



DESTINATION
Los Angeles



THE CHOICE SERIES

LORI OSTERBERG

DESTINATION LOS ANGELES

Lori Osterberg

The Choice Series Short Story

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Destination Los Angeles/ Lori Osterberg.

To midlife
To reinvention
To the time of our lives ...

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1 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.

2 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.

3 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.

4 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.

5 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.

6 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 life-

time. 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.

WHAT'S NEXT

Do you love traveling as much as I do? That's what inspired the Destination Roulette concept and all of the Destination Books in this series.

As we were traveling around Europe a few summers ago, I marveled at how much travel changed me as a person. Sitting in the airport one afternoon waiting for a plane, I started crafting a story around the concept. How would it change a person's life? How would it impact their future?

Slowly, the idea began to build. A little research led me to the concept of a game in an airport. And a little imagination helped me craft the idea of "play and leave immediately."

Of course, I had to build it around a very powerful woman who wanted nothing more than the freedom that comes from building her own business. I wanted her to be having the time of her life in midlife, reinvent her life into something even more magical, and eventually find romance herself.

LORI OSTERBERG

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?

Then read on.

I've given you a sneak peak to two of my favorites.

And if you want to follow me and 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 LoriOsterberg.com

And I'd love to say hello to you:

<http://LoriOsterberg.com>

Lori on Twitter: [@LoriOsterberg](https://twitter.com/LoriOsterberg)

Lori on Facebook: facebook.com/TheChoiceBooks

Thanks for reading!

Lori Osterberg
Portland, Oregon
February 2018

A SNEAK PEEK:

DESTINATION VANCOUVER

1 CHAPTER ONE

Ann Mathison kicked off her Jimmy Choos and put her feet up on her desk. She leaned over to rub her toes.

As much as she loved Jimmy, twelve hour days were sometimes too much.

She glanced at the dark gray heels lying on the floor. Still, they were kick-ass shoes. And really, did anything else matter at the end of the day?

She heard a rustling out in the main office and looked up. Through her doorway, she could see MJ Williams moving papers and opening drawers. Busy as usual.

That man works harder than I do.

She snickered. She'd thought that was impossible until she'd met him. Her counterpart. Her equal. He always seemed to match her work ethic every step of the way.

Ann put her head back on her chair for just a moment. She stretched. She breathed deep.

Her mind drifted back to the moment she'd met him.

Six months earlier she'd made her way to Sophia's to relax before a big meeting. And as she checked email and scrolled through her messages, MJ had materialized next to her.

They talked. They flirted. Hell, she would have probably taken him home if things had been different.

He'd made her insides do somersaults, something that hadn't happened in a very long time.

Then they discovered their connection.

Ann had started a company with her two best friends, Liz Cohen and Kate Hendricks, just a few months earlier. And when Liz mentioned she had the perfect person to help them along, Ann had agreed to meet him at Sophia's. She never connected Liz's friend MJ with *Morgan*, the gorgeous man who'd sat next to her, until Liz had shown up.

The flirting ended. MJ was hired. And the rest, as they say, is history.

They worked. They lived it, breathed it, even fell asleep with it half the time. That was to be expected with a startup.

But in the end, it was worth it.

The first edition of their magazine, TravelVentures, had just been released to rave reviews.

It was beautiful. Even more impressive than she'd ever dreamed.

She'd never settled for anything but first class before, and she wasn't about to start slipping up with the magazine. Her two best friends agreed. And as she quickly found out, MJ believed the same.

They'd worked side by side, week after week, for six months to get their baby up and running. And the last thing they needed to confuse matters was an office romance.

Ann had said no. And MJ agreed. For a while.

They'd been careful on all those long days and nights they'd worked together.

Even late night dinners alone never turned into anything but discussions between friends.

Still, the flirting continued.

And the daydreams. Oh, the daydreams.

Like right now.

Her eyes flickered back into the main office. Were those pants perfect or what? He really did have a great ass. It looked even better when he was bent over the drafting table the way he was right now.

He knew how to dress.

And he always smelled so good.

He'd caught her on more than one occasion, stepping in a little too close, just standing there breathing in him.

He'd grin. She'd smile.

And life would move on.

