

The *Wild*
Woman's Guide
to Traveling
the World

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Guide to
Traveling the
World

A Novel

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STREET

New York Nashville

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*To April, for igniting the spark,
and to Audrey, for fanning the flame*

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chapter one

So I think I'm going to go home."

Elena said this to me as I swigged from my bottle of San Miguel. She wouldn't look me in the eye. Instead, she stared down at her bowl of wiry brown noodles, jabbing at them with the fork she had procured from her purse. The emergency fork should have been my first indicator that she wasn't comfortable in Hong Kong.

"What do you mean you think you're going to go home?" I forced the words from the back of my throat, suppressing a cough from the mouthful of beer that I'd gulped. The bitter aftertaste burned the edges of my tongue. "We just got here eight hours ago. Our flight's not for another week."

"Well, when you were in the shower before, I called the airline and changed my return flight to tomorrow morning. So I think I'm going to go home." She twirled the noodles repeatedly around her fork, watching them glisten, but never brought them to her mouth. It was the most perfect noodle I'd ever tasted, firm and salty, but here she was, wasting them with her mindless fiddling. I wanted to grab the fork from her pale, bony hand and stab her in the eye.

"What about me?"

"Oh, I didn't change your ticket. You should stay," she said.

“You should definitely stay and enjoy the rest of your vacation.” It was now my vacation, not ours.

The din around us at the Temple Street Night Market began to fade and I felt a dull ache behind my eyes. Jet lag was descending. I had expected to spend this meal reviewing our itinerary for the rest of the week. The itinerary I’d so carefully and painstakingly planned. Instead, I was being abandoned by my best friend, seven thousand miles from home. The earmarked guidebook I had placed on the table mocked me.

An overburdened waitress deposited two plastic plates in front of us, each laden with food fresh from the makeshift sidewalk kitchen four feet away. Spicy fried pork piled atop a thin layer of shredded white cabbage, dotted with nickel slices of fiery red peppers. Razor clams heaped with green vegetables, sopping in a thick brown sauce. Steam rose from them in fragrant, gray plumes. A grimace passed over Elena’s face.

“Help yourself,” I challenged. “It’s probably your last chance for a meal in Hong Kong.”

The fork stood upright in her bowl, tangled in the cooling noodles. Her hands were clasped around the purse in her lap, signaling that she was done with this meal. I picked up my chopsticks and pinched a narrow, tubular clamshell from the serving dish.

“What is that?” she asked, recoiling slightly, the clam a potential threat to her well-being.

“It’s a fucking clam, Elena.” I tore the chewy flesh from the shell with my chopsticks and popped it in my mouth, getting a

burst of sweet fishiness as I bit down. "Why don't you try one instead of sitting there feeling sorry for yourself?"

"Why are you being so cold to me?" she said, her face twisted in disbelief, as if my aggression had been unprovoked. We'd known each other since grade school, but her Little Miss Innocent act still managed to astound me.

"As soon as we buckled ourselves in on the plane ride over here," I said, "you started crying about how much you miss Roddy, and you haven't let up since. I planned this whole trip for us, and now you're ditching me without even giving it a chance."

"If you were in love, you would understand."

My eyes reflexively rolled to the back of my head. "Is this what love is? Being so obsessed with someone that you can't be apart from them for a few days to have fun with a friend in a new country?"

"When it happens to you, you'll see," she said, turning her nose up. I expected her to storm away in her usual theatrical fashion, but I could see in the way her eyes darted that the crowd was intimidating her. She was too afraid to get up from this table and take the subway by herself back to our hotel in Wan Chai. So I held her hostage while I ate, taking my time to savor the flavors before me, the meal that I'd looked forward to for so long. Hong Kong had a reputation for delectable street food; at least one of us was going to enjoy this once-in-a-lifetime experience.

It was my own fault, really, for suggesting that we go away together. Elena rarely left the tri-state area; her idea of an exotic

getaway involved tanning on the Jersey Shore. I, on the other hand, was on a mission to fill my passport with as many stamps as I could. I'd stood atop the Eiffel Tower, I'd sipped warm Guinness in a Dublin pub, I'd sunbathed on the balmy beaches of Ibiza—and I'd done it all alone. As a traveling IT consultant for an international firm, I'd found myself on the Tube in London one week and soaking up the sun in LA two weeks later. There was no denying that I had the travel bug. Life on the road was so much more interesting than staying at home in New York.

So when Elena came to me two months earlier, devastated by her breakup with Roddy, I took her out for an exorcism by alcohol and told her that a trip was what she needed to clear her head. And this time, we should go on vacation together.

"It'll be great," I said, still tasting the sweetness of the Jägerbomb on my lips. "We'll sightsee and shop and drink and eat all this awesome food. And pick up hot foreign guys! Let's do it!"

"I don't know, Sophie," she said. Her eyes were swollen from hours of crying and were growing increasingly glassy with each shot she threw back. "I don't even have a passport."

"We'll get you one; that's not a problem at all."

"There's no way I could afford it. Not all of us can be a big-shot IT consultant with a fat paycheck like you, Soph. I'm a receptionist. I'm not exactly rolling in dough."

"Then you don't have to worry about the plane ticket," I said, unwilling to take no for an answer. "I've got plenty of frequent-flyer miles. It's my treat!"

She smiled for the first time that night. "Really?"

"Of course!" I squealed, the booze turning up the volume on my enthusiasm. "I'm going to book this now before you change your mind and chicken out."

Three weeks later, she and Roddy reconciled and started talking about moving in together. I felt that the makers of Jägermeister now owed me a refund for the 120,000 hard-earned frequent-flyer miles I'd blown on her plane ticket.

