Writing Tomb Raider Stories:

A Guide Book by Katie Fleming

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INTRODUCTION

<u>Writing Tomb Raider Stories</u>

As many of you know, I have been writing Tomb Raider stories for several years. To this day I don't think I ever would have ever started writing creatively if it wasn't for the Tomb Raider games. Lara Croft has been a huge inspiration to me and the whole concept of the games is quite captivating.

When fans write me I am often asked how I write my stories. They want to know where I get my ideas from, how I come up with plots and characters, and how to execute a story from start to finish. I have answered a lot of these questions in the *Ask Katie* section of my Fan Club, but from the amount of interest I see on a weekly basis, I decided to construct a guide, which I hope will be an aid to those interested in writing stories.

<u>Purpose</u>

What is the purpose of writing stories? For me, it was to bring Lara alive on paper and continue adventuring with her. I think there's something special and unique about being able to bring Lara to life using words. The Tomb Raider games are a treat and I believe that by being able to create new adventures for her, it keeps the games alive and keeps the *idea* of Lara, and who she is/what she stands for alive as well.

Everyone might have a different end result or outcome they'd like to achieve by writing, but I think we can agree that one goal we have is to create a new adventure for Lara and experience the thrill of venturing to different locales around the world on the search for ancient artefacts and treasure. If you're passionate about Tomb Raider and Lara, writing a story can only heighten your love for the game and be an adventure all on its own.

<u>Rewards</u>

Aside from the purpose you have for writing a story, it's interesting to look at what type of rewards you may receive. Of course you might be thinking I'm talking about awards and material items, but those, to me, are little 'bonuses'.

It is rewarding to know you've finished a big project, and feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in meeting your goals. Writing can be very rewarding in a variety of ways, but a theory I stand by firmly is to write for yourself and not for others. If you're happy with the result, that is a huge reward in itself. Having others reward you, either with positive feedback, awards, etc is also great, but is something I don't necessarily believe in striving for. If you have produced a story that you are proud of and enjoy, chances are others will follow suit with similar opinions.

CREATIVITY & INSPIRATION

Who is Creative?

So who can write stories? Some individuals might think they're not very creative and therefore, cannot write stories. This is false. Everyone is creative; we were born creative. Think back to when you were younger of the games you would invent. Children are very creative but we seem to learn to be less creative as we get older. We're taught not to be different or to think differently, that we need to follow rules and learn to fear rejection.

If you believe you're creative, you are. I firmly believe that there are a lot of "negative" things that might cause people to think differently: it can't be done, mine won't be as good, will people like it? These are all negative examples. On the other hand, there are positive attributes to being creative; the thrill of a challenge, and the curiosity factor. One thing I dislike hearing from fans is, "I can't write as well as you", or "My stories won't be as good as yours". That's jumping the gun, and putting negativity into play before you begin.

Don't worry if it's going to be good – just write! If you can break through that barrier you'll have a better chance of producing a higher quality piece of work. Therefore, everyone can be creative. You just need to find how to tap into your creative side and learn to explore and develop it.

A friend of mine, Jake Volt, creative director at the hottest advertising agency in Ottawa shared his view on creativity:

"I actually don't think that everyone is creative. I've met people who are decidedly uncreative. They have no desire to create, to break rules, to leave their mark, or to do anything but follow the path that's been set out in front of them. But perhaps all they're missing is the desire. Maybe it's the desire to be creative that makes one creative."

I asked him if specific people were creative and his answer was, "*Business people should be creative. Mathematicians can be creative. It's not what your job or title is, but what's inside that counts.*"

How Do You Become More Creative?

Easy to say everyone can be creative, but how do you become *more* creative? Creativity is about looking at things in different ways and finding similarities between typically non-related things. Drawing, writing, painting, singing, reading – all of these will help you become more creative.

"Creativity comes from trust. Trust your instincts. And never hope more than you work."
– Rita Mae Brown

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CREATIVITY & INSPIRATION

I asked Jake Volt about this topic as well since he is an expert in this field.

