

LORI OSTERBERG

THE *Networker*



A Creative Standalone

THE NETWORKER

Lori Osterberg

A Creative Standalone Short Story

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The Networker/ Lori Osterberg.

*To every female entrepreneur
To every female creative
To everyone ready to make the leap ...*

Other Books by Lori Osterberg

~ *The Choice Series* ~

Destination Vancouver – Ann and MJ
Destination Barcelona - Casey & Jordi
Destination Mexico City - Jena & Justin

~ *The Creative Standalone Series* ~

The Writer - Kelly & Aiden
The Artist – Renee & Bradley
The Coach – Tessa & Graham

1 CHAPTER ONE

Tricia Myers found her seat, stowed her carry-on and moved into the row. She left her seat belt unbuckled until the other person arrived. Then she fiddled with her bag, withdrawing everything she needed for the flight before sliding it underneath the chair in front of her.

She'd become somewhat of an expert at flying. Starting a company did that to a person, especially with the goal of turning it into a national brand.

Tricia had spent the past eighteen months perfecting Nutz, a company that produced and sold nut and seed butters. She'd just received her first million dollar contract, and was on course to do five million dollars in revenue in the next year. With five full time and multiple part time employees, her entrepreneurial dreams had come true. And with any luck, attending The Natural Foods Expo would fasttrack her to a whole new level.

She was walking on air. Five full days to hand out the five hundred business cards currently tucked into her bag. It was a

lofty goal. But then she hadn't come this far without highly focused objectives.

A thump on the shoulder from an oversized bag, followed by a jolt to her foot by a rolling suitcase brought her back to reality. Now all she had to do was survive this flight.

She turned her attention to the people shuffling by. Who would settle in beside her?

The young woman with a baby on her hip? She looked as if she hadn't slept a full night in months. Remembering how many months she went without sleep when her own son was little, she was sure she probably hadn't.

Or maybe it would be the elderly woman who looked a lot like her mom. Her friendly face and big smile told her she wouldn't be getting much work done during the flight if she was the one.

Or maybe ... Maybe it would be Mr Gorgeous who was waiting patiently as he moved along. His button-down accented the healthy tan that spread from his face to his neck, and continued down into the opening of his shirt. His dark hair just a little unruly; just long enough to wind her fingers in and ...

"Excuse me. Can I slide in?"

Tricia looked up into Mr Gorgeous's hazel eyes.

And a smile that dazzled.

"Sure," she jumped. Blushing, feeling almost like a schoolgirl, she reached up, pulled herself to standing, and moved to the aisle. She bumped him as she went. "Sorry."

"Not a problem." He smiled again. He leaned in, dropping his satchel onto the floor.

She watched as he moved in, mesmerized by his backside that was equally as impressive as the rest of him. She breathed in, loving the fragrance he left behind.

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He scooted towards the window, nudging his bag under the seat with his foot.

Tricia dropped back down into her seat, sliding the belt into place. She brushed her fingers along his arm as she moved her iPad.

He brushed his leg against hers as he tried to settle into his space.

“Sorry,” he looked apologetic at her one more time. “These damn seats just aren’t made for a six foot two person.”

She moved her legs out into the aisle to give him a moment to settle in. She was struck by a man with too much luggage trying to squeeze it all into his space. She let her head fall back to the seat. “Don’t you remember the good old days when this used to be fun?” She said to no one in particular.

“I know. When they used to smile at you and were glad you were there? Where they fed you a great meal? Where you didn’t feel like you were one of the herd merely taking up space?”

She turned to her seatmate, mesmerized as he fed his fingers through his hair, trying to tame the curls into place.

She picked up where he left off. “Where you didn’t wonder when they were going to start charging for oxygen?”

That threw them both into a fit of giggles.

Mr Gorgeous went back to pushing his hair out of his eyes. He grabbed his phone from the front pocket of his bag and started punching and swiping.

Five hours. I have five hours to watch this man.

Not that she had time to simply stare at a man. She’d wanted to get a few more emails out and go over her notes one more time. Tricia hit the button on her iPad and opened up her account.

She felt the doors close and the plane back away from the gate. She caught a glimpse of the flight attendants giving their standard talk out of the corner of her eye. She heard the rumblings and muttering of conversations all around her. But with so much to do, she quickly became absorbed.

