

# PISMO BEACH

My headlights lit up the sign that read “Campground Full” as I pulled in just past midnight. I had arrived at the small beachside campground in Pismo Beach after hours on the road. There was no guard at the gate as I drove through the entrance, looking for a spot to stop and try to blend in. It was the first day of my new life, whatever that meant. A few lights lined the small winding road past campsites with smoldering, flickering flames and glowing embers from the evening fires. I smelled burning wood and salt in the air and saw glimpses of twinkling lanterns as I searched for somewhere to pull up and pitch my tiny one-person army tent. I drove across the narrow road dimly lit by my parking lights and I crept up next to an already occupied campsite near an open parking space. I had to sleep somewhere. My eyes wouldn’t stay open much longer.

I parked the car and told my pit bull, Haley, to be quiet. I used my parking lights to read the small, faded details that would help me pitch the tent. The paper was worn and hard to read. I tried everything I could to make it work. No luck. Frustrated and drained, I gave up and began pulling items out from behind the driver’s seat and stacking them against the car: a folding chair, a duffle bag of clothes, anything bulky that made me unable to completely recline. Finally, the seat clicked all the way back.

Getting caught in a parking space next to someone’s campsite had not been in the plan. The sound of dry dog food hitting the silver metal bowl seemed too loud. Haley inhaled her food, lapped up half a bowl of water, and made a mad dash to the grass area nearby, dragging me behind clinging to her leash.

After draping towels over the front windows, I cracked one back window slightly for a little bit of air, locked all the doors, and covered myself head to toe with a thick cotton blanket. I prayed for sleep to come as I shut my eyes, a canister of pepper spray clutched in my hand. Haley curled up

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in the passenger seat and I began to drift into a slumber, my mind on my daughter, Breea.

### *3 Days Earlier*

It had seemed like the worst punishment in the world to leave Breea, fly home to San Diego, and then drive all alone up the west coast of the US from San Diego through Canada and the rugged terrain of the Yukon Territory and into the Alaska wilderness. I had been warned that a large part of what is known as the AL-Can highway was mostly unpaved. We had arrived four days earlier. I flew her there to get her out of harm's way after receiving a call from the FBI saying we should probably get out of dodge. I wasn't waiting for the risk assessment they were going to do that might take weeks. I called her grandmother and got the green light to fly there, and get Breea settled in and I was going to figure the rest out later. I wasn't expecting those four days to turn into a calling in my soul I could not ignore.

Leaving her at the airport promising I would be back reminded me of the last time I promised I would be back. Only this time she wasn't duct taped in a closet and I wasn't being forced to leave her at gunpoint.

I was about to pass through security feeling her tiny fingers nestled into my palm. I turned to her, knelt and gave her a long, hard kiss on her forehead, and hugged her tight. I didn't want to let go. Was I making a mistake leaving her here with her Grandmother without me? What if she fell apart the minute I left? What if *I* did?

I tore myself away and put my pinky out. "Let's make a pinky promise," I said. A big lump in my throat was choking me.

"Okay, Mama." she said softly.

"I'll be back for your birthday. Pinky."

"Pinky Mama?"

"Yes, angel. Pinky."

We locked fingers. I pulled her close and melted into her.

When I reluctantly approached the gate, I turned to her, waving good bye. Of course, Breea did not want me to leave, but she knew she was safe with her grandmother until I could get back to her.

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“I’ll be back before you know it, sweetie!” I shouted.

“I love you.”

“I love you more,” I said with as much of a grin as I could muster.

“No, me.”

This is a game we play.

“No, it’s me for sure,” I replied.

“No, both Mama. We love each other the same.”

“Okay. You’re right. Both. We love each other the same. The exact same.”

It somehow made our separation feel less desperate and sad and more about looking forward to getting back. I waved and blew a ridiculous amount of air kisses her way. It was July 3rd, five days after we’d arrived in Eagle River, Alaska when I tearfully faced the gate.

I walked along the ramp to the plane, trying to quiet my mind. “What if she keeps having nightmares? What if she gets sick and I can’t get back to help her? What if she gets hurt and I can’t be there to pick her up and put on her bandages?” The what if’s were stacking up.

I boarded the plane, frustrated that I hadn’t been able to stop the evil in the world from harming my daughter and me. I hated that I had failed to keep her safe from *them*. Was I to blame for the trauma that plagued her now? Had I been too busy to realize I was being stalked? Reeling with guilt, I staggered to my window seat. In 13 days, Breea would be turning eight. How would I make her life work for her? How could I make our life normal again?

I rested my head against the cold Plexiglas window and closed my eyes. I had no idea who was sitting on the seats beside me and I was too tormented and confused to care. When the plane lifted off, I stared out over the magnificent snow-capped mountain peaks and gratefully, I drifted off to sleep for an hour or two.

The next day, back in San Diego, I organized a front yard giveaway. It was a veritable ‘Sale of the Century’ with a road trip donation jar for anyone who wanted to contribute to my imminent journey North.

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Hand-scribbled paper signs with the words “FREE” or “MAKE AN OFFER” dangled from furniture, old bikes, second-hand clothing, and lamps in the front yard of the rental we had lived in for a few short months. It didn’t take long for the crowds to arrive and swoop up my old stuff – things that had meant something. Now they didn’t. All that mattered was getting back to Breea. When the sale was over, I would be rid of everything I didn’t want, need or care about.

In the late afternoon, my sister arrived with her husband and their pick-up truck to take some sentimental things I couldn’t part with – the set of China my ex-husband had given me on our first anniversary, the refurbished treasure chest that held my pregnancy diary, pictures of the sonogram and the dress that Breea wore home from the hospital. I stroked the baby blue dress, trimmed with white lace that I had wrapped her in when I first took her home. In nine days, I’d be seeing her again, hearing her sweet, innocent voice, kissing her soft pale cheeks, and holding her.

I went to my landlady, paid her what I owed, and stuffed nearly five hundred dollars in my pocket for the trip. It wasn’t much but it had to be enough. I cleared the last food items out of the refrigerator and threw them in a white and blue mini cooler. Then I grabbed the canister of pepper spray I’d purchased weeks before and put a leash around Haley’s neck. She was a white and brown pit bull my sister gave me so I would have a companion and extra security on the road. If my car broke down, I’d be forced to seek help from strangers. That scared me more than anything else, but I had sweet-tempered Haley who could turn into ‘Fido the Ripper’ at a moment’s notice.

I called my brother Dave. He said he could hear my determination and he knew I was doing exactly what I needed to do – what I was being led to do. Then I went to see my best friend, Kristi. She walked through the glass double doors of an office building and straight to my car parked outside. She leaned up against the back of my compact SUV.

“Are you *really* going to do this?” she asked as she reached her arms out to hug me.

“I *have* to,” I told her.

It was impossible for her to understand.

I hugged her tight, kissed her cheek and I hit the road to Alaska. On July

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6th, as the sun was setting in the western sky, Kristi watched me drive away in my packed Kia Sportage. I watched a magnificent sunset as my hands gripped the wheel. I turned left towards the on-ramp and watched my broken dreams disappear in the rearview mirror as I headed North to the Interstate 5 freeway. I was all alone with my new four-legged companion.

Goodbye old home. Goodbye.