"I think that everybody who is creative for a living has developed some tricks. These tricks help save you when you're in a crazy rush or feeling a little bit dry. My favourite is to look at the problem "upside down." For instance, if we're selling a product that has a benefit of being very quick, I may consider some of the slower things in life. My other favourite is 10 ideas in an hour."

<u>What Inspires You?</u>

This question is one I get asked a lot. What inspires me? Where do I find inspiration? How can you look for inspiration?

The answer, quite simply, is if you're reading this guide something or someone has inspired you. For me, the Tomb Raider games were my first inspiration. Sometimes though, you need to look for other inspiration outside of the main source (the games) and it can be difficult if you're not sure where to look. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Books
- Movies
- Music
- Family/Friends
- Nature
- Newspapers/Magazines

"Tell them to read. A lot of them don't read, and they should." – Julia Alvarez

I can't agree with this more. Not only will this help increase your vocabulary, and help you with writing, but it will certainly spark some ideas. Sometimes when I'm writing I like to play Tomb Raider music, or related music in the background. If I'm writing an action scene, sometimes it helps to have that extra aid to get your creativity flowing, and get you in the mood.

If you're struggling with finding inspiration to start a story, sometimes you'll find it without looking. Don't expect to create a masterpiece the first time, but concentrate on creating a piece of work that you're proud of.

"Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go." - E.L Doctorow

Jake looks in similar areas for inspiration; "…*as a creative person I constantly cram my head with stuff: art, movies, magazines, street dialogue, bad tv, music, comedy, literature, and pop culture. To be creative you need context. The more useless knowledge you have the more chances you are to strike upon a great idea.*"

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THE PROCESS: BEGINNING TO END

The Process: An Overview

There's no right or wrong way to write a story. Part of the journey of writing is learning what works for you, and how to develop it further. With that in mind, I can tell you what works for me – you are more than welcome to try what I suggest. If it works, great, if not, you'll need to find something that does.

In addition to reading this guide book, I highly suggest searching on the Internet for other writing tips. The more you get the better, and your chances of success will probably increase. Half the battle is starting to write, so once you can get over that hump it's free sailing!

Finding Time

Another question I get is how I find the time to write, work on my website, and keep up with normal day-to-day activities. It's simple, really. If you love something, or want to do something you have a passion for, you will make time.

"If you don't have the time to read, you don't have the time or the tools to write." - Stephen King

A lot of it is organizing your time and making some sort of schedule for yourself. Currently, as I'm writing this guide, I am working on my twelfth story, *A Room in Waiting*. My schedule? Working full time Monday to Friday, working on Tomb Raider Underworld updates, updating my Stories section of the website, working on three other websites I'm designing for clients, and oh yeah, trying to enjoy my "summer vacation".

That's a lot on the go, right? Here's my solution:

- Edit story while travelling to and from work
- Work on writing story at least twice a week in the evening, after working on websites for clients
- (Did I mention I'm writing this guide during my lunch breaks at work, and in the evening in-between working on my story and working on client stuff?)

No matter how busy your schedule, I'm a firm believer that you can make time if you're truly committed to writing. See where you can fit it into yours! There's a lot of "wasted time" during the day, so make the best of it by working on your story.

"If you don't have time to write, stop answering the phone. Change your e-mail address. Kill your television… If you work too much, work more. If you don't work enough, work less. If there's a problem, exaggerate it…" – Ariel Gore

THE PROCESS: BEGINNING TO END

1. The Beginning

From what I've read, the most trouble people have is trying to start a story. *Where am I going to start? What is the story going to be about? What is Lara going to be doing? What's the end going to be like?* Finding yourself asking these questions? You're already too far ahead of yourself!

The beginning of writing is as easy as deciding that you want to write a story. Once you have the desire and inclination to create an adventure with Lara, you're ready.