The flight attendants settled in with a last announcement. She felt the plane accelerate, and a sudden tenseness in the seat next to her.

She glanced over to find him grasping the armrests hard enough to turn his knuckles white. A scowl crossed over his face.

As the plane lifted, it rocked a little more than normal. She heard soft swearing to her left. She saw his fingers tapping his thigh. *Ringless* fingers ...

“You okay?”

“Yeah, sorry.” He glanced at her sideways. “I fly all the time. You think I’d be used to this.”

“Anything I can do?”

He shook his head. “No. I was on a flight a couple of weeks ago where the turbulence was so bad, it sent six people to the hospital. Everything fell out of the overhead bins. It’s just made me a bit wary, I guess.”

She nodded. “Oh, I remember that on the news. It must have been a wild ride.”

He snorted. “Yeah, not good for someone who already doesn’t like flying.”

“Were you hurt?”

“No. My nerves were more than anything. Throw me on a ski behind a boat, and I’m fine. Push me into the front car of a roller coaster, and I’ll willingly hold up my hands. But put me in a tin can thousands of miles off the ground and I move into panic mode. Go figure.”

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“Just think of this as a very large enclosed amusement park ride.” She grinned.

He returned with an eye roll. “As if it were that easy.”

Somewhere inside, she could tell he had a wicked sense of humor. They’d been playing this game from the moment they’d made eye contact.

She hit the off button on her iPad, turned a little to face him and readied to play a bit more.

“So are you sweet or salty?”

She tried not to laugh as she watched bewilderment cross over his face.

“What?”

“Candy bar or potato chips?”

His whole demeanor shifted. He sat up, quit fidgeting, shook his head, and carefully moved to face her. And after a moment, he smiled and blurted out, “Candy.”

“Caramel or chocolate?”

His head tipped down, and his eyes opened a bit wider. He moved a little closer. “Chocolate. Definitely chocolate.”

“Milk chocolate or dark chocolate?”

“Dark.”

“Coffee or tea.”

“Coffee.”

“Wine or beer.”

“Beer.”

“Tofu or steak.”

“Steak.”

She held up her hand. “Okay, now you lost me. I have to stop there. I can’t go any further.” She turned slightly in her seat.

“Oh yeah?”

She was playing, and he knew it. She could feel him shift even more towards her.

“Steak isn’t your thing?” He looked mildly offended.

She shifted back to him. “No way. How could you eat such a thing?”

“You’re not one of *those*, are you?” He smiled as he fake-shivered. “There’s enough of them here in Seattle. You *might* be one of *them*.”

She raised an eyebrow. “*Those? Them?* Just what are you referring to?”

“You know. Veggie people that can’t handle a good slab of meat.”

She pressed her lips together to keep from giggling. *Oh, so many comebacks. Which way to go?*

“I just prefer my *hunks* a little more a la naturel.” She flipped her hair over her shoulder as she added a French twist to her pronunciation.

He howled with laughter. Even in a noisy airplane, he captured the attention of several rows around them.

She loved it. He had a great laugh.

Just deep enough to send shivers down her spine.

Just gravelly enough to send her thoughts to the places they could go and the things they could do ...

Her eyes moved from watching his lips back up to his eyes. And from the fire she saw in the flecks of gold, she knew she’d been caught.

Tricia was fifty-two. She was finally making her career dreams come true. Her big idea was now a million dollar business. And after this weekend, she had every hope to make it a multi-million dollar one, hopefully with an investor or two with connections helping her out.

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It had been several months since she'd dated. And even before that, her prospects had been minimal at best.

There was Craig; he'd lasted two dates before she told him she wasn't interested. If she'd had to spend one more dinner talking about the good ol' days, she'd have gone crazy. What was wrong with now?

She'd given Bob what's-his-name three hours before she'd decided no way, no how. A girl could only take hearing about how terrible his ex was for so long.

There hadn't been anyone in her bed for ... she couldn't seem to remember. That was a very bad thing indeed.

Because right now, she was eyeing this man in front of her with a little more interest than she cared to let on. Something she needed to think about when she had the time.