They never talked about it. They never did anything about it.

But lately, that was becoming more difficult. And MJ had hinted more than once he was ready to take it to the next level.

If anyone else in the office noticed the electricity between them, they'd never mentioned it.

She'd spoken to Liz and Kate about her feelings on more than one occasion. But they'd never offered an opinion or judgment. They'd simply said they'd leave it to her. To them.

If it happened, it was meant to be.

She'd never felt ready before. She'd never wanted to explore.

She'd never had time.

Running a new company took a lot out of a person. Starting a magazine in the competitive travel media market was considered crazy at best. Setting up an online world at the same time

was often called insane. She'd had several people in the industry call her just that.

But she'd had a dream, and luckily her two best friends had bought into it, too.

They dreamed big, made even bigger plans, and had everything fall perfectly into place.

And now today, edition one of TravelVentures was on display on her desk as proof it could be done.

The first issue was complete. Edition two was being finalized. Editions three and four were in progress.

She had an office with a view.

She had a great place to live.

She was happy.

Yet something was missing.

MJ mumbled as he wadded up paper and threw it in the trash. He leaned over, pushed paper, moved things around. Ann watched every movement with interest.

Finally, she sat up and grabbed her iPad. She switched it on, opened up an app. She checked her notes, moved things around.

It was now or never.

She'd chatted with Liz and Kate before they'd left. Now, with only MJ still in the office, she was ready for him.

She leaned down, kicked her Choos up and snuggled back into them. She stood, adjusted her skirt, grabbed her tablet and walked into the main space.

"MJ, are you busy?"

He glanced behind him. "Give me a minute."

He worked a few more moments, laying things out and adding things to the cover layout. He stood up, crossed his arms and tipped his head as he looked at his results.

"Perfect. I think this is it. What do you think?" He glanced behind him, watched as she walked beside him. "This is for the

third edition. I like the way this falls off the page,” he said as he motioned beyond the left side of the layout.

He’d been playing with ideas for the third cover for several days. And with the new images that had come in earlier, he felt it was finally up to all of their expectations.

“Wow. Who took this? Great photo.” Ann leaned in, studying it a little closer. Their featured article included a charming village in the south of France. The photo nailed the image they wanted to leave in their reader’s minds.

“A friend of the writer’s. I’ve never used her before, but if she shoots like this all the time, we’ll be seeing a lot more of her photos in our magazine.”

“Agreed. Run it.”

Ann leaned down once again. The color was brilliant, and this was just the mockup. The flowers on the cafe tables popped off the page. The old-world buildings off in the distance were captivating. The brilliant blue sky beckoned: *visit me*.

“Makes you want to go, doesn’t it?” MJ smiled as she stood up and turned to face him.

“It really does, right? I can almost smell the bakery that undoubtedly is nearby.” She took a deep breath, almost salivating as the scent wafted from nowhere. “Have you ever been to France?”

“Once. Paris. With Jennifer.” He dismissed the thought, leaned down once more for a final modification.

Jennifer. Ann watched as MJ’s hands quickly moved back and forth. Jennifer had hurt him, bad. Sure, exes were always ex for a reason. But in Jennifer’s case, there were a lot of reasons. Jennifer had gone from angry and mean to flat out nasty in the years since their divorce.

MJ had taken this job to be closer to her, closer to the nine-year-old daughter they shared in common. And Claire was eve-

ry bit her father's daughter. She loved him desperately. And she had him wrapped around her little finger.

Every other Friday night, Claire arrived like clockwork a little before five. MJ and Jennifer used his office as neutral ground, a place to switch parental roles where the likelihood of a fight breaking out was kept to a minimum. When the discussion heated, Claire would drift into Ann's office, and the two would talk about everything from clothes to books to school. Invariably she'd remain there until the arguing ceased, Jennifer said goodbye, and MJ went into dad mode.

Ann had learned a lot about Claire over the months; she enjoyed their conversations.

She'd also learned a thing or two about Jennifer, and what she heard she didn't like.

Jennifer was the last thing she wanted to think about. She was the last thing she wanted MJ to worry about. So Ann changed direction.

