



THE CHOICE
SERIES

Short Story

HOLLYWOOD

DESTINATION

Los Angeles

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Destination Los Angeles
Short Story: The Beginning

~ The Choice ~

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CHAPTER ONE

"What if we could do this all the time? And get paid for it?" Ann Mathison dreamily asked as she pulled her floppy hat down farther over her eyes. She sunk deeper into her floating chair, one leg dangling into the pool.

Her two best friends, Liz Cohen and Kate Hendricks, floated by.

"I'll drink to that," Kate held up her pina colada in salute.

A small grunt was all she got out of Liz, who looked like she was more asleep than awake.

The three had been the best of friends since college when they were assigned to a project together for Mr Erikson's marketing class during their sophomore year. They rented an apartment junior and senior year, and steadfastly had made it a requirement that no matter where they were in life, where they were in the world, they would always have one glorious week together every year at some exotic location to celebrate their friendship. This year was no exception.

Ann had found this resort in Bali, and their cabanas were phenomenal. They were palatial, the exact thing three forty-somethings needed to relax and rejuvenate after the intense few months they all had before.

"I'm serious guys." Ann sat up a bit straighter, adjusted her hat to look at her friends.

Ann was the dreamer. She was the idea generator. She was the one they could always count on to keep life interesting. She was the one who treated her two best friends to skydiving for their twenty-first birthdays. She was the one that booked a surprise African safari "just because". Whenever Ann was in charge, the others knew they were in for the time of their

lives; she never disappointed.

“What if we could make a living out of traveling the world?”

“Really Ann, can’t we just take a break here? I just want to work on my tan, sleep, and drink. I don’t get much time to do that the other fifty-one weeks of the year. Why can’t you just make dinner reservations or something?” Liz smiled at Ann over the top of her sunglasses. Though she tried to sound annoyed, she knew Ann wouldn’t pay any attention. Once she had an idea, you might as well listen to what she had in mind.

“What do you propose, we just ask people for money and say we’ve given up on life, we just want to travel the next year of our lives, would you help pay for it? Like we could get a lot of people willing to do that,” Kate mocked her at the thought.

“And on that note, my glass is empty. Everybody ready for a refill?” Kate was already sitting up, using her hands to guide her raft.

“Right behind you,” Liz flipped over and began paddling.

Ann followed along.

With empty glasses in hand, they all floated back to the center. Because the resort only had a dozen cabanas, there were only a handful of other guests on site. And today, the others were all out touring or shopping or whatever you did in this part of the world. So they were lucky enough to have the entire pool to themselves. Minus the bartender who was ready and waiting for their every demand.

Glasses full, they resumed their tanning positions.

"No really, what if we started up a travel magazine that went beyond the average touristy things you find in most of the ones on the market today. I'm talking articles that focus in on personal experiences, how you blend in with the culture, how you connect with the locals and become a part of the community, even if it is just for a week or two." Ann brainstormed, adding in details as they came to mind.

"You know how many people are doing that these days? A lot. They don't want the week long vacation where all you do is run

from dawn to midnight indulging in everything the brochures tell them to do, buying every trinket to bring home as a souvenir, only to wind up back home more exhausted than ever. I'm talking about the people who want to see the realness behind the city. They want to eat where the fisherman brings in the best fish from their daily catch. They want to shop where the locals know they can get the best deals. They want to experience the best the world has to offer. They want to speak the language, even if it is just for a week or two. They want immersion. They want the insiders guide to how to live life to the fullest." Ann was on a roll, and both Liz and Kate knew not to stop her.

"I read an article in *The New York Times* just the other day about a company that provides experiential travel for its clients," Kate piped in. "They cater to women over the age of forty who want to travel safely alone or in groups, who want to do things they haven't done with their families. It talked about several upcoming tours. One of them was a cooking trip through France, Italy and Spain. They get the first-hand experience with chefs in each location, teaching them culinary skills that are widespread throughout the region. I know the other was biking through Amsterdam, but I don't remember much about it, or what the other tours were either. I guess if the experiential travel

concept is in the *Times*, it's definitely growing in popularity."

Kate was an expert on everything content; she always had just read a story on whatever you happened to bring up. But this time, Ann sat up and took note. "See, I'm on to something here. Admit it, guys, I am."

"Okay, it does sound like a good idea. But Ann, we all have great jobs. We all have lives. We live in different cities for crying out loud! Like we're going to give everything up, move in together, and start a business? Really?" Liz rolled her eyes.

"My plan might not be perfect. Yet." Ann swirled her drink around, watching the ice clink against the side of the glass.

"I know. Maybe it'd be a way to get you both back to L.A. You know I miss you guys. I've been telling you to come home forever." Liz knew she'd do anything to get her two best friends back into her life on a regular basis. They'd all grown up in Los Angeles, had family there. They met at University of California San Diego. And after many years together, they'd been apart the past few as job and life priorities had changed.

Ann thought about her current employer in Chicago. She'd been grateful for the opportunity five years before. It allowed her to follow the love of her life, Brian, who had accepted a finance position in the windy city. Yet Brian had blown out of her life two years before, and all she had left in Chicago was her work. Okay, maybe a few friends. But she rarely had time for anything outside of work.

Kate had followed her husband, Peter, to Seattle three years prior. Kate was lead content writer for a major clothing manufacturer. She loved the industry, did her job well. But the company's sales had been down for the last three quarters, and lay-off rumors were always floating around in the background. And a bitter divorce the previous year had left her desiring a life change more than she cared to admit.

Ann's mind was working overtime. She knew her idea had potential. And she could tell by the look on her friends' faces, her idea wasn't all that bad. "We have the experience. We do this kind of stuff every day in our jobs. And let's face it, none of our jobs are that great anymore. Right?" Ann looked to her friends for confirmation. They had Skyped more than once just to vent anger and frustration.