"Snack?" The flight attendant leaned over with bags of pretzels, and they both burst into a fit of giggles.

They accepted the bags and ordered drinks.

He bumped her with his shoulder. "Very sneaky."

"Hmmm?" Tricia cocked her head as she gazed at him.

"Thanks. For pulling my attention away for a bit."

"Glad I could help."

"I'm Dan Griffin," he held out his hand.

"Nice to meet you, Dan. I'm Tricia Myers."

Tricia jumped from the impact. With one single handshake, her world changed.

His touch was electrifying.

She felt something move deep in her soul. She felt the energy buzz between them. It felt like the stars aligned, just for them.

Her heart beat a little faster. It was simply indescribable.

For the rest of the flight, they talked about everything, and found a whole lot in common. She told him about her new com-

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pany and her goals for the expo she was about to attend, only to find out he was operating a booth at the very same tradeshow pitching his own products. They talked about marriage, divorces, and raising kids. They filled in the space with books, movies, restaurants they frequented. They discovered their homes were in Seattle, only eight miles apart.

“We’ll be landing in ten minutes.” The flight attendant’s announcement came all too soon.

“Here’s my card. I’m not sure if I’ll run into you this week. But I’d love to see you for dinner once we’re home.” Dan slid a card out of his bag and placed it in her hand.

She returned with a card of her own. “I’d like that. I hope you have a great show.”

They walked to the baggage claim together, and after they had collected their bags and boxes, they said goodbye.

2 CHAPTER TWO

Tricia was exhausted. Exhilarated, but completely spent. Three days of networking, learning, and connecting with more people than she thought possible had a way of thoroughly wearing a person out. Still, “magical” was the only way to describe her experience.

She’d had the opportunity to pitch her business, and it had gone better than expected. With five venture capitalists in attendance, two had expressed interest. She had a follow-up meeting scheduled for the morning, and she’d spent a couple of hours earlier putting together a new series of calculations and statistics in anticipation. She was ready. But for now, she just wanted a moment of quiet.

She sighed as she took a sip of her chardonnay, watching over the rim of her glass. *As if she’d get it here, in the ballroom of the convention center where the expo was taking place.*

The cocktail party was turning into a wild blowout. She’d never known adults to get quite so rowdy. As one of the oldest

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expos in the industry, she knew a lot of these people had been together for years, decades, and as such had a homecoming with the people around them. She wasn't in the *in-crowd* yet, so she stood off to the side, waiting for the perfect chance to slip away, back up to her hotel room, for room service and an early night to bed.

"If you had a crystal ball, what would you ask for right now?"

She felt him, warm, standing right behind her. His lips hovered close to her ear, positioned so she could hear him above the sound system blaring to all the corners of the room.

She turned and found the same eyes she'd spent five hours looking into just a few days before. "Dan. How are you?" She leaned in and gave him a quick hug. He smelled woodsy, spicy, with a hint of the gin and tonic he held in his hand.

He raised his eyebrow. "So, what's your answer?" He continued as he saw puzzlement cross her face. "The crystal ball. What would you ask it?"

She chuckled. "That's easy. Where's the closest restaurant where I can get a vegetarian burger?"

He grabbed the drink from her hand and placed both of their glasses on a tray nearby. Then he twined his fingers with hers and started walking.

She scrambled to keep up with his six foot two stride. But as she matched the rhythm of his steps, she noticed how natural it felt to be at his side, with him. Her vision moved down to her hand perfectly encased in his. Like it was made just for his. Like it belonged there, the only place it should be.

He stuck to the outside walls of the room, dodging people as they went. Once outside, he pulled her into the cab line and opened the door for her to climb in. He directed the driver, then leaned back and smiled a satisfied grin.

“You come here enough to know a place that serves veggie burgers?”

He held up his phone. “Nope, I just did a quick search while we walked. The app says this place is pretty good.” He moved his phone in front of her, showing her several reviews.

“And here I thought you really had a crystal ball.”

He crossed his arms and settled in. “Maybe I do.” With a deep sigh, he seemed to relax.

She followed, letting her head roll a little from side to side. It felt good to step away from the loud circus they’d just left. While she loved networking and had made great connections, she hadn’t realized just how stressed she’d become.