"I want to tell you about an idea I've been playing with. I mentioned it to Liz and Kate earlier while you were out of the office. They both loved it, so I wanted to spring it on you too before I move ahead."

MJ motioned with his hands to head back into his office.

They settled into two leather chairs in the corner. With the sun sinking in the west, a soft glow filtered across his room, making it the perfect place to get lost in conversation.

"What's the one thing almost everyone wants more of?" she asked

"Travel," he shrugged, knowing it was the answer she expected.

"Travel. But why don't people travel more?"

He thought for the moment, then answered, “A lot of reasons. But I would say the two biggest are they’re too busy, and they can’t afford it.”

“Exactly. I am willing to bet those two groups of people make up the majority of readers for today’s travel magazines. Buy a magazine, and you can travel anywhere in the world, and see it all in several hours from the convenience of your sofa. It’s cheap, and it doesn’t interfere with life-stuff.”

Ann moved her iPad to the table. She scooted forward, then continued. “But out of the two reasons, I would say that cost is probably the bigger of the two. How many people would love to leave everything behind for a week and travel to France?” She motioned out towards the cover they’d just finalized.

“Everyone.”

“Everyone, precisely. Leave your world behind for a week. Go to someplace new, like France. Who hasn’t daydreamed about that from time to time? Then reality sets in when you have to look at your checking account as you slap down your credit card for an unexpected car repair, or have your kids whine for new shoes. So you climb into your car and go back to work.”

“Such a romantic, aren’t you?” MJ chuckled at her description.

“Just the truth. That’s life.” She scrunched her shoulder in agreement.

She moved forward in her chair, closer to MJ. “But what if you were given a trip for free? What if someone came to you right now and offered you an all-expense-paid trip, let’s say it was to Provence. Here’s the ticket, your flight leaves in an hour. Would you do it?” She held out her hand to him with her pretend ticket.

He surprised her by grabbing her hand, pulling her up and heading for the door. "Hurry, let's go."

She laughed as she was thrown off guard, falling into him. He righted her in his doorway, but somehow couldn't quite let go of her. He lingered, hands on her hips. Staring.

His hands zipped up her sides, across her arms, settled on the sides of her face for just a moment, before realizing his actions and dropping his arms down. Still, his eyes never wavered. "I think it's safe to say I'd say yes."

Her breath caught, just a little. *Okay, then.*

Her brain did cartwheels picturing the two of them sitting at that little cafe in Provence, eating croissants, smelling the flowers, basking in the sunshine underneath that bright blue sky. After a phenomenal night together, of course.

She recovered. She looked at him, smirking in the way only he could. *Caught.*

She shook her head. Yes, she had every intention of continuing this game. But first, her idea. So she continued, "What if we give people a chance for free travel?"

She went back to her chair, grabbed her iPad, pulled up her whiteboard and motioned for him to join her.

He sat, moved forward and glanced at the tablet balancing on her knee.

"So I thought 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." Ann scrolled through photos she'd found to represent different ideas. She filled in details as necessary, added comments when he had questions.

The idea was simple enough, and it didn't take MJ long to see the possibilities. He dropped back into his chair, brought his hand up to his chin, contemplating.

Ann watched his eyes, judging his reaction.

He turned, eyeing her. And broke into a full-out grin. "Brilliant."

Her grin matched his. "So you like it? Think it'll work?"

"I don't see why not. It needs tweaking. But the premise is there."

"Of course. I just came up with it this week." She tapped her screen to get out of the app. Flipped it off.

"It'd be a great addition to what we already have in place with the magazine."

"The social media possibilities are endless, aren't they?"

He chuckled. "Remember when I first started? You quizzed me all the time on who the hell used Twitter in the first place and why we needed an account."

She nodded. "I've grown."

"That you have."

They were so comfortable together. Like brother and sister.

Scratch that. Ann looked at the five o'clock shadow forming across his face. He wore it well. He wore everything well. His shirt, a deep green that accentuated his eyes. His pants, tan, hugging his hips impeccably. His shoes, classy.

His hair, the ideal length to run her fingers through, hold on-to while they ...

"Ann?"

He was searching her face. She knew she was an open book by the look in his eyes.