"A life change. That could be good. I definitely would be up for that." Kate had wallowed in self-pity for far too long. She'd loved her husband, thought her life had been perfect. Until he announced he had to "figure things out," and "figuring things out" simply didn't include a wife.

They talked about other travel magazines on the market. They discussed about what was missing. And the more they talked, the more they started to listen. Because all three of them knew, there was nothing like that out there. They all had purchased their share of travel magazines; it's what gave them inspiration on their worst days. It's how they all came up with ideas for their yearly travel meetings. And of course, when they each traveled alone as well.

But all other travel magazines focused in on how to be a tourist, how to experience things as an American in another place, not how to experience things as if you were part of the culture you were visiting.

"Why not?" Ann smiled, knowing full well this was one conversation that wasn't over.

CHAPTER TWO

The next morning Ann met the other two in the cafe for breakfast at nine. What she didn't tell the other two as they walked up is that she had been up and in the business center since it opened at six.

"Okay, let me ask you guys a question. How do you think people will travel differently in the next five years? What would you say is the biggest growing travel niche right now?"

"Ann, you're still on that? Why don't you give it a rest already? We're going hiking today. I signed us all up for that five-hour tour that takes us deep into the forest, to be one with nature and the animals." While Liz knew Ann would never let go of her new idea that quickly, she had been looking forward to

this tour since the day they got here. "Honestly, I really am looking forward to this trip today."

"Okay Ann, why don't you give us the answers to your questions while we finish our food. The van doesn't leave until ten, so we'll listen to what you have to say. Then no more talk about it while we're hiking, agreed?" Kate always tried to keep the peace.

"Fine. But you guys, I know we're on to something here. I found this article that talked about the future of the travel industry. Travel, just like every other industry, is going through massive changes right now, thanks to the Internet. Travel agents are losing their jobs left and right. Travel companies are shutting down every day. Even some of the major travel magazines we grew up with are either radically changing or closing up shop forever.

"But that doesn't mean travel is going away; it only means the concept is changing. The more intimate you can make the experience, the more in demand you'll be. The more you can learn about a culture before you go, the more you'll understand how the locals live once you're there. Look at Rick Steves. He's

been filming his insiders guides to Europe for years, but he's been reinventing himself, and his business is bigger than ever. In addition to his shows on television, he sells gazillions of travel books every year to people who not only are going on trips and want an insider's perspective, but also to armchair travelers who use it to learn more about Europe, yet have no intention of visiting it in person. He's also recently started a tour company, that goes beyond the typical touristy things you'll find in the cities, and bypasses them to go to unique venues that give you a better flare for the culture of a region."

Liz looked at Ann through curious eyes. "Just where did you get all of this information? Did you sleep last night?"

Ann closed her eyes, waiting for her friends' response as she said, "I got up early and worked at the business center."

"Ann!"

"I know, I know. I just couldn't help myself."

Ann continued. "So let me tell you about the other trend

that's growing right now. It's called slow travel. You may have heard of the words *nomads*, *long-term travelers*, and *expats* to a certain extent. These people don't want the standard one or two-week vacation. They want long term. I've read about people that save up money, get rid of their houses, quit their jobs, and leave for an entire year to experience the world. Some come back to their old lifestyles after a year, albeit completely changed. And some never return at all, finding ways to finance their dreams of traveling the world thanks to Internet businesses.

"I'm telling you, experiential travel is the way of the future, a multi-billion dollar business. Especially as our concept of working changes, which we all know it is. How many of us have the benefits packages we did a few years ago? How many of us have any guarantees we'll even be working for the company we're currently with tomorrow? We have high unemployment, even higher underemployment. The world is changing so quickly; there's no way we can keep up with it all. As we start to realize this as a society and put new employment concepts into our lives, more of us are going to realize we can travel anywhere, work from anywhere, and enjoy any lifestyle we choose.

"The three of us may not be at that point yet. After all,

we've all worked for a living forever. But what if something changed overnight, and we all went back to find we no longer had a job anymore? Then what?"

Kate voiced her concern. "You both now I've had a rough year, with Peter leaving and all. I haven't even talked much about my job. The last three quarters have been tough, sales are down considerably. We've had consultants in the office making recommendations on where to cut, where to save. Several jobs underneath me have been eliminated altogether. And I'm worried that if things don't improve, those layoffs you talk about could happen to me. Content writing is definitely an area that's easy to outsource. Then what would I do?"

Liz touched her friend's shoulder, understanding her concerns. "You know I've reached a plateau with my own job. And I'd be lying if I told you it didn't bother me. I've dreamed about more. I've tossed around the idea of starting my own business. But it's a scary world out there. I'm not sure I want to throw away a twenty-year career away at the moment."

Liz was VP of an ad agency that worked on some of the most well-known restaurant accounts across the US. And while Liz

loved her job and did very well at it, it always bugged her that she would never be number one. The company was privately owned, and she knew her boss, the president, was grooming his twenty-five-year-old son to eventually take the wheel.

Ann seized the opportunity once more. "I'm telling you; I'm on to something here. I can feel it. And besides that, I'm ready for a change. Guys, I really think this is something, would you at least consider it?"

Kate and Liz looked at each other, then looked back at Ann.

"Okay, I hear what you're saying and I agree, it does have its merits," Liz conceded. "I don't know if I'm ready to leap into the world of entrepreneurialism just yet. But I'll think about it, okay? We have today and tomorrow, and we head back to civilization the day after. Can we just relax for those two days and I promise I'll do my own investigative work once I get home, and we can all talk together in a few days?"