"The pages are still blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamouring to become visible." - Vladimir Nabakov

2. Plots and Ideas

Part of developing a plot comes with finding inspiration. Are there any locations in the world that interest you? Any monuments or treasures that have already been discovered? Myths or legends? A group of individuals? Past civilizations? Future civilizations? Wonders of the world?

"If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it." - Toni Morrison

Once you have an idea of what you might be interested in writing about, jot it down and write what you'd like to learn about it. See what you end up writing – you might be surprised with what you come up with. Keep a pad of paper and pen with you at all times so you can jot down ideas when they arrive. This way you won't forget, and will have something to build upon later.

For example, my story, *Perilous Paradise* was constructed on the basis of having an interest in Babylon. I didn't know a thing about its history, where it was, what its purpose was, but I *did* have an interest in the place. After jotting down ideas that came to mind when I thought about it, I was soon well on my way to the next phase. Same with *A New World – a New Life*; I was interested in the Bermuda Triangle and thought it might be interesting to construct a story around it. Often my stories are built up on small ideas. Try to think small first, then build up once you're ready.

"The story arises in the unconscious." - Dorothea Brande

Another technique that may help you build up on an idea is the use of mind maps. You might have seen them before – they have several uses, the most common being helping people remember things. But they can also be used to build ideas.

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Get a piece of paper and pen, and in the middle of the page, write down the idea you want to build on, and then circle it. From there, whatever comes to mind, write it down somewhere on the page.

It doesn't have to be pretty – you're brainstorming. See what you can write down, you might be surprised what you come up with!

Here's a really quick example of mind mapping without drawing it out. Let's say our idea is to write about penguins:

Penguins

- Tall
- Black and white
- Dangerous?
- Smooth
- Antarctica
    o Cold
    o Winter
    o Ice
    o Polar bears
    o Threats?
        ▪ Oil
        ▪ Hunters
        ▪ Whales
- Swimmers
    o Deep diving
    o Cave exploration

I'm sure you can come up with a hundred other items to put with penguins, but you get the idea. You can use this technique for anything, so give it a try! I used it when I first started planning out my twelfth story and found it very useful. It works the best when you're stuck for an idea.

3. Research

Ah, research! My favourite part. Is it necessary, you might ask? I'm sure there are arguments for both sides. When I started writing, I did not do any research for *The Evil House*. That story was based entirely off of what I knew about the Tomb Raider games I had played to date, and my knowledge of Lara and her history. Same with *Lara's Mansion – Death Trap?* – this was based off of the third Tomb Raider game, and the only "research" needed was to know the game well enough to write about it.

THE PROCESS: BEGINNING TO END

Extensive research was done for my fifth story, *Sweat, Strength, and Determination*, which placed first in Core Design's world-wide fan fiction competition. In *Search for Delphi* Lara travelled to Australia and I did quite a bit of research.

I'm a believer in doing *some* research for a story. That doesn't mean you have to use everything you find, but by taking the initiative to do some research, you just might end up finding some information that will spark some new ideas. I've had this happen *countless* times, and it's really exciting to see what sort of information you might come across. You may even find after doing some research, your plot or general storyline will change – this isn't a bad thing.

I often receive e-mails from fans asking how to do research for a story. Again, there's no right or wrong way, but here's typically how I do it:

- Internet (For my latest story on Tikal, I spent a good 5 hours doing research online)
- Books (I read over 15 books on Tikal and ended up purchasing one that I found very useful)
- Videos (I bought a video on Tikal, and also borrowed several from a local library)
- Magazines (National Geographic was helpful with some articles on Tikal)
- Friends (Surprisingly, friends might be able to help too! Tell them what you're writing about – they might know something that can help you)

4. Planning

Once you've completed the research phase (if you choose to do so) you will already be well underway with the planning stage. You will find yourself coming up with ideas when you're doing research, slowly building up some sort of a general plot you'd like to write about.