They chatted about the show as the driver rounded a few corners and pulled up out front. The valet opened the door and let them out. They found a table for two in back, to the side of the bar. While they had a live band performing on the other end of the room, it was surprisingly quieter than the atmosphere they’d just left.

They ordered. As Dan handed the menus back to the waiter, Tricia found herself watching every move he made. How had she fallen so quickly into liking whatever this was growing between them? He made her feel intelligent, invincible. He made her feel sexy. He made her feel comfortable. Not something that was easy to do.

As his eyes met hers, she didn’t shy away. They stared, asking, speaking without saying a word. She could tell he felt it too.

Where did you come from?

There was so much she wanted to ask; so much she wanted to say. But the bottom line was they were at a convention. It wasn’t the time or the place.

So she changed direction. “So how’s the show going? Lots of connections?”

“There’s more traffic than the last three. It seems interest is skyrocketing for natural foods. With the contacts I’ve made, I’m hoping we can double sales this next year. I do this show twice a year. It’s the best, that’s why I keep coming back.” He explained how his company had started with a line of organic juices and had expanded to include twenty-four different flavors in recent years.

He took a sip, then turned to her. “How’d the pitch fest go?”

She pressed her lips together for a moment, thinking. “Well. I’m hopeful.” Then changed her tune and released a brilliant smile. “Scratch that. I’m *wildly optimistic*! I’m meeting with one of the venture capitalists tomorrow morning. I have a good feeling.” She couldn’t keep the grin from taking over her face.

“Wow!” He held up his beer. “Congrats. That’s awesome, Tricia. I’m happy for you.”

“Thanks. You know, two years ago, I never would have believed this to be possible. And now, here I am. I feel like I’m on this crazy, unbelievable ride and it has no signs of ending. Good things just keep happening.”

She sat back as the waiter placed two heaping plates of food in front of them. She picked up a fry and nibbled, watching the man in front of her.

She hadn’t gone looking for a man in her life. But sitting here, talking business with Dan, she felt a pang of regret for all the years when she’d held men at bay. She’d told herself to wait until after she’d raised her son. He was now twenty-three and living on his own, with a job that paid well enough for him to be self-sufficient. And in truth, he hadn’t needed her in years. Not since he’d gone off to college a thousand miles from home.

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Yet here she was, still telling herself she didn't need anyone in her life. Why?

If felt good to chat about the day, have someone to share the good and the bad with. To have someone nod and accept what she had to say, offering advice along the way.

They'd fallen into a rhythm that was surprising at best. Once again, she wondered how he'd come into her life. Serendipity might be at play.

She'd anticipated an early evening alone in her room. Just a chance to recover, take a deep breath, and collect her thoughts for her meeting the next day.

But maybe, just maybe, she needed something else.

3 CHAPTER THREE

“You’re at the Marriott too?” It was a logical guess, as it was closest to the convention center.

She nodded.

They were quiet as they buzzed through the city. The lights flickered in through the window, highlighting his face.

Her senses were on edge. She basked in his warmth as they sat, side by side. She reveled in how alive he made her feel.

With him, she was completely losing control. She hadn’t been that person since ... *How long had it been?*

She was the kind of person that had to have her shit together, all of the time. She rarely did anything without a mile of planning. The moment wasn’t lost on her that this man snuck in without any thought or preparation, and was quickly pushing her to the point of no return. To a point where she no longer cared about anything. Not the convention. Not her meeting. Not her company. Only the two of them, and whatever *this* was.

Minutes passed, and they pulled up outside the doors.

She waited while he slid his card through the reader and paid the driver. Then he followed her in through the double doors.

For Tricia, hotels ran together, looking somewhat alike after a while. This one was no different; only the people and the city changed. The atrium was vast, with little pockets of groups talking, laughing. It was dark enough to blend in. She walked beside him, thinking, contemplating.

Should she?

As they made their way to the elevators, Tricia slowed and stopped near a window overlooking the city. She turned and stepped into Dan.

“I don’t usually do this. Hell, I’ve never done this. But I don’t want this to end. I was wondering if you,” she stumbled for the right words. “If you’d like to, um, what I mean is ...”