Kate piped up. "I've been through hell this past year. I don't know what I want or what's important to me anymore. But I do know that I'm up for change. I've lived through a lot of pain

and am only recently starting to see the light again. You know I would do anything for the two of you. So I'm in. I'll pull a few strings, read all I can, and do some research too when I get back. Then we can all chat a bit more in a week or so. Deal?"

Kate looked at her two best friends for agreement.

"Deal." They put their hands together in the middle to form a pact, something they had done since college.

"But for now, let's just enjoy the rest of our time together, no work, just nature, drinking and a few more sun rays."

Ann laughed. "Okay I get it. You want to relax. But you know me, always the idea person. And you wouldn't want me any other way."

"That's for sure," Liz hugged Ann close as they began walking up to the lobby to meet their tour guide. She pulled Kate under her other arm. And together the friends felt their connection once again.

CHAPTER THREE

Wednesday morning, three days back from vacation, Liz texted her friends.

Liz: Skype tonight, I need you.

Ann: Are you okay?

Liz: Yes, don't worry, but need your advice.

Ann: Okay, how about 6?

Kate: Works for me.

Ann: Works for me.

Liz: See you then.

Ann was a little worried. Liz wanted to chat this soon after their vacation? She hoped everything was okay.

The day flew by. Ann was marketing director for a small food distribution company, and even though she loved her job, it was anything but challenging. The head of the company was happy with their current direction and didn't want to grow too quickly. That meant for Ann, her job was all about keeping everything running the way it always did, rather than reaching out for new opportunities. She could almost do her job in her sleep, so she had plenty of time to continue exploring her new idea on the side. And since she was talking with her two best friends, she wanted to come armed with new ideas in case the direction turned towards her crazy idea.

Ann rushed into her apartment a little before six, her favorite take-out food in hand. She placed everything on a plate, poured a large glass of wine, settled in behind her computer and pulled up Skype. Kate always initiated the call, so she dug into her food while she waited.

"Hi everyone, long time no see," Kate smiled as all three screens popped into view.

Ann immediately sensed something was up with Liz. Her eyes were red. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, something she

never did unless she was working out. She looked like she hadn't slept in days. And for Liz, the polished one of their group, that wasn't okay. "Spill it. I can see something wrong."

Liz put her hands on her forehead, leaned her elbows on the table. "I was fired."

"What!" Kate and Ann shouted in unison.

"Liz, I can't believe that, you're the best! You always say how much you love your job. How could they do that?" Ann felt terrible for Liz; she knew how much that job meant to her. At the same time, she knew there had to be more to the story.

"I knew something was up the moment I got to the office on Monday. I asked around, but nobody seemed to know what was up. Mr Pitkins was behind closed doors; he didn't even ask to see me, which is par for the course when I get back from vacation. So I sat around almost all day, working on old files, wondering what was happening. The tension was so high you could cut it with a knife. Everyone around the office was on pins and needles; to say nothing got done was an understatement." Liz reached for her glass, took a sip of water.

"When he finally called me into his office, I knew it wouldn't be good. He had this look on his face, you know?" Liz squinted, recalling his expression. She shook her head. "So anyway, I sat down, and he told me that while I was away, he had sold the company. His wife recently was diagnosed with breast cancer for the second time, and he wants to spend whatever time left with her, enjoying life rather than working twenty-four hours a day. His son doesn't want to take over the company, wants to pursue other things. Mr Pitkins has spoken with the new owners on more than one occasion, and when they approached last week with an offer, he jumped at it. It's a quick sale, but it's more than enough, supposedly, to keep him happy for his life and beyond. So he's gone. He's out of there at the end of this week. He'll do some consulting from time to time through the transition, but otherwise, the new management team starts on Monday."

Liz leaned back in her chair, a frown returning to her face. "And of course, they don't want the old management team in place. So Bruce and Dan and I all got the axe. He's giving us all pretty good compensation packages and the highest recommendation for finding another job, but that's it. I'm gone."

I don't have a job anymore." She pounded the desk in front of her.

"I went in today to clean out my desk and say goodbye to everyone. I'm in shock. I can't believe it. Now what?" Liz lived and breathed her job. And just like that, it was over. She looked at her friends morosely.

"Oh, Liz, I'm so sorry. I know how much that job meant to you." Ann truly could feel her pain.

"You're going to be okay, I promise you." Kate was always the strong one. "After all I've been through this year, I can tell you that everything will be okay, and we'll be here for you every step of the way."

They chatted for a few more minutes, letting Liz vent her anger over the entire situation. She went back and forth between anger and sadness; it was hard to keep up with her mood swings. Yet it was entirely expected after everything she had been through.

Finally, Liz breathed in deep, grateful her friends'

silence and understanding. "Thanks guys."

Ann could see she felt a little better, at least for the moment. "Feeling any better?"

"Much. Thanks for letting me get all of this off my chest." Then Liz looked straight at Ann. "Okay Ann, I know you're dying to say it. Tell me how now is the perfect time to start that business."

"I don't want to push that on you now. I know you need some time to process this first before we continue down the road with this magazine idea. I'll let you think about it more before I push that again."

Then it was Liz's turn to shock Ann. "Actually, I've been giving it some thought. I know I'm not ready to make any huge commitments yet, but all afternoon, the only thing I could think about was the riskiness behind working for someone else. I had no control whatsoever. My boss decides to sell, and I'm out of a job. How shitty is that? I'm forty-two years old. I'm not saying I'm over the hill by any stretch, but at the same time, how many times can I have something like this happen to me? Maybe this

isn't such a bad thing, starting up something together."

Ann made sure to look understanding and sympathetic, but inside, she was doing backflips.

Liz continued, "Okay, tell you what. Since I have nothing better to do, let me play around with this idea. Let's chat again this weekend. Maybe by then I'll have made some sense out of this whole situation, and I'll be in a better frame of mind."