Before starting this guide I had a simple plan written out; what topics I wanted to include, the order, etc. You can construct stories in similar ways. In fact, for my latest story on Tikal I had planned Lara's itinerary out before starting to write – what temples she was going to visit each day and the order. I didn't always have the details written out for what was going to happen at each one, but it helped me to plan how the story was going to unfold.

Sometimes I have a page where I jot down specific events that I want to have happen in my story. When you get a new idea, write it down and build your story around it. Even when I am halfway through a story I find myself referring to these notes regularly, making changes, adding new ideas, etc. It's like your road map, make use of it! When I write I probably spend more time researching and planning than I do writing the story. By doing these steps before beginning to write, half the work is already finished for you – all you have to do is fill in the blanks.

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The planning stage is simply deciding what, from your research, you'd like to incorporate into your story. I always dedicate a section of my writing binder to planning/research, and for my twelfth story, had it divided this way:

- Plot ideas
- Traps and puzzles
- Research
- Maps
- Lara's inventory
- Words to use

Remember, you don't have to have every single detail planned out before you begin to write, but it helps to have some sort of a plan that you can build on. It also helps to keep your focus and you can use it like a checklist when you are working on your story.

5. Writing

At last, you're ready to begin your story! I have very specific 'conditions' that I follow when I write. Again, everyone will have something different that will work for them, so you need to discover what that is for you. First, I find I write the best late evening/night when the day is over, and I don't have any distractions. For me, this is when I am most creative, when my mind isn't bogged down with a hundred things that I need to do.

Find a spot where you can be comfortable to write, for me, it's in my bed propped up against some pillows. I distinctly remember writing the end for *Search for Delphi* – I finished at midnight one night. I hid my story and a flashlight under my bed and waited until my parents went to bed, and then I finished the story. Some people write the best in the morning when they're fresh, others scattered throughout the day. See what works for you.

Another "rule" I have for myself is to not write when I'm tired, upset, etc. If I'm not in the mood to write and something is bothering me, I don't. On the other hand, this is when some of you might be productive, so again, it's all about what works for you. Something else that really works for me is handwriting my stories. Instead of sitting at a computer and watching the cursor flash vigorously at you, demanding words to be typed, a pen and paper suffice. There's no pressure and if you don't have anything to write, it's ok.

Never force yourself to write. If you don't have any ideas and you're stuck, sleep on it. Never force anything otherwise you may be pushing aside valuable material that's still working its thought process in your head. Whenever I am ready to continue a story that I've been working on, I will re-read the past few pages to get back into the story and familiarize myself with what thought process I was following.

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Sometimes after re-reading part of my story, I'm at a loss for what I want to write next. <u>This is ok</u>. If you don't have any ideas, don't write. I've often had to do this, and it will give you more time to think about what you want to write about.

Another question I often get is how I get my stories to be "so long" or "x number of pages". I never have once sat down and said, ok, I'm going to write a story that is sixty pages long. I never shoot for a specific length. Remember the saying it's quality not quantity? If your story is ten pages, great! Fifty? Great! You can't give a story value based on how long it is. Write until it's finished, and don't worry about how long it is.

You may find that while you're writing your story, checking your plot ideas and research will act as a wonderful aid. You'll probably rework some of your old ideas, add new ones, and begin to really sculpt your story. You might even find yourself crossing off initial ideas and replacing them, I do it all the time. You'll be amazed to see how your story evolves from your initial idea to the finished product. And don't forget, if you're finding yourself getting stuck, look to see where you can get some inspiration.

