

Crossing Borders

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A Novel

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To my mom, dad, and sister for always
having faith in me.

Chapter One



The bright, northern Ohio sun was just starting to peek its rays above the tall pine trees that outlined the barn property. There was a warm humidity starting to rise, signaling a potentially warm and sticky day on the horizon. The front door of the tan metal barn was wide open allowing the fresh air breeze to filter its way down the aisle. The horses were all munching peacefully on their breakfast while last-minute checks were taking place before the big trip.

"Everything's loaded up then?" the somewhat unfriendly but experienced truck driver asked me. He looked gruff on the outside, graying beard and typical trucker hat with buttoned down plaid shirt. Deep inside I could tell he had a kind heart toward animals. At least that was what I was hoping for.

I had spent the last three weeks packing and repacking for this trip so no, I wasn't sure if everything was loaded up or not. I had the saddle, bridles, girths, saddle pads, and all the colorful polo wraps I could find packed into the tack stall in the shipping trailer. This was the first time in my entire life that I wasn't the one hauling my own horse. I was extremely nervous yet extremely thankful to not have the burden of traveling alone.

I had hired someone, someone with border crossing experience, to haul my young Hanoverian gelding across the Canadian border. It was a trip I had been dying to take for several years, but until recently had little to no funding to do. After

saving up for the past three years my dream was finally coming true, and I was nervous as all get out. I would be spending the next three months with Olympic trainer Amy Arnot as a working student. The majority of my tasks would include barn chores, but I would also be receiving lessons from Ms. Arnot on Indie and hopefully on some of her schoolmasters as well.

“Yes, I think,” I replied. Indie, my not-so-patient horse, was the last big item to pack, so to speak, so I quickly walked down to his stall and led him to his awaiting chariot. Indie, a big fan of traveling, was more than willing to hop in and experience a new adventure.

We stepped onto the gravel drive and only took one hesitant step toward the trailer, a chance to take a second to look at the huge rig he was about to enter. Apparently, it met Indie’s approval and with one delicate step he lifted himself into the trailer.

The doors locked behind us and I was alone for about thirty seconds to say a quick prayer over my horse, the love of my life, and wipe away the tears before I stepped out the man door on the side of the trailer. Indie was certainly traveling in style. He had his own box stall with sawdust and would only be traveling with one other horse. That made me happy because Indie was quite the social butterfly, and I knew he would enjoy the company during the eight-hour “flight” to upper Ontario. They would be making two stops along the way. One in northern New York to pick up another horse, and another stop just over the Canadian border for checks.

“We’ll see you there,” the driver said as he gave me a quick but firm handshake. He strode away to the cab of the truck and pulled himself in, filling out a bit of paperwork before starting the engine. It was all I could do not to start crying again. What was my problem? It’s not like I would never see the big brown

horse ever again. I guess it was just separation anxiety kicking in. My mom put her arm around me and offered her reassurance.

“He hasn’t left the driveway yet. You could always run after him and say you’ve changed your mind,” she said. Wishful thinking on her part. She didn’t want me to go but was supportive of my decision anyway. I could see the tears just ready to start pouring out from behind her glasses. This trip was going to be difficult for her as well. She was the ultimate horse show mom and had always traveled with me and my sister to shows, clinics, and everywhere else we went with the horses. I wanted to pack her up in my suitcase and take her with me, but I knew I had to do this alone.

“Thanks, mom, but we’re doing this. Besides, I’ll only be gone three months. I do have a job to get back to, hopefully.” I am a first-grade teacher and had to take some leave of absence here at the end of the school year to actually get my three months in before school started again. My mom was willing to tear down and set up my room for me while I was gone so I could live my dream, which she hoped would be short-lived.

“Alright,” I said with an anxious sigh. “Let’s double check the car to make sure I’ve got all my stuff. I don’t want to have to buy anything while I’m up there.” We walked over to my little blue car and made sure all my pink suitcases were packed in and accounted for. My sister had strategically packed the Tetris of suitcases which I knew I would never in a million years be able to duplicate for the trip home, but that wasn’t really a worry of mine at the moment.

My sister handed me a small package as I closed the trunk.

“Here,” she said. “It’s to help remind you of where you came from and hopefully encourage you to do so much more.”

I opened the wrapping and found a handmade journal. Each

page had a picture of Indie, from his baby years on the farm to his present stunning condition. On the opposite pages were blank lines where I would record everything that I learned, experienced, cried about, and rejoiced about during my trip. My eyes decided to rebel and the flood gates opened. I grabbed my sister in a huge hug and together we cried tears of joy mixed with tears of sadness.

We broke our embrace moments later when I decided I needed to compose myself for my long journey. I didn't want puffy eyes for my arrival at a professional training facility.

I chose to leave my cell phone at home and instead just use the local barn phone to make the necessary calls home to let everyone know I was doing okay. I figured the international charges would become outrageous with all the talking and texting I would want to do from the barn. Besides, I was at the point in my life where pretty much all of my friends had gotten married, moved away, and started families so I really had no attachments to the area. There was no boyfriend that I needed to keep in contact with and my barn friends would stay connected with me through my family. Our barn was just a small family-run barn with only a few boarders who were more like friends than business transactions. Most of our boarders had been with us for twenty years or so.

Yes, we are certainly blessed with some wonderful horse people in our lives.

Together, my mom, my sister, and I walked up to my house one last time to make sure I had not forgotten a thing. I was certain something of great importance might have fallen behind the bed or slipped under the couch, but I did not find anything that would have been of use to me on my trip.

My sister had packed a giant bag of snacks for me to munch on during the car ride. She made sure there was nothing that

would be of question when I came to the border. Although I would be stopping several times to use the restroom due to my cashew-sized bladder, I would not take the time to stop for “real” food. Just a quirk of mine. My patience with people was nowhere near my patience with my horses. Maybe that was why my best friends were four-legged kinds as opposed to the two-legged counterparts.

After a quick early lunch with my parents I said my final goodbyes back in the barn parking lot. I had to keep reminding myself that I would see them again soon. It didn’t really help but at least it was a distraction. I tucked myself into my well-cared-for and well-packed car.

“There’s no hurry to Canada so take your time on the roads. If there is bad weather pull over and if you get tired pull over and rest,” my mom jabbered on.

“Mom, I’ll be fine. Just keep praying for safe travels and all will be fine. Trust me. And don’t worry. If any of those things should come up I’ll remember to follow your advice.” I smiled reassuringly to my mom as the tears started to well up in her eyes.

“Stop, your going to make me cry!” I jumped out of the car and gave her one last big hug. I gave my dad and sister one last hug as well hoping that I could pull this off and make everyone proud of me. As weird as it sounds, I took one last good whiff of the country air and settled back into the car, rolling the window down so I could wave my goodbyes down the driveway.

I waved the entire way as I pulled out of the driveway and said a quick prayer for myself as I headed north to the highway.

“Lord, give me strength. Give my family strength. Let your angels watch over this car and Indie’s trailer and let us be a light to everyone we encounter on this awesome adventure you’ve al-

lowed us to experience. You are so good!”

With that I felt energized and cranked up my Jamie Grace CD as I turned on Judy, my portable GPS system. Yes, everyone names their GPS. Don't act so surprised.

My trip was going quite well. My energy drink was halfway gone. One box of Raisinets were already emptied and I had just opened the trail mix when I decided it was time for my first stop. Thankfully, the traffic was very light for a sunny Monday afternoon. We had been having wonderful weather in the upper 70s and I was hoping that the farther north I would go the cooler it would get. I'm a cool-weather rider. My horse throws off some massive body heat when I ride him and I always tell people it's like riding a sauna. I wear short-sleeve shirts in the 20-degree Ohio winters because Indie is my personal heater. People think I'm crazy but until you climb aboard the steam engine you really have no idea.

After settling back into the car I turned Judy back on and headed toward the highway again. I kept thinking that if my sister were with me she would be snapping pictures with her phone at each state crossing and at all the weird sights during the trip. I was really missing her and the fact that I had no phone to call her to tell her everything I was seeing. Not that the vineyards were all that terribly exciting but to hear her voice would be good enough for me.

Before crossing into Canada I made one last stop and took some pictures with my camera before waiting in line to show my passport and answer all those scary questions about the reason for my travels. Border crossings can be quite intimidating.

I was right about the long lines. It was pretty lengthy but it moved along quickly. When I pulled up to the booth the highly unfriendly attendant took my passport and asked me exactly what I expected.

“What is your purpose for traveling to Canada?” he asked.

Oh my gosh. I knew this question was coming but I started to panic thinking I couldn’t say I was traveling with my horse to ride. I wasn’t technically traveling with my horse. He was staring impatiently at me and I realized it was time to suck it up and give him an answer.

“I’m visiting a farm in upper Ontario.”

“Who is traveling with you?”

Okay, seriously? I’m literally the only person in the car, clearly, and you are asking me if there is anyone else traveling in my car? Yes, you got me. I have them stuffed in the trunk. But I held back the sarcasm and answered politely, “No, just me.”

“How long do you plan on staying?”

“Three months.”

He handed me my passport and motioned me forward into the foreign country. I was thrilled but then realized I had no idea where I was going. Apparently Judy and I were not on speaking terms at that moment either. I kindly reminded her that just because we crossed a border it doesn’t mean her job was over. They still speak English up here you know. Thankfully I had a hard copy of the directions and was able to easily maneuver onto the right highway.

I kept wondering how Indie was doing. My mom’s phone number was listed as the emergency number just in case something were to happen. Oh, I didn’t want to even let my mind go there. I needed a distraction.

I had planned some extra time to stop at Niagara Falls for

about an hour before continuing my trek up north. It took a few swipes past the falls before finding a free parking lot (which was very difficult to do at the tourist trap, I mean natural wonder). The mist was unbelievable and breathtaking and for a moment I had forgotten that I wasn't there on vacation. After securing my car I grabbed the camera and walked to the falls, following the throngs of people to find the best viewing spot.

It actually felt good to get out and stretch my legs a bit so I didn't mind the long walk. I snapped a bunch of pictures and was totally taken in by the awesome power of the falls. It had been years since I was there and I suddenly realized that you can't fully understand God's awesome power when you're that little, but come your late twenties you start to see all the ways your life is so meaningful in His eyes.

After about twenty pictures of the falls I went into Tablerock and looked for some souvenirs. I suffered through the crowds because I knew I wouldn't be back for quite some time. I wasn't planning on buying much but then I saw the cutest t-shirt. It was white with little rhinestone eyes and a rhinestone nose with a caption underneath that said: "Canadian Polar Bear in a snow storm." How perfect for my sister! Our college mascot was the polar bear and she had been collecting odd polar bear things ever since. I just had to get her one.

Flipping through the rack I finally found her size and started heading over to the checkout counter.

"Excuse me?" I heard someone say. At first I ignored the male voice since I certainly didn't look like a local or a salesperson for that fact.

"Excuse me?" I heard him say again. I turned to see a man standing by the same t-shirts I had just come from. Without moving my head I shifted my eyes from side to side realizing there

really was no one else in the area except for me. I looked at him and replied, “um, yes?” Really, what else was there to say.

“I feel really silly,” he started. Good English. Must be American. Was that a racist thought? Nah. I’ve heard some stuff about Canadians and how they feel about us so I don’t actually feel that bad about my thought process. I took a few steps in his direction.

“My sister loves polar bears and I don’t know her size but she looks about your height. Can I ask what size I should get?” Not wanting to get any more information about him or his sister I quickly flipped through the shirts and handed him one that looked like it would fit me.

“This should do it. I guess it must be a sister thing,” I smiled. There I go. Oversharing again. I told myself that was one thing I was really going to try to control during this trip. One of my many downfalls. It’s like an open invitation to start an unwanted conversation with me. Here it comes.

“So your sister is a polar bear fanatic as well, eh?” And there it was. I might have misjudged the whole he-must-be-American comment. The “eh” was a dead giveaway.

“Yes,” good job keeping the answer simple I thought. I turned and swiftly walked to the checkout counter only to realize it was the only checkout counter and my new-found friend was joining me in line. Keep your eyes forward and look annoyed I told myself. People don’t bother you when you look ticked. I learned that from my friend Kathryn.

I was thankful to make my purchase and started to walk toward the door. I threw a quick last-minute glance and smile to the polar bear man, and oh my, he was quite handsome. Why hadn’t I noticed before? Maybe I shouldn’t have been so cold. Perhaps I should have been a little kinder to this handsome stranger. So much for shining my light. Next time, I guess.

Back in the car I had that urge to call my sister and tell her what I found for her. I didn't know if I could wait three months to give it to her. Suddenly sadness washed over me. Again, the prayer slipped from my lips, "Lord give me strength." I could do this and I would try harder to shine that silly light of mine that apparently hadn't been used in a while. I almost forgot how it worked.