Kate and Ann both said their goodbyes, agreeing they would all talk again over the weekend.

CHAPTER FOUR

A few moments before their Skype time, Ann received an email from Liz. She opened it up and started to laugh. Leave it to Liz to do this much research on an idea. She knew there was no way her over-the-top friend would ever stand still a moment longer than she had to.

Liz had compiled all kinds of statistics and had an entire page of resources within the travel industry. She had links to articles that all confirmed Ann's premonitions on where the travel industry was headed. She even had some ideas for company names and direction. Ann started getting excited. Her computer buzzed to let her know her friends were online.

"Hi guys, what's happening?" Ann silently snickered as she

watched Liz organizing her piles of binders, folders, and magazines. Yep, that was Liz, always the overachiever.

“Hi, Liz. Hi, Ann. Liz, I see you’re recovering nicely...”
Kate exaggerated the point as she held up her iPad and pretended to scroll through an endless amount of email.

Liz grinned. “So what are you two up to next weekend? Care to come to L.A. for a visit?”

Both Ann and Kate stared at Liz, wondering what she was up to now. Though deep inside, Ann was cheering, glad to see her friend was making a quick recovery.

“Why, what’s up?”

“Okay Ann, I know this is going to make you happy, this idea of yours is fantastic. I’ve run the numbers, done a ton of research, and I really do think you’re on to something. I’ve emailed over a lot of data I’ve been finding and putting together, which I know you’ve both received,” Liz gave both of her friends a knowing look.

Both Kate and Ann started laughing. "A lot is an understatement Liz; I don't think I could get through all this in a weekend," Kate whined. "Do you know what you're doing to my free time?" She knew which of Liz's buttons to push to get her going, and even though she knew she was complaining about the amount of information Liz had sent over, she too was happy Liz was getting her mojo back so quickly.

"So you want us to come to L.A. to talk about this? What do you have in mind?" Ann pulled up another screen and started searching for flight information.

"Kate, I know you've been looking for a change after all you've been through. And Ann, I know you've always been excited about the idea of starting up your own business. While I haven't given it a lot of thought before, I have realized that I don't want to work for someone else ever again. After all the time I put in working for someone else, I can still lose my job in an instant if I work for someone else. Why would I ever go through that again? Plus Mr Pitkins gave me a pretty good compensation package, so I have room to wiggle in getting this idea off the ground. I'd love to do something with the two of you. I'd love for you to both be closer to me. Can you imagine the three of us

together again, working together on a project, now that we're in our forties? The world would never be the same! So what do you say, are you all up for a weekend trip here to L.A. to talk about the details?" Though Liz looked to her friends in anticipation, she knew it was a done deal. They'd talked enough over the past few months about getting back together again, and this was the perfect reason for both Kate and Ann to return to L.A.

Kate wasn't quite as sure as the others about jumping in full force to a new idea. "Okay, I get you guys are excited about a business. But are you guys really serious?" As much as she loved her friends and would welcome the opportunity to return to her roots, to completely leave her life behind was a little scary. She had a pension, after all. She had a job that paid her every Friday. And even though it might not be the most stable job at the moment, did she really want to throw all that away and move over fifteen hundred miles away?

Liz went into pitch mode. "I know I'm being a little vague, but if you read through everything I sent over, you'll see that Ann's idea is a really good one. Let me recap my email just a little.

"So the travel industry is in a very volatile state right now. But that's happening in every industry. We're going through massive changes thanks to the online world. If you do things the traditional way, stuff like producing a traditional newspaper or magazine, traditional publishing, even booking trips through a travel agent, you're going to lose business rapidly.

"Yet people haven't given up on traveling. In fact, they do it more. They're just changing the way they do it. And that's where Ann's idea comes into play. If you head back to our grandparents or even great grandparents generation, travel was a different industry altogether. They may have fished, camped. They may have traveled a little ways from home. But cars and road trips were a new phenomena. Air travel was only for the elite. Even our parents never traveled much. The expense was just too high for elaborate trips. And to a certain extent, that was our world too. How many places did you travel to when you guys were kids?"

Kate responded first. "We never traveled any place. My parents were from a small town in Kansas. Every year for a week in the summer and over Christmas break, we would hop in the car

and spend vacation time at my grandparents' farm. I never saw an ocean until I was in my twenties."

"Exactly. Ann, I know you lead a similar life."

Ann piped in. "Yep. It was just my mom and me. She could never afford very much. Her idea of a vacation was to see the sights in our community, like the zoo and stuff."

"Exactly. But that's not the case anymore. As we grew up, we got the opportunity to travel more. Airline fees came down, opportunities for travel became easier to get, and overall we became wealthier as a nation, which means we're taking vacations like never before. So of course we no longer want the one week trip to a tourist trap. Been there, done that. What people want now is something unique and unexpected. That's where the opportunity is."

"Yep, that's what I've been saying." Ann's excitement kept growing as Liz continued to talk.

"I've sent you a bunch of stats and ideas. Read it all over before you come in this weekend, see if you can find any holes

in my logic. Then I've also found flights that would be easy for you guys to take into L.A. Take a look and let me know. I know I'm going fast on this, heck, I only lost my job a few days ago. Maybe I'm a maniac or something, but from the moment I started looking into this opportunity, I can't get it out of my head. I really do believe this could be good. I know we could chat by phone or like this, by Skype. But I would love to have a whole weekend together where we can brainstorm and plan, and see if this is something we all want to do. So are you guys in?"

"I'm in. That's an easy one for me." Ann had a great feeling that this was the pivotal moment that was going to change their lives forever.