He pulled her in close. He placed both hands along her jaw, tipping her head just so. With better access, he leaned in, stopping for a moment, relishing the moment right before they connected. Then he carefully touched her lips with his.

“Yes,” he whispered when they came up for air. Then dove back in.

“Do ... you ... have ...” she asked between kisses.

He grabbed her fingers again, racing towards the gift shop.

One box of condoms and five minutes later, they were kissing in the back of the elevator, on the way to the fifteenth floor.

Was she really doing this? She was a full grown woman carrying on as if her life depended on sex. And at this very moment, she was pretty sure it did.

She hadn’t felt this frenzied, this excited and out of control in a long time. She didn’t regret it; she relished it. She needed this. She deserved this.

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And watching Dan's eyes as they opened and closed, speaking louder than words ever could, told her all she needed to know.

She pulled him into her room and touched. Played. Explored.

He affected her. She hadn't expected it. Even now, wasn't sure she believed it.

Still, he whispered into her skin as he moved up and down. "You're beautiful." "I can't believe I found you." "Where did you come from?"

She felt it too.

His body hovered over hers, enveloping her, devouring her. She touched and moved to give it all in return.

Arms working.

Bodies moving.

Skin heating.

Legs cocooning.

Until their breathing became one, rhythmically moving, together.

She'd never be able to catch her breath again.

She wasn't sure if she ever wanted to.

4 CHAPTER FOUR

Tricia plodded along through the security line, waiting her turn. She piled her belongings in buckets, then walked through the detector to the other side.

She pulled everything back together, then found the sign that pointed to her gate number.

She stopped for a smoothie, then made her way down the concourse.

She found a little corner where she could hide out and put her thoughts together before she boarded the plane. As she stared out the window, watching the hustle and bustle of a busy airport, she pondered her days away from home.

Her bag was lighter. She might not have given away all five hundred business cards, but she'd made a pretty good dent. She had an equal sized stack in the front pocket from all the cards she'd collected.

She'd searched through them frantically earlier as she finished packing, looking for the one she'd wanted more than the others: Dan's. Somehow through all of her meetings, she'd lost the one she most wanted to keep.

Did she dream him? Was it truly a one night stand?

She smiled and touched her lips. Even if it was, it had been a hell of a night. He knew what he was doing. As she stretched, she realized the knot that was normally in the back of her neck was no longer there. She sat a little straighter, her lower back feeling more comfortable than it had in quite a while.

With a pang of melancholy, she couldn't help but think of her future, their future.

She might never see Dan again.

They'd had fun. But this was a conference. And kind of like Vegas, what happened at a conference, stayed at the conference.

Was he relationship material? Was he even interested in dating someone long term?

And why the hell was she thinking long term? She had a business to grow. A business that consumed her twenty-four-seven. With a new investor on board, she had a million things to do once she got back home.

Dan wasn't someone she could think about. Dating wasn't something she had time for. So there was only one thing for her to do. And it didn't involve a man.

She touched base with her assistant, chatted with her son to set up dinner arrangements for the following week.

She made her way down the jetway for early boarding. She found her seat in the middle of the plane.

As she approached, she glanced ahead, looking for her row. Both seats were empty. Somewhere deep inside, she'd imagined Dan sitting there waiting for her.

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She knew it was silly. What were the chances? It was most likely she'd never see him again.

She'd move on with her life. He'd move on with his.

They'd had a great night together. She liked him; she did.

But she didn't really have time for all of that.

She placed her luggage in the bin above her, and scooted her bag underneath the seat. She turned on her iPad and settled in once more with email, lists, and plans for the coming week.

She felt a familiar whoosh of energy run through her system. She felt his warm breath as he leaned in close to her ear. "Miss me?"

She looked up to find Dan straightening, looking down at her, grinning. "That's my seat. Can I get in?"

Tricia clicked off her iPad, stood and stepped aside.

He brushed her as he moved, sending tiny sparks of electricity through every square inch of her body.

She fell into place beside him.

He turned, placed his hand around her neck and pulled her into him. He kissed her lips gently. "Hi."

She reached up, wrapped her hand around his. As he moved his hand away from her face, she linked her fingers with his. "Hi."

"How did your investor meeting go?"

"I now have a new partner," she grinned.