"MJ, why did you grab me and run a few minutes ago?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

“Why did you do it? When I asked you if you’d drop everything and leave for Provence, you grabbed my hand and ran. Why?”

He scrubbed a hand over his face, clearly buying time while he considered his words.

He moved forward, moved closer to where she sat.

“Because you’re all I think about. And if we’re talking about wishes, about daydreams or fantasies, you’re mine. If I won a trip, I’d want you with me. If I had the chance to explore a place like Provence, there’s no one else I’d want along.”

He sat back in his chair. “But we’re not going there, are we.”

No, they’d agreed on that the moment he took the job. Office politics were rough. And this magazine was Ann’s baby.

But here’s the thing about love. Sometimes it creeps up on you slowly, so gradual you have to look closely to determine when it first appeared. Then when you know it’s there, it hits you like a freight train, crashing into you at the speed of sound.

Right now, sitting here with him, Ann felt something she’d never felt before.

She’d been in love. She’d lived with men before. Thought she’d spend the rest of her life with one of them. But looking back, she could see just how flawed that love had been.

She’d given one hundred percent; he’d given her only what he could, which often fell significantly below one hundred percent.

But right now, right here, she could see this man giving his everything to her if she’d let him.

She hadn’t wanted it before. She’d wanted her magazine and her business more.

But somehow he’d crept into her life, into her heart, and shown her she could have both if she simply opened up and said yes to it.

DESTINATION VANCOUVER

So she did the only thing she could.

Because she was tired of safe. She was tired of having to choose. She was tired of having one side of her life fucking-fantastic. The other side completely nonexistent.

So she did what had to be done.

She said yes.

Keep Reading:

<http://loriosterberg.com/books/the-choice-series/>

A SNEAK PEEK:

DESTINATION BARCELONA

1 CHAPTER ONE

That stupid book got it all wrong. It said the first week after you drop them off is the hardest. Obviously the writer didn't know what she was talking about. Because clearly the hardest part was the agonizing one hour lunch buffet on the campus plaza before leaving them forever.

Casey had read lots of books on sending her daughter to college, including the one that gave tips for how to let go. That was the hardest part of this whole thing. Letting her go. She wasn't one of those helicopter moms who did everything for her daughter. Still, it had been the two of them. Her only. Just them. How was she not supposed to miss her? Especially when she'd be twelve hundred miles from home.

Casey grabbed a carrot stick off Julia's plate, nibbled on it while she watched the stage. The headmaster walked up for one final message.

"If I could have everyone's attention one last time. I know we've handed a lot of information out over these past few days.

There's a lot to take in. I've found in the past that this day is bittersweet at best. You're dropping off your babies, the ones you've watched grow into these fine young men and women that are standing with us today. We know how much they mean to you, and we'll do everything to watch over them and continue what you started not-so-long ago. This truly will be the time of their lives. They'll grow, they'll learn, and they'll have fun."

The chuckles swept through the crowds of moms and dads, young men and young women, all about to make one of the biggest transitions of their lives. Casey liked the president. She enjoyed meeting him on the tour earlier in the year. He was warm and friendly, the perfect person to run the school she was entrusting her daughter to. She knew this was a good decision.

Casey's eyes swept back to her daughter. How did it all go so fast? Wasn't she just holding her in her arms in the hospital? And yet here she was dropping her baby off at college.

"I know in the next hour or so you'll be saying your good-byes. But don't think of it as goodbye. Think of it as a new beginning," his infectious grin and wide eyes captured everyone's attention as he visually connected with the parents around him. Somehow he knew exactly what moms and dads needed to hear. "Give your children space to become who they're meant to become. We've done this a time or two. They will be in good hands. But if you ever have any questions, just know my entire staff is always available to you. Give us a call anytime. Okay, that's all I've got. There's still plenty of food left everyone, thank you and enjoy the rest of your lunch."

Casey glanced around the plaza one more time, fighting the inevitable. She saw tears in a lot of eyes. She knew hers weren't far behind.

The kids all looked like they couldn't wait to say goodbye and get the party started.

Including that blonde kid over there trying desperately not to be noticed while making ooglie eyes at Julia. *Geez, quit looking at her like she belongs on the buffet line*, Casey thought.