"Well, you know I won't be left out. I guess I'll see you Friday night." Kate would always tag along. She may be the one to hold back and question things, but she was ever-loyal to her friends. If they were in, she was too.

They finished making their plans, then hung up to begin making even bigger plans for their trip to L.A.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ann spent the rest of the week studying Liz's files and doing a little research of her own. Liz had a ton of facts, links to all kinds of data online, and had even started a tentative business plan. *She's thorough*, Ann thought as she made her own notes to the file.

A day before she was scheduled to leave, she headed to the office store to pick up a binder. She carefully placed all of the data in different sections, color coding them by category. She created room for the business plan, knowing their top goal would be to get their strategy up and running as quickly as possible.

Ann knew she was ready for this change, and mentally

started checking out from the job she had held for the last few years. She knew L.A. was in her future.

Kate wasn't quite as sure. She admired her friends' ability to jump quickly into new projects, but she had always liked stability. She liked being able to depend on a paycheck. She loved watching her retirement fund grow, even though her company had been contributing less and less over the past few years.

Kate's divorce had cost her part of her retirement. She had saved a lot more than Peter, and because they split everything fifty-fifty, she had had to go into her retirement fund to pull out some of the money she owed him. She was hoping to be able to put back the money over the course of the next year or two.

Yet Liz's predicament scared her. She had been working for her company for quite a few years too, and she knew things weren't safe. What if she lost her job like Liz had? Maybe it was time to think about doing something new. Maybe this was a blessing in disguise.

She stored all of the documents on her iPad and added her ideas as she read through the data. She continued making notes

as she flew into L.A.

Liz picked them both up at baggage claim, and after a long ride in the brutal California traffic, Liz was happy to have her two best friends in her home. She opened up a bottle of wine and poured them each a glass. "I'm having Thai food delivered around eight, that way we can get to work."

"Work already? You're such a slave driver." Kate laughed as she pulled her iPad out of her bag. Ann pulled out her notes too, and the three of them settled in for a productive evening.

Liz started. "Okay, since you're here, and I'm the one that called this meeting, I put together an outline and a plan for us to follow. Don't think I'm bossy, I just wanted to make sure we stay focused and use our time wisely while you're here."

Ann jumped in. "Liz, we know you've been spending a lot of time on this, we can see that. I'm glad you're taking charge. I've put together ideas of my own, and I'm sure Kate has too. Let's hear what you have to say, and we can go from there."

By eight, Liz had spelled out her entire idea, and both Ann

and Kate were pleasantly surprised by the work she had done. They broke for dinner and went right back to work. By Sunday afternoon, each was thoroughly convinced their idea was spectacular, and they were willing to change their lives because of it.

Both Kate and Ann gave their two weeks notice on the first Monday back at the office, and within a month had made the transition to L.A. Kate and Ann decided to rent an apartment together at first while they sold their homes and closed out their old lives in their respective cities. They chose a place close to Liz, to make commuting that much easier. And because Liz had a dining room with a view, they chose that as their temporary boardroom, until the money started coming in, and they could invest in a more commercialized location.

They each assigned themselves official titles and began defining who would do what within the business. Liz became President of TravelVentures, a role they each knew she would take on with gusto. Ann became VP of Travel Experiences, and Kate, VP of Marketing and Content. They knew they would hire editors, writers, marketers, social media consultants and salespeople just as soon as their budget began to grow. But for

now, they all dove in and started doing a little bit of everything.

By month one, their entire concept was mapped out and ready for action. By month two, they started hiring.

Liz entered Kate's office where both Ann and Kate sat talking. "Hey guys, I have a friend I'd like you to meet. Can you guys do dinner after work tonight?" Liz looked to both of her friends expectantly as she held the phone away from her ear.

"Sure."

She returned to her phone call. "They said they're both free. Okay, we'll meet you there. Do you know the address? Yep. Great! I'm looking forward to seeing you again, see you tonight." Liz clicked her phone and tucked it into her pocket.

Kate and Ann looked expectantly at Liz, waiting for an explanation.

"Thanks for being available tonight. I have a guy I want you both to meet, and he happens to be in L.A. for the next

couple of days. His name is MJ Williams; I've known him for years. He's been both an advertising director and a sales director at places like The New Yorker and Food & Travel. He sits on the boards of several travel-related businesses, hotels, tourism boards, things like that. I've chatted with him a bit about our direction, where we're going with our new magazine, and he expressed interest in talking with us about the publisher position. He would bring a lot of experience to the table, and I don't think we can pass up talking with him. I know we haven't chatted between the three of us about hiring someone like this for the magazine quite yet, but I don't think we can pass this up.

"I will tell you he's in town for personal matters. He went through a nasty divorce a couple of years ago, and his ex-wife and daughter live here, which gives us an advantage of having someone willing to move from New York to L.A. I will tell you that a lot of people may not be prepared to do that, so that's a plus in his favor. Though obviously, not a reason to give him the job. But his qualifications are out of this world, and he is a real networker. He knows his stuff, and I know he would give this his all. I'm not saying we have to hire him on the spot, but would you guys be open to meeting with him and then talking

about the potential he brings to the table?"

Ann knew a good deal when she heard one. And her interest immediately piqued. To have someone with his talent on board would be a big plus for the magazine. "Sure Liz, I trust your judgment. I know we need someone with his background. He could make things boom even faster. Plus to have an extra set of hands, someone who could run the entire production would be that much easier. We're only three people after all."

Liz smiled, knowing he would be one to impress her two friends. "Great. We're meeting him at Sophia's tonight at seven. I have a couple of other errands to run before we meet, so I'll see you both there."

Ann headed out a little early as well. With all of her errands finished, she decided to relax in Sophia's bar with a glass of wine before she met with the others. She arrived a little after six and was surprised to find the bar as busy as it was. She chose a bar stool in the corner, hoping she could catch

up on some reading before the meeting began.