"Congratulations! That's great." He kissed her in celebration. "We should go out for dinner and celebrate your achievement."

She watched as he settled in, nudging his satchel underneath the seat. His iPad casually lying across his lap.

He looked content, in much better shape than the flight out. Dare she think she played a part in that? Her eyes bounced all

around, studying him, appraising him, considering what was next.

“So, do I pass the test?”

“Hmmm?”

“That was quite the evaluation. Did I pass?” his eyes never left her face.

She blurted out, “What is this? What have we started?”

“There you go with your questions again,” he chortled. He softened as he saw the quizzical look on her face.

“Happy or sad?”

She looked at him.

“Come on, make a choice. Happy or sad?”

She rolled her eyes, letting out a puff of breath. “Happy.”

“Work or play?”

She stopped, thinking for a moment.

He nudged her with his shoulder.

“Okay, okay. Play. But I’ll have you know, I like work too. I had a hell of a time here these past five ...”

He stopped her by pressing his lips to hers. Her eyes fluttered shut, taking him in. If this was her fantasy, she preferred to stay asleep.

“Yes or no?” he breathed inches from her ear.

“Yes. Definitely yes.”

“Then that’s all we need.” He sat back in his seat. His fingers tangled with hers. He let out a sigh.

She let her head fall to his shoulder.

Yep, she’d have to agree.

Life could change on a dime. She knew that. She’d proved that a lot the past two years. If anything, she knew adventure snuck up when you least expected it. And this trip had definitely been an adventure.

She turned into him, whispered so only he could hear.

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“Dinner or ...”

He captured her lips one more time. “I’ll choose the or. Your house or mine?”

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.

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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/LoriOsterbergAuthor

Thanks for reading!

Lori Osterberg
Portland, Oregon
August 2018

PLEASE TURN THE PAGE FOR AN EXCITING SNEAK PEEK

OF

LORI OSTERBERG'S
THE CHOICE SERIES

THE WRITER

1 CHAPTER ONE

She needed this workout. Bad.

He had her so mixed up. And so full of energy. She had no idea what to do with all of this pent up frustration.

Yeah, she was going with that. Frustration. She snorted knowing full well it wasn't just frustration.

She slid on her favorite workout shorts. Pulled the tank over her head and moved it into place. With a quick tie of her shoes, she was ready to go.

It was late; she was the only one in the gym. Tonight, intensity was her middle name.

One mile on the treadmill.

One hundred pull-ups.

One hundred pushups.

One hundred bodyweight squats.

Back to the treadmill for another mile.

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She moved to the weights. And as she adjusted the barbell, she caught her breath. She knew he was there. Could feel him there.

She looked up, into the mirror, searching. Caught just a glimpse, in the corner, watching.

So he wanted to play that game?

She picked up the barbell, started in with the repetitions. Up. Down. Flexing. Moving.

She knew she looked good, standing there just a little sweaty, breathing hard.

Up. Down. Up. Down.

As she counted down ... seven, six, five, four ... she saw him move in.

He stepped to her side, searching for her eyes in the mirror.

He took her breath away. But she wasn't going to let him see how he impacted her. How bad she wanted him.

Three. Two. One.

She put the barbell back into place. And as she stood up, he was there. Behind her.

He wrapped an arm around her, pulled her in. He breathed deeply. "You're so fucking hot." He nibbled her neck, behind her ear, right where she liked it. Trilled his tongue down her spine.

She arched into him, moaned. How did he do that? How did he turn her into a quivering mess? How had she survived without him?

She pressed against him, feeling every last hard inch of him. Her hand traced down his abs, down his rock hard stomach. More. She wanted, oh, so much more ...



“Dammit.” Kelly jumped as her phone rang next to her. She picked it up, turned the volume down. She glanced at the incoming call, hit accept.

“Hi, Beth. What’s up?”

“Hey, you, whatcha doing?”

“Writing.”

“You’re kidding, right? It’s eighty degrees. It’s Friday. It’s time to play.”

Kelly Sorenson reached up with her free hand, pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to determine how to keep the conversation from turning the way she knew it was about to go. She loved her friend, but lately, Beth had been on a personal mission to get her a life. And it was driving her crazy.

“Beth...”

