. We were supposed to leave Portland, Maine, that afternoon for a weeklong drive across the country to start a new life in Los Angeles. Dan and four of his friends had already spent over three hours in the wind trying to negotiate our Thule bin onto the top of our car. A few days before, the movers had started out ahead of us with a truck full of our belongings. Now the things we'd earmarked to go with us in our car would not cooperate. There was no room for all our stuff; us; our dog, Hopper; and our cat, Ellison. Something, or someone, was going to have to go. Dan kept coming into our empty apartment to warm up his hands. Every time he came in, I'd say, "Hey, Dan, this isn't working. Maybe we need to rethink, sleep on this and leave tomorrow?" I was starting to get that kind of anxious that makes me freeze in one place and become totally useless. I was supposed to be packing the bathroom, but all I could do was watch my husband and freak out.

"No, Cait, we're going today," he responded. And then he went back outside to yank everything out of the car again and line it all up on the dirty snowbank. I had washed everything and neatly folded and packed it so that we could start out brand new and clean in our new life. I had gone so far as to buy two beautiful boat bags from L.L. Bean, one for each animal's gear. I had wanted to get them monogrammed with their respective names in big embroidered block letters, but Dan said that was a ridiculous waste of money. Looking outside at our duffel bags, CD cases, boat bags, one lone sleeping bag, pillows and books all strewn this way and that, I wasn't sure anything we had amounted to much. And, suddenly, I had no idea why we were leaving everything and everyone we knew.

Dan unpacked the car again and brought the bags and pillows, CD books and CDs all back inside and told me I needed to start throwing stuff out. When he gets like this I call him Deputy Dan. Because he's generally mild-mannered and mostly kind, when he's on a tear, I do what he says. I figure he's taking charge because we're in a crisis and this is what men do; they manage crises. Our friends Molly, Brian and Joelle had come over to say goodbye. They were starting to look a little nervous because, I'm sure,

this whole thing seemed more disorganized and more wrenchingly unpleasant than anyone wanted to be party to.

“Uh, what stuff are you suggesting?”

“All that stuff you’re packing in the bathroom—all that perfume you hardly ever wear. This pillow, this hat, this bag, these books, half of your clothes. They won’t fit. We’ll get this stuff again.”

“But—”

“Cait. I’m serious. In a couple of months we’ll buy all this shit, new. Nicer. Trust me.”

“Are you sure?”

“It won’t fit. I’m sure.” He had a firm but slightly pleading look on his face that was hard to ignore.

I turned to Molly and said, “Hey, want these perfumes?” (One of which was a Christmas gift I had bought for myself when I was eighteen and living in Paris.) I was reluctant to actually hand the perfume to her and, as stupid as this is, I started crying about it. She was standing there like a deer caught in headlights, unsure as I described how wonderful my perfume was, if she should want it or not want it given she was Dan’s friend as well. Instead I started trying to make my cosmetics bag thinner. I pulled out some nail polish and a few cotton balls. Deputy Dan was watching this parsimonious gesture. He walked past me into the bathroom, where I’d been trying all afternoon to concentrate enough to sort and pack our toiletries, and, in one swipe, took out a whole shelf of stuff with what seemed like the longest arm I’d ever seen and then dumped it all into a trash bag.

“We can get all that crap again.” Then into the pile went the straw cowboy hat he got in Texas one spring break from college, a sweater, a few books and some jeans. Joelle put her head down and started helping me sort through our bags like she knew now was not the time to start arguing with Dan. Of course not, because he was acting like a maniac.

Dan pulled out my wedding dress and said, “This is not something you need right now.” Yeah, no kidding.

Molly rushed in and said, “I’ll hold on to it for you.” I handed it over, even though I wanted it to go with us. Dan and I had only been married a few months, and this wedding dress—in which I looked, I will brag, fabulous—seemed like the most important material object to tether me to the lives we were leaving and also the future unfolding in front of us. Molly was getting married in six months and was starting to look for her own dress. Something in me started to worry that she might steal my dress and my whole wedding, even. Let’s face it, she already had my perfume. Everything started to whirl around me like it does when a panic attack is starting. It was getting dark outside and I’ve always thought it’s a terrible idea to start any trip in the dark. Morning is the time to leave places. Our wedding, just seven months earlier, flooded my boggled brain; my dress, his suit, the rain all morning clearing to the most beautiful puffy-white-clouds-against-a-blue-sky day, the wind. And I got this memory, as if I were behind a camera

watching us that day: Dan and I are standing at the edge of a golden, undulating field. The bay by my mother's house is shimmering just over our shoulders, the pine trees bearing witness from the edges of the tall grass. Around us more than a hundred of our closest friends and relatives sit in the late-August light, their sun hats and dark glasses occluding their faces, their dresses and ties blowing in the wind. Dan, always a guy to stand on tradition, says his vows flawlessly. But when it comes time for me to repeat the richer or poorer line, I turn to my audience and say, "For what I hope will be richer!" and then mug for a laugh.

"OK," I thought. "This is what we're doing. We're doing the richer part. We're leaving Maine and moving to the land of milk and honey to make some money because my husband thinks this is the best thing we can do in an economy going south. He says we can replace all these things and he must be right. It's just stuff, anyway."

I let everyone else take over at that point because I was having trouble breathing. Before I knew it, I was sitting with three bags between my feet and Dan was shoving Hopper into the backseat on top of a pile of bags. I heard Brian say to Dan, "We can take Hopper if you don't have room for him" and Dan snapped, "No, he's fine," and then he slammed the door on Hoppy's tail. At this point the Deputy cracked and yelled, "#\$%&!" and opened the door to hold Hop, saying, "I'm so sorry, buddy." But this fissure in his armor was only momentary. A second later, he closed the door, this time with controlled gentleness, Hopper looking out at him, his face vulnerable. Ellison was as quiet as snow in the backseat. Deputy Dan turned, efficiently gave hugs to our friends, got in and started driving. Hopper was panting and tried to get from the backseat to the front to sit on my lap. The darkness fell like a pitch-black shroud around our tiny, rolling universe and I was crying my eyes out. "What are we doing?" I kept saying over and over and over again. What are we doing?