"Hey, is this seat taken?" A man leaned into her line of vision.

"Be my guest," Ann smiled as he pulled out the chair next to her. *He has beautiful eyes*, she thought to herself as she watched him sit down.

"I didn't expect this place to be so busy," he said after ordering a drink.

"I was thinking the same thing when I got here. Do you come here much?" Ann glanced over at him, taking in everything about him. His suit. His shoes. His hair. The way he smelled.

"No, I've never been here before. A friend recommended it. I'm not in L.A. much, so I rely on other people's recommendations."

"Well, you can't go wrong with Sophia's. I come here a lot; it's not too far from my office." *And as of tonight, a great place to meet attractive guys.*

"So you're from L.A.?"

"Originally, yes. But I've been in Chicago the past few years and I just moved back here a couple of months ago. A drastic difference, I'm glad to be back. I'll especially enjoy it when I hear about a blizzard, knowing I won't have to be a part of it." She shuddered at the thought, making him laugh.

"I can totally relate to that. I'm from New York, and I wouldn't mind it either if I never had to see another blizzard. There's something about age that makes the thrill of snow disappear." He rolled his eyes. He'd had enough snow to last a lifetime.

"I couldn't agree more. I'm Ann, by the way." She held out her hand.

"Hi Ann, Morgan." He took her hand in his own.

"Nice to meet you, Morgan." They smiled at each other as they clinked the rims of their glasses together.

"So are you reading something good, or just killing time with email?" Morgan glanced over at the iPad she was scrolling through.

"I suppose a little bit of both. I always have a hundred things open at once. I'm the classic over-worker, over-achiever I guess. Always trying to push it a little harder to get a few more things completed before I close out for the evening. Have you ever thought about what we did without these iPhone, iPad, iWatch gadget things? Did anybody truly have a conversation where they didn't feel like they had to connect and be on top of everything?" Ann decided to take her own advice and clicked the power button on her iPad letting it go dark. She turned her attention to him.

"Sounds a little like you might need a break." Morgan said as he turned towards Ann, bumping her knee with his own.

She laughed. "No, actually I'm in a really good place right now. I moved to a new state. I'm starting up a new career. Yes, I'm busy. But honestly, it doesn't get any better than this. I love life at the moment. What more could a forty, er, twenty-nine year old want?" She smirked at him wickedly.

"Well, I never would have guessed a day over twenty-nine. In fact, I was going to say twenty-eight, but you blew it! You look great for a twenty-nine year old." His eyes playfully scanned her up and down. Though a part of him was teasing, the other part of him enjoyed the chance to look at her a little closer. She could definitely be his type if he were looking for someone.

"Thank you. You earned a few brownie points for that one." Ann tipped her head to the side, flirting with him just a little.

They sat in silence for a few moments, and Ann's mind wandered back to her last relationship. It was hard to believe it had been over two years since she had someone steady in her life. While she didn't miss Brian at all, she did miss the companionship. It was nice to be able to call someone and have them wonder how your day was. It was nice to have a deep conversation with someone. It was nice to have someone in bed with you at night.

Where did that come from? she thought, as she shook Brian's

image out of her mind.

"So, are you married, Morgan?"

"Nope, not anymore. I'm a workaholic too, I suppose, and it cost me my wife and my family. We had been drifting apart for a while, but that doesn't make it any easier. I really miss my daughter and try and spend as much time as possible with her. How about you?"

"Nope, I've never married, never really believed in it or wanted it I guess. I've had several boyfriends, lived with three of them over the years. The last one moved out two years ago, and I've been too busy and too preoccupied to do much about finding a fourth. I guess I've hit an age where things just happen, and I have other priorities. I've never really thought about it much. My best friend got a divorce last year, so I've been rushing to her side on and off for the year. She was in Seattle, so I've spent a lot of long weekends there helping her recover. When we were together, I guess we spent more time relationship bashing than heading out and trying to establish a new one." Ann gave him a playful evil look.

Morgan looked at her in mock horror. "Relationship bashing, I like that." He'd done that a time or two himself. "So what was the worst thing you said about her ex?"

"Oh man, I don't even know if I can remember the worst of it. Trust me, as a guy, you really don't want to know." Ann winked at him and laid her hand on his arm as they laughed together.

"That bad huh? I guess it can't be any worse than what my friends and I drank to and talked about while I moved out of my old house and into my new life." He definitely didn't want to reveal any of those conversations to her.

They each sat staring into their drinks, thinking about the past for just a moment more.

Ann moved her hand in front of her as if to clean the slate. "Okay, enough of this bad stuff. We're wallowing here, Morgan. Tell me something good about you. What do you like? What's one crazy little secret you can tell me that you've never told anyone else before?" Ann turned to him and gave him her undivided attention. Batting her eyelashes, of course.

Morgan turned towards her and thought for a moment. "Okay, here's one. I've always had this dream of opening up a restaurant of my own on a tiny little island somewhere in the Caribbean. You know, a real beach shack kind of place. Have coconut drinks. Sell fish tacos. Just this good old place that the locals love and the people in the travel magazines give high ratings to."

"That's an awesome dream." Ann could see it as Morgan continued to fill in the details.

"Of course, paradise is never good alone, so I'd need someone to run the place with. And of course, someone to go home to at night."

They sat and stared for a moment. Ann finally moved forward a bit, fanning herself with her hand. "Is it getting hot in here or is it just me?" She laughed as he leaned in closer. They were both enjoying this flirtation they had started. There was definitely something going on between them. Though, at the moment, it seemed to be an underlying game, a line that neither of them really wanted to cross. They both seemed content to play

with their words, nothing more.