Looking back on it, I should've planned a weekend in Miami or Vegas, someplace closer to home and more familiar for her. Someplace where the restaurants laid a fork on every table. To be honest, I wasn't really thinking about what would be most comfortable for Elena when I booked those tickets. Hong Kong had been next on my list of places I wanted to visit, and her breakup just happened to coincide with a trip I was already planning to take. My first vacation that wasn't incidentally tacked on to the end of a business trip.

But I also wanted to give her the opportunity to see something different, to introduce her to new experiences, to show her there was more to life than Roddy and New Jersey. So far, she'd lived a very sheltered life; she still lived at home with her mom, still slept in the same bedroom in which she'd grown up. Meanwhile, I'd struck out on my own and moved into the city. It had been so long since we'd spent any quality time together. I thought a foreign country would be the perfect place for us to rekindle our bond. Now, as we glared at each other over these Chinese delicacies, I realized I had made an error in judgment.

Elena pursed her lips. "You travel alone all the time. I don't see what the big deal is."

“Yes, I travel alone all the time, but this was something we planned together. A girls’ trip. I wasn’t expecting to be on my own here.” I tore into a pork chop, the peppery juices stinging my soft palate, trying not to think about all the business trips I’d have to go on to recover those lost frequent-flyer miles.

“I thought you’d be happier this way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She tossed her long blond hair over her shoulder and took a deep breath. “It’s clear I’m annoying you. I’ve been annoying you all day. I’m sorry I’m not comfortable here, but I’m not into traveling like you are. You’ll have a better time without me.”

“I really want us to have a good time together,” I said. And despite that momentary fantasy about gouging her eye out, I meant it, sincerely. “I think if you just let go and forget about Roddy for a minute, you’ll be able to relax and enjoy yourself.”

“I don’t want to forget about Roddy!” she cried. “I feel empty without him, like part of me is on the other end of the earth.”

Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes and her fair skin flushed pink. Her display of melodrama elicited no sympathy from me.

“For God’s sake, Elena, two months ago, you swore you’d never speak to him again. Now you suddenly can’t live without him? This seems like the definition of a dysfunctional relationship.”

She broke out in a full-force sob, salty streaks streaming down her splotchy cheeks. The waitress gave a sideways glance as she hurried past us with a stack of empty bowls. I covered my face with my hands, embarrassed to be a part of this performance.

"When did you stop being my friend?" she wailed. The couple at the table next to us paused their meal to gawk at the spectacle we were creating, the chopsticks in their hands suspended midair.

"Would you please stop making a scene?" I muttered this quietly, trying not to make eye contact with her, hoping that my body language would send the message to onlookers that I was not a willing participant in her tantrum.

"Oh sure, Sophie, let's not make a scene!" she said, waving her arms about in a very scene-making gesture. "That is so typical."

"Typical of what?"

"Typical of you!" she spat. "Controlling and judgmental. You have no emotions, no passion. You don't understand how I feel because you don't even know how to love someone! And no one could ever love you because you're so closed off and miserable!"

I reached inside my wallet and threw a wad of cash on the table, a rainbow of strange bills. I had no idea how much it was, if it was even enough to cover the cost of the meal. I had no time to convert the currency; I just needed to get away from her.

"I'm sorry you feel that way." I chugged the last of my San Miguel, snatched my guidebook off the table, and pushed my way out through the tent and into the tangle of people beyond.

"Sophie, I'm sorry! Please wait!" I heard her call behind me, but I was busy weaving among a pack of moving bodies, trying to lose her in the floodlit night. "I don't know how to get back to the hotel!"

Passionless. Closed off, unlovable, and miserable.

"Figure it out!" I yelled over my shoulder, and stalked

through the narrow aisles of the market, past tables piled high with plastic trinkets and irregular counterfeit T-shirts. I fumed, hoping she'd get lost trying to make her way back to the hotel. Perhaps I was being cold and spiteful; maybe Elena was right about me. Then again, I wasn't the one who'd secretly booked an early flight home while my unsuspecting friend was shampooing her hair.

It was hard to imagine that after all these years, our friendship was now deteriorating thousands of miles away from Garden Avenue, the tree-lined New Jersey street on which we'd grown up together. It was true we'd drifted apart in recent years, with me constantly traveling for work, and her relationship with Roddy taking precedence above all else. But I hadn't realized exactly how different we'd become. I felt like we didn't even know each other at all anymore.

If Elena really thought I was cold and emotionless, though, why did she even agree to come to Hong Kong with me? Considering our history, everything we'd been through together, her attack seemed vicious and, frankly, untrue. I had always been there to support her. The day her father packed his boxes and moved out of their house, I sat with her for hours in my room, reading *Seventeen* magazine on the pink bedspread, pretending that we couldn't hear the rumbling of the moving truck down the street. On prom night, I held her hair back as she hung her head out of the open limo door, the effects of too much blackberry schnapps splattering in the gutter. Lately, our only interactions had consisted of me listening to her mourn each of the breakups she'd endured with Roddy—three breakups in three years. After this, I didn't intend

to be around for the fourth.

The night was still young, and I didn't intend to waste it seething about Elena, or worse yet, watching her pack her bags back at the hotel. Feeling suddenly energized, I slipped into an alley and opened my guidebook to the "Nightlife" section. Near the top of the list was Lan Kwai Fong, a district packed with bars and clubs, popular with tourists and locals alike, described as "a party in the streets." It seemed like it might be a good place to find company on what had turned into a solitary Saturday night in a strange town.

As I ducked into the entrance of the Jordan subway station, a sour gust of air rose up from its depths and washed over my face. I breathed it in, immersed in the unfamiliar sensation of this bustling city. Even if Elena was right, even if I was unlovable, in that moment I thought I didn't need to be loved. I was Sophie Bruno, international adventurer, and tonight I was flying solo.