Another point I'd like to make is the choice I made to stick as close to the games as possible. My ultimate goal was to create stories which closely resembled the games, and did not deviate from the storylines and character/game information. To me, it's important to be true to the games and to the character, and I have found that many have applauded this:

> *"Well Katie what I can say, the story is fantastic. It's compelling, original, dark and perfect for adventure with you keeping very loyal to Lara and her behavioural patterns..."*

> *"You have managed to stick within the parameters of Lara's behaviour whilst mixing in original storylines. It would be much easier, and also more boring if you just stuck with slight changes in existing storylines, but you don't for which we must applaud you..."*

> *"Your knowledge of Lara and how she works is instantly recognisable in your stories and again you adhere to the important parameters that the game sets."*
> – Gary Reading, Core Design

> *"It shows a great overall observation of Lara and the Tomb Raider games - you've certainly done your homework there - it's almost like playing a Tomb Raider game."*
> – Susie Hamilton, Core Design

It is entirely up to you what you do with your story, but I don't recommend deviating too far from the games and from what fans know about Lara. If you are keen on sticking to the games, I **highly** recommend the book, *The Official Tomb Raider Files*, written by Susie Hamilton, published by Carlton Books. ISBN 1-84222-378-X

THE PROCESS: BEGINNING TO END

6. Character Development

Another question I get asked is with regards to character development. *How do I decide if I should use characters from the Tomb Raider games? What new ones should I use, and how do I further develop them, and make them come to life in my stories?* When you were developing plot ideas, and working through the planning stage, you may have decided a specific character from the previous Tomb Raider games would be perfect in your story. So what's the next step?

Take *The Strenuous Escapade*, my ninth story. I thought it would be awesome to write a story with Zip, as I loved him from Tomb Raider Chronicles. In order to craft him into my story, I needed to familiarize myself with who he was. A re-visit to the game worked wonders, as well as listening to his dialogue over and over. This way, I was able to get inside of his head, get a good grasp on his sense of humour, how he interacted with Lara, and from there, crafted various dialogues between him and Lara that I believed, matched his character to the game.

This works with any character from the games – study them, listen to their dialogue, start brainstorming new dialogue for them and see if it fits their behaviour in the games. One word of caution is to probably not deviate too far from the character. If you're finding you're doing this, it might be best to replace them with a new character, else you're not really following the games.

Another example, then. My eighth story, *The Lost City of Tsumeb* had Kurtis Trent, from the Angel of Darkness in it. Very few people know this, but the game hadn't actually been released when I wrote this story. Core Design gave me a beautiful style guide, full of photos, concept art, and information about the characters in the upcoming game. From the videos that I had seen, articles I read, and information in the style guide, I was able to craft my own adventure with him and Lara. Of course, this doesn't follow the game perfectly – we all know the ending to AOD. However, with that being said, his dialogue and behaviour matched the character from the game, and therefore, was successful.

If you're working on a story that involves new characters, like many of mine have, it's a great idea to get a fresh sheet of paper, and write their name at the top. Now, start writing down details: are they male or female? How old are they? Where are they from? What major role do they have/will they have in your story? Does Lara already know them, or are they new? What do they look like? What secrets or information do they have that Lara will need to find out, or information that they will give her?

Writing out as much information as possible will help you craft your characters even more. It doesn't hurt to write out a page for Lara either if you're just starting – it will help you start to think like her, and will only better your abilities at successfully writing who her character is. Also, what are your characters strengths and weaknesses?

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What was their history like? Not all characters need an in-depth biography, but it doesn't hurt to start thinking about these points so you will be better off when describing them to your readers. Another pointer: you don't have to write out absolutely everything about your character when they are first introduced in your story. Part of developing characters is to show how they evolve, and what they reveal about themselves over time. Think about what you want the readers to know upfront, and what you want them to have to wait for. Not only does this help with creating suspense, but it allows the reader to really visualize who they are.

Final Steps in Production: Make Your Story Shine

So you've finished a story, congratulations! There's no better feeling then completing something you've worked hard on. So what's next? Think of your first written copy as your draft, it isn't finished yet. The next and one of the most important steps, is to edit your work. If you'd like to publish your story or put it online, I strongly recommend editing and polishing it.

How do I do it? When I finish writing, I type up my story (because I always handwrite them first), print it out, and grab a red pen. For the next couple weeks I read and re-read the story, finding mistakes, making corrections, taking out chunks of text that don't need to be there, reworking sentences that were awkward, adding new information in where needed and polishing it the best I can.