Morgan picked up the conversation. "All right, time to turn the tables. You now know my crazy dream of paradise; what about you? What's your idea of paradise?"

Ann thought for a moment. "You already know it's not Chicago. But even L.A. isn't my dream for the long term. A couple of years ago I spent an entire month in Greece. Now *that* is paradise. It was partially business related, and then I tacked on a couple of vacation weeks to further explore the islands. The water was amazing. The food was incredible. Even the people were super nice and always tried to help in some way. I rented out a small flat for the month, so I kind of pretended it was my home. I tried to dig into the culture as much as I could. I could see myself doing more of that in the future." *Hence, the reason this magazine was such a good idea.*

"With somebody special?" The flirtation continued. Morgan touched her hand with anticipation.

"Maybe..." She held his eyes for more than a moment, wondering where on earth this game was going to take them. She

didn't have time for romance right now; she had a business to get off the ground. And he wasn't even from L.A. Plus with an ex and a kid, he sounded like he had more than his share of commitments.

They both looked up as Liz rushed in and stepped between them.

"Ann, MJ, I see you two have met," She wrapped her arms around both of them, kissing each of them on the cheek. "MJ, this is one of my best friends in the whole world, the brainchild behind this new magazine concept I was pitching you. Ann, this is MJ, travel extraordinaire. I've known MJ for a long time. He really knows his stuff when it comes to the media industry."

Ann put on her professional hat, smirking at the look on MJ's face. "Nice to meet you *MJ*."

"You too, Ann. Morgan. James. MJ." As if that explained everything. Morgan was rarely speechless, but he was suddenly a little unsure of what to do next. Had he really just flirted with the woman who could potentially be his boss? What was he

thinking? "I had no idea. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

As she watched the wheels spin into action as doubt crossed his eyes, Ann squashed any fears he may have. "Morgan, stop. Neither one of us knew who the other was. I had fun. I'm assuming you did too." She caught his eye, trying to get a smile from him. He returned with unsure eyes.

Liz stared at the both of them, trying to figure out what was going on. "Oh no, you didn't. What have you two been up to?" She eyed them warily. "You two naughty, naughty kids." She couldn't help but laugh at the sheepish looks on their faces.

Ann was the first to recover. "Nothing Liz, I promise. Just a little bit of flirting and fun to pass the time away before our big meeting. Let's push this aside and move into the dining room to discuss business. Are we okay, Morgan?" The last thing Ann wanted to do is stop her new business venture from cruising down the fast track because of a little fun between her and a potential publisher of their magazine.

"Sounds good to me. A do-over." Morgan knew he would be very careful in this meeting. "Let's get this business meeting

started."

Yet silently, neither one of them had dismissed the concept of "something more" completely.

CHAPTER SIX

Six months later, Kate and Liz stood in Ann's office looking at the mockup of their first issue. The scheduled release was still six weeks away, but what they saw excited them to the core.

"Can you believe it? It came together unbelievably well," Liz squealed as she went leafed through the magazine, page by page.

"I have to admit it, we pulled it off after all." Kate, always the skeptic, was probably the most amazed of all.

Ann came around her desk and hugged her two friends close. "Look at it, it's awesome! We did it, you guys. I'm so proud of

us." She could hardly believe how much they had accomplished since their trip to Bali.

In less than a month, Ann and Kate had moved to L.A. and opened up TravelVentures Ltd, a multi-platform travel media company dedicated to adventure. Their first magazine was scheduled for an October release while their website was already up and operational. They had a long way to go, but they had accomplished so much in just a short period.

MJ had started with TravelVentures five weeks before and had been instrumental in getting the mockup of the magazine together so quickly. All three women were confident that he had been one of their biggest and brightest finds. Though MJ and Ann had never spoken of their flirtatious evening, Ann had caught him looking at her a little longer than necessary more than once. She didn't mind. In fact, she even tingled at the thought. She liked him. That was something she definitely had to think about in the future. But for now, all thoughts revolved around the project at hand.

"So now that the magazine is about to be released, I have another idea for you two." Ann had come up with quite a few

ideas in the past few weeks, but she was most excited about the one she was about to propose to her two friends.

"Ann!" Kate groaned.

"I'm thinking maybe we deserve a vacation, and you're talking about more ideas?" Liz tried to look exasperated though she loved Ann too much to succeed. She braced herself.

"No guys, really, you're going to like my idea. I promise." Ann linked arms and brought them out to their corner office, the sitting area that had sold them on the space. They knew this would be their planning corner, the place where all their ideas took life. And Ann had a good one to share.

They all took their favorite chairs. Ann opened a bottle of wine. She handed each friend a glass.

"Okay, I've decided to take my title seriously, and expand on the concept of giving our readers even greater experiences. I have a plan I think you're going to love.

"I want to start a feature column in our magazine, a place

that highlights one lucky winner as they take a trip of a lifetime. I'm calling it Destination Roulette. I'll head out to LAX and set up a Destination Roulette board programmed with select destinations around the world. These places will be superb travel experiences, the best of the best. Places people put on their bucket lists.

"Then I'll give people the chance to win on the spot. If they choose to play, they hit the button on the game board, and wherever the wheel lands, they leave for that destination immediately. So they have to make a decision. Do they want to play and change their lives all in the love of travel, or do they want to turn it down? Imagine the PR we could get from this. And people would go wild, especially when someone agrees to play. People will crowd in, not believing these brave people said yes. We can really play off of this concept in a lot of ways.

"I'm thinking from there we can create a column around the people who say yes, like writing about their adventures. Maybe we can even turn those people into our bloggers, and they can write about their experiences. Those would be well-loved posts, they could really drive views on social media. We could even

video the process - that would be shareable. It would be a hit for all the social sites - Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram. All of them.