She turned her attention back to her daughter. It was time to say goodbye.

"Hey sweetie, you excited?" She brought Julia in for a hug. That was the good thing about dropping her kid off at college. Julia didn't mind the constant hugs. Part of them really want to be hugged. And since every other kid is getting them too, they don't argue.

"Yes, Mom, for the hundredth time." Julia rolled her eyes at her for the hundredth time that day.

"Okay, okay. So, you've got a floor meeting this afternoon, a party tonight. Volunteering tomorrow. Oh, it all sounds like fun. Have fun. I'll be thinking about you." Casey hugged Julia again.

"They've got us taken care of. I hardly have any free time between now and when classes start on Monday. I'll be fine. Really."

"I know you will." They started making their way back towards the dorms. "Well, you know I'm a phone call away. Anytime. You can call. Or Skype. Or Facetime. Or..."

"Mom."

Okay, there it was. Mom. That was the stopping point.

Julia decided to turn the tables. "Do you have everything?"

Casey nodded to her daughter. "Yep, I shipped all that extra stuff back home this morning. My bags are packed and in the car. I've got all the paperwork here in my bag." Casey started pulling things out to make sure it was all in its place. "The magazine I'll try and read on the plane. The final school forms I

filled out this morning. My passport in case I get a wild hair to go roaming the earth.”

“Oh, Mom, I love you.” Julia flung her arms around Casey’s neck. “Do it. Follow that wild hair. Go roam somewhere. I won’t be home until Thanksgiving,” she teased.

Yeah right. Like that would ever happen. She was good ol’ dependable Casey. She took care of people. She didn’t do things spur of the moment.

“I’m serious, Mom. Have some fun while I’m gone. Live a little.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Then she thought about it. “I’m not that bad, am I?” Casey said it more to herself than to her daughter. But she really was beginning to wonder. Ever since the divorce two years before, everyone around her had been on her case to have some fun.

She was fun. She knew how to have fun. She just didn’t have the time. A kid to raise. A house to take care of. A boring job to go to. An ex-husband to loathe.

“Mom, stop. Quit thinking about Rob.”

“He’s still Dad to you, honey.

“Yeah, but he hasn’t really been acting like one, you know? So he’s Rob until he does.” Julia’s loyalty ran strong for her mom.

“See, what am I going to do without someone in the house who knows every single thing I’m thinking?” Casey loved that about their relationship. She figured that’s what happens with an only child. Their connection was ... different.

They followed the flow of parents and kids down through the campus and back towards the dorms. Casey could feel the anxiety in the air. Parents missing their kids. Kids anxious for dorm life. A new chapter had begun.

One more hug. “Oh, Julia, have a good time, okay?” Casey kissed her daughter on the nose, like she’d done so many times before. “You live it up. Enjoy every moment. Have a blast. But not too much fun. Remember those grades. And whatever you do, avoid that blonde kid over there. He won’t quit staring at you. I swear, I’m going to go over there and smack him upside the head. It should be illegal to have your tongue hanging so far out of your mouth.”

Julia glanced his direction. And blushed. “That’s Zach. He’s on my floor.”

Oh God. Just kill me now, please.

“Stay away from him. He’s trouble.” Cute too. Definitely trouble.

“Yes, Mom.” Julia shrugged her shoulders, twitched her lips. Then snuck a peek back at Zack.

Yep, trouble.

Casey knew she could stretch this out forever. But there was a time and place for everything. “Okay, my beautiful girl. Goodbye. I love you. Have fun. See you.” One more hug. One more kiss.

Then she watched as her baby climbed the stairs towards her dorm. With Zach waiting to hold the door open for her.

Ugh.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After running several successful businesses, Lori Osterberg decided it was time to reinvent herself once again. Facing an empty nest and too much normal suburbia lifestyle in front of her, she talked her husband into selling off their 3300 square foot home, sell two-thirds of their stuff, all for the chance to slow travel the world. When not traveling, she finds a friend or two to share a good bottle of wine, visits tea factories, dances the night away at outdoor concerts, eats her way through farmers markets, and daydreams about the next set of characters she lives vicariously through. She's currently writing books and living the dream in the Pacific Northwest.

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