It's amazing how you'll catch mistakes on your third edit that you completely missed on the first two. That's because you wrote the story, so you know what's going to happen and therefore, your brain will naturally read over it, not seeing the mistakes. I most certainly get to this point when editing, and when that happens, my time with editing the story is over. At this point I need to hand it over to someone who will be able to edit it for me, catching the mistakes I missed.

I hire a professional editor to help polish and edit my stories. While this is not completely necessary if you don't plan on publishing them, I still recommend you find someone to help edit. The more eyes the better! My editor, Stephanie VanderMeulen, of *EditQuest* is simply amazing. She has edited quite a few of my stories and has really made them shine. Stephanie has been an inspiration and a guide for me as well and I am so thankful to have her as an editor.

If any of you are interested in hiring an editor to help polish your work, I highly recommend Stephanie. When you are looking to hire an editor, you need to look for one that meets your needs and that you are happy with. With Stephanie, I struck gold! Feel free to contact her if you're interested in having her edit your work, at steph.vandermeulen@gmail.com. I contacted Stephanie and asked her to provide a little background about herself and some reasons why she recommends having your work edited:

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Thanks, Katie!

A little background, then: I'm a huge fan of fiction of any sort but especially fantasy, and I've been an avid reader since I was four or so. However, I was two when I first spoke out as an editor: I corrected a man who said "fishie" to me. Editors have certain personalities: they're born, not made!

Skip ahead thirty-two years. I've been editing for about fifteen years now, and have had my freelance business since 2003 [currently being revamped for a new look and name. Watch for EditQuest.com, coming soon!]. I'm a member of the Editors' Association of Canada, and attend both writers' and editors' courses and workshops. I've worked in libraries, Chapters, a publishing house. I've edited and project managed hundreds of books, walked and talked and handheld authors from contract to finished product. Independent writers who have approached me have indeed been published. My clients have included university presses, accomplished writers, local businesses, the government, media and printing companies, post-grad students, and goal-driven new authors like you.

<u>Why Hire An Editor?</u>
While there are some who might tell you that hiring a professional independent editor is unnecessary, Katie has an excellent point about finding another person to look over your writing, especially if you do hope to publish. As she mentioned, it is impossible to catch all our own mistakes. Even the best editors need editors! You know that saying about not seeing the forest for the trees? Self-editing is like that. It's hard to see your errors because you're so immersed in and connected to your writing, and it helps to get other perspectives and insight from people who can point out things you may not have considered. Having someone else look over your work is important because when you are about to look for an agent, you need to have a manuscript they are willing to take seriously.

The benefit to hiring a professional to edit your writing is that she knows what to look for. Your friend may be able to point out that you missed a letter in a word, but is he familiar with grammar rules, what agents want, how to critique your story regarding title, plot, setting, characters, pace, consistencies, structure, point of view, and dialogue?

If your main concern is money, let me put that to rest right now. Hiring an independent editor does not necessarily mean you hand over your life savings as well! There are plenty of editors out there (including me!) who offer affordable rates and who can be flexible depending on your situation. Payment plans or reduced rates are not unheard of.

If your life's ambition is to be published, you want to go about it the right way, not the hard way. The publishing process can be overwhelming enough that even seasoned writers stash manuscripts in drawers rather than submitting. An independent editor is just the right person to not only guide you to good, polished writing but also help you navigate the path to possible literary success.

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POST PRODUCTION

<u>Tips to Improve Your Writing</u>

The only way to really improve your writing is to keep practising. The more you write, the better you'll become. Your process will evolve, you'll learn to tap into your creative side more easily, you'll be able to create more advanced plots and storylines, and you will learn to develop your craft.

When I take a look back at *The Evil House* and compare it to my later stories, I can see a vast improvement. I often hear from fans that they can see a difference in my writing from story to story, and it is something I strive for. That doesn't mean your earlier works aren't of value – they were, at the time, