



1

A Passport

I TRIED EVERYTHING possible to avoid my own thoughts on the flight home, and none of it worked. The movie selection reminded me of nights with my grandmother, who loved her basic cable and would happily settle in for any romance Lifetime had to offer. The voice in the meditation app lulled me into a doze, until I jerked myself awake from a dream of my father reading me to sleep with *The Essential Whole Earth Catalog*. The book I'd chosen for the flight was the worst of all, a memoir by an English sheep farmer about his attachment to the place where he was raised. I thought it would help me wrap my brain around what lay ahead. Instead, the author landed a solid punch to my gut within the first few pages. *People who went away ceased to belong, he wrote; they changed and could never really come back.*

I shut my reading app and determinedly launched a game of Candy Crush. I'd gone away wanting to change, and I had,

or at least part of me had. But I'd always meant to come back before it was too late.

The flight attendant handed me a package of Oreo alfajores and I leaned down to tuck it into the pocket of my backpack for Grandma Bee before I remembered there was no one to save it for. Instead, I ate them myself and barely tasted them, staring out over the clouds, concentrating on feeling nothing, not when the Manhattan skyline came into view, not when my fellow passengers broke into applause as the wheels touched down on the runway. I was good at pretending to be tougher and stronger than I was. Not just good. I was a pro.

I was playing my part perfectly when the border control agent unexpectedly broke through my determination to pretend this was just any trip.

"Welcome home," he said, handing me my well-worn blue passport along with my nothing-to-declare paperwork.

Home. I turned away quickly, wiping a stinging from the corner of my eyes that could have been from anything. Dust. Pollen. The sharp itch of my new tattoo, a tiny bumblebee on my upper arm in honor of the grandmother who raised me but wouldn't be waiting to greet me when I finally made my way to our farm in New Hampshire. The farm where I learned that animals were more reliable than people. The farm that gave me the skills I needed to make it in the real world, like focusing on the job even when it's raining so hard you can barely see the fence you're fixing or shaking it off when a cow's just knocked you flat on your butt, then getting up and showing that cow who's in charge. My farm, now. I'd be there within twenty-four hours. Then I could cry.

In Her Boots

With no luggage to claim, I was outside JFK within minutes, shaking off unwanted emotion and opening my eyes wide to absorb the light and set my internal clock for another season. I'd left behind a mild fall in Argentina. Here, the sharp greens of spring had already mellowed into a glorious May. In a minute I'd plunge back into the crazy and head for the AirTrain and then the subway to Brooklyn and my best friend Jasmine's fancy brownstone, but first I needed a little air, even the exhaust-filled version offered by the ocean of concrete and tarmac that surrounded me. At least there were no mosquitoes.

But there were plenty of distractions, and I welcomed them, even the two men yelling at each other over a stalled sedan parked on the side of the access road.

"Why won't it start?" The shorter of the two, and, based on his Wall Street casual uniform of khakis and button-down, the obvious passenger, sounded to me as if he might have asked that same question more than once already.

The other, long and sideburned in the manner of the hipster part-time driver, part-time whatever-else-New York-had-to-offer, stared down into the open hood as though he hoped the answer might be written there.

"I don't know, man. It was fine on the way here." Hipster driver glanced up nervously at the approaching security guard. "This isn't where I was supposed to pick you up either. I'm going to get a ticket."

"You can't stop here," the officer said, taking out her radio. "I'm going to have to have you towed."

Oof. That tow fee would be no joke. I hesitated—this might

be my chance at a far cushier ride into town than that offered by public transport. If I had the cojones to pull it off.

“Why don’t you help him start it?” the would-be passenger demanded angrily. He looked the officer up and down. “That’s what a real cop would do. I don’t know why they let you even have this job if all you can do is call for help.”

That’s it, I’d heard enough. *You see a sexist jerk*, said the voice of the Modern Pioneer Girl in my mind. *I see a teaching opportunity*. The mechanical part would be easy. It was the human element that always made me anxious. But almost twenty years of travel and job-hopping overseas had taught me tricks—like what I thought of as my alter ego, the Modern Pioneer Girl—for overcoming those fears. I’d done it for so long it was almost second nature.

Almost.

Channeling my alter ego’s confidence, I strolled up to the open hood and slid my backpack off my shoulders. “What seems to be the problem here, gentlemen?”

Business guy snorted with distaste as he took me in. Too tall, with my lanky body clad in the nondescript jeans-and-T-shirt uniform of backpackers everywhere, long, faded red braids stringing out from under my baseball cap. Too old, at forty, too wrinkly from the sun. Too not-New York for the likes of him.

I met his eyes with an intentionally blank face. I knew I didn’t look like much. I didn’t look like someone who could rig a sail in a storm, round up a thousand cattle from the back of a horse, or, of more interest to him in this moment, hot-wire a truck when my boss dropped the keys somewhere along the

trail of a six-mile mushroom-foraging hike. I certainly didn't look like someone who would write a book about those things and find myself newly beloved by an entire generation of would-be feminist adventurers—just in time for the life I'd built to crumble quietly into the dirt of the Patagonian ranch I'd had to leave behind.

That last thought made it hard to face him down, this anonymous dude who was probably compensating for some insecurities of his own. But that was no excuse for his behavior. I stood my ground, refusing to drop my eyes. *More people know my name than he'll ever meet*, I reminded myself.

Well, sort of.

He rolled his eyes and stepped aside, taking out his phone, probably to call another ride and leave the driver to his fate.

There was nothing the Modern Pioneer Girl loved more than being underestimated. I joined the driver in looking under the hood. "How old's your battery?"

"Pretty new," he said, clasping his pale hands together nervously. "Plus, I just drove here and turned off the engine."

"Yeah, it's probably not that." Second-most likely thing, then. I leaned in, avoiding the hot engine, and opened the fuse box. Got it in one. Driver guy didn't look likely to have a spare fuse, though, and this was a pretty old car, so there were none in the fuse box.

My eye fell on the security officer, radio in hand, her hair pulled tightly into a bun at the back of her neck, and I knew I had this. I turned to the driver. "If I fix it, will you give me a ride into Brooklyn? I don't care what you do with this guy."

“Deal,” the driver said. “But I can’t leave him here. He’ll screw my star rating.”

“Whatever,” I said, and turned to the officer. “Can I have three minutes?”

She nodded, and I pointed to her bun. “And one of the pins in your hair?”

That made the officer grin. She reached back and handed me exactly what I was hoping for, an open-ended hairpin. “Set a timer,” I said, feeling more cheerful than I had in days. I slid the burnt fuse out, then rigged up the hairpin to complete the circuit, bending it to anchor it tightly. “Okay, try to start it.”

The driver slid into the car, turned the key, and gave it a little gas, and after the faintest hesitation—just enough to allow the business guy to give me a triumphant look—the engine turned over.

The driver cheered, and the officer held up her hand to offer me a high five. “Two minutes, sister,” she said.

I grabbed my backpack. “Can I put this in the trunk?” The driver nodded and opened it as the businessman, avoiding eye contact, hurriedly climbed into the back. “I’ll sit up front with you, okay? I don’t think Smiley here likes me very much.”