“Nope, don’t *Beth* me. It’s Friday. It’s beautiful outside. It’s festival time. Come on; we’re going out to have some fun. Todd’s gone this weekend, and I don’t want to eat alone. So you’re coming with me. Meet me at Henry’s at six!”

Kelly glanced at her watch. Four. That gave her two hours. She could easily make it. She glanced back at her computer, looking at where she’d left off. She’d written at least five thousand words in the last couple of hours, more than enough to keep her on schedule. She could probably squeeze in a few hundred more before she left.

“I hear your brain churning, wondering if you should tell me no and stay at home and work. The answer is no. Shut your computer down. Get dressed in something cute and meet me at Henry’s. Or I’ll come get you.”

Kelly dropped her head to her hand. Closed her eyes and counted to five. She loved her friend. Beth Watson had been there through the thick of things these past few years. They’d met three years earlier at a writing convention, became insepa-

nable in their few days together. Even after they both returned home, they started a routine of talking once a day, met when they could. They were like soul sisters. They thought alike. They could finish each other's sentences. Hell, they even wrote alike, collaborating on three books to date. But Beth's current mission was truly driving her crazy.

"If I meet you, it'll just be you, right? You don't have an ulterior motive, do you?"

"Geez, I set you up with one bad date, and you're all over me. That was last week. Forget it already. I told you I was sorry."

"Beth, he felt me up. In the restaurant. With you and Todd on the other side of the table. I'd known him for all of twenty minutes. He was a first class creep with a capital C. Never again, you got it?"

"Hey, I didn't expect him to do *that*. He's really nice at the club. Todd's played squash with him for months. I have no idea what his problem was."

"Honestly, I'm okay. I don't need a man in my life. I'm really *okay*."

"Kelly, I know you are. But I just think you work way too much. Trust me; no other writer can dare keep up with your schedule. You're a writing maniac. But you have to live too. You're too young just to sit in your house and write. You need to get out and have fun. You're only fifty-three years old. I know life's been rough since Tom. I get that. Having someone in your life again would be good for you. You're too young not to have the time of your life. Tom would want that for you, you know."

Kelly swallowed, pushing the knot that always formed in her throat back down. Tom. She missed him so much.

Three years earlier, she and Tom had moved to Portland from San Francisco, partly to be nearer to their only daughter

DESTINATION VANCOUVER

who had decided to make Portland home and partly for the opportunity Tom found to head a tech startup. They looked at it as their reinvention, their chance to do something fun and completely out of character.

And so Kelly wrote. She no longer needed a job - the startup bonus and stock option Tom had received ensured that. Her bucket list had always included a line item of becoming a famous novelist. So the move gave her the chance to write.

She nailed it. Killed it. Her first novel was an instant success. She'd hit Amazon and New York Times' best sellers lists within weeks.

They lived a fairytale life. They'd traveled every weekend, visiting Seattle, Vancouver, the coast. They explored the best restaurants. They found a quaint condo in the middle of the city center, remodeled it and called it home.

Then eighteen months later, Tom was on his way to a meeting. A young woman texted her friends, crossed the yellow line, and the fairytale ended, poof, in an instant.

Kelly couldn't have survived it without Beth.

Now she wasn't sure if she'd survive Beth. This dating thing truly was going to kill her. If she didn't kill Beth first.

"No, you can't kill me. It's against the law." Beth snickered, knowing full well what her friend had been thinking. "Come on. Let's meet at Henry's. You love it there. It's always lively, and they have great food. We can check out the latest happenings, watch the younger crowd hit on each other. It'll give us something to write about." If Beth knew anything, it was how to punch her friend's buttons.

"Well, when you put it like that ..." Kelly laughed. She loved Beth. And no matter what, she could never stay mad at her for more than a moment. Besides, the weather was truly beautiful.

LORI OSTERBERG

And since Henry's was only ten blocks from her condo, the walk would do her good. "Okay, six, I'll see you there in just a bit."

"Yeah. I'll see you there. Don't be late."

Keep Reading:

<https://loriosterberg.com/books/the-creative-standalone-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.

DESTINATION BARCELONA

Including that blonde kid over there trying desperately not to be noticed while making oogle 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. Good-bye. 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.

Keep Reading:

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

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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