"This idea can morph and change over time. I'm just thinking out of the box at the moment. But I could set it up in different airports once I figure this whole thing out. And it could include even more people once we get a system in place.

"If we start working it with a few destinations up front, I can find the best travel agents and tour guides to help me get the plans together. We can find unique opportunities that stay true to our themes. This really could be a great addition to our magazine. I'm super excited about it. What do you think?" Ann looked expectantly at her two friends while she sipped her wine.

Liz didn't need to hear any more. "Beautiful. I love it all. Do it, I'm with you." She knew Ann was onto something big. She could feel it in her gut.

Liz thought back to Ann's proposal a little more than six months before as they floated around the pool. In six short months, their lives had all changed for the better. And it was

only the beginning. Who would have thought all of this could be born from a simple concept of wanting to make a living while traveling the world?

After all the research they had done, after all the planning, strategizing, and even after shedding a few tears and throwing a few tantrums, their baby was about to go wild. They were about to release their Big Idea to the world. And it had changed their lives forever.

Who needed the riskiness of a job? They had their idea. And they had each other.

Now it was time to share it with those who wanted to travel too. And have a whole lot of fun along the way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MJ was seated at his desk typing away, all his concentration on his work. He didn't notice Ann stop outside his office, lean against the door.

Ann stood there watching him for just a moment. MJ'd been a great addition to the staff. Liz had been right on the money with him. He knew his stuff and had been instrumental in getting the magazine up and running as fast as they had. With his connections, they had more advertising contracts in place during their first month than she had expected in six.

Yep, this magazine was going to be good. She could feel it.

Ann watched him for just a moment more. She liked him. And

now that things were finally settling down, their days were relatively calm, their positions somewhat defined, Ann was ready to talk to MJ about what was happening between them.

She thought back to Sophia's, the night they had first met. She'd been attracted to him from the moment he'd sat down beside her. That had never changed. If anything, it had intensified, though both had maintained professionalism whenever they were together.

Even now, watching him, he did things to her. Her insides tingled. She loved the way his hair curled around his collar. The way he wore his tie just a little loose. And those eyes.

Ann knew she wasn't the only one feeling the attraction. She'd caught him staring. They'd shared smiles across the room.

She also knew he would never overstep the professional boundaries that had been established when he said yes to the position. He had told her as much when he signed the contract and joined the staff. He had put the ball in her court. As one of the founding directors, it was up to her to make the next move.

She was ready.

Ann had spoken to both Liz and Kate about it, not wanting to muddy up the office with romantic politics. But both had given their blessings if it was something Ann and MJ chose to pursue.

"Hey, you got a minute?" Ann knocked on his door.

MJ looked up from his screen. "Sure, come in. Have a seat. Just give me one more minute." He motioned to the chairs he had in the corner.

Ann loved his office almost as much as her own. The view was phenomenal from here too. And she loved the chairs he had picked out. Comfy was the only way to describe them. She settled back and waited.

MJ finished writing his email and hit send. He walked over and sat next to Ann.

"I've had this idea I've been playing with for awhile. I

just ran it by Kate and Liz, and they loved it. I wanted to run it by you." Ann stopped and judged his reaction.

MJ put a finger along his jaw, leaned on his arm, ready to listen. "Lay it on me."

"So I was thinking we'd call it Destination Roulette. The premise is we set up computerized game boards in airports, giving people a chance to jump at traveling to a new destination. The only catch is they have to leave within the hour. No thinking. No planning. They have to act immediately. We could get all kinds of sponsors from our advertisers. We could work with travel agents. And of course, there's the social media aspect of it. I see each of the winners blogging about their experiences. Of course I would help them; I realize not everyone is a writer. Then we would take the posts and feed them into a feature column in the magazine each month. We could video it. We could use Instagram. There're so many ways we can run with this, and this is just the starting point. PR for something like this could be out of this world. I really could go on and on, but what do you think?" Ann looked at his face, judging his reaction.

MJ leaned forward, smiling at her. "You have the best ideas. I love it. I can really see the social side of this working well."

"Really? You're not just saying that?" Ann knew she was onto something. But she wanted everyone else on board too.

"Definitely." He sat there watching her, something he loved to do.

She stared back. Letting the comfortable space hang between them.

And at that moment, she knew. Ann realized that this was their chance. And looking at him, she realized there was nothing she wanted more.

"I'd love to talk more about this. About dreams. About taking on new projects. About pursuing things you've never said yes to before. Because there's always so much potential if you just take a step forward, put everything else aside." Ann knew she was flirting with him. And she could tell he was picking up her signals loud and clear. She continued. "Care to head over to

Sophia's and talk about it over drinks? Maybe some dinner? Just the two of us?" Ann purposely brushed her knee against his and felt the electricity light up the room.

MJ could do nothing but smile. She made the first move. Ann sent out the signal he'd been waiting for. He knew this was their chance. And he wasn't going to let it slip by. Without a moment of hesitation, he responded, "I thought you'd never ask."

What would you do if you had the chance to hit the button on the Destination Roulette board on your next trip through your local airport? Would you say yes?

[Click Here to get your very own copy of The Choice:](#)

[Barcelona](#). When Casey drops her only daughter off at college over twelve hundred miles away from home, she knows she needs to do something to add some spice to her life. She has no idea how fast that change will come. On her way home through LAX, Casey says yes to playing Destination Roulette and says yes to the reinvention her life has needed for way too long.

To find out more about The Choice, Destination Roulette, and what it takes for real life women to reinvent their lives and make their second acts in life even better than the first,

be sure to sign up for the email list at www.LoriOsterberg.com

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Thanks for reading!

Lori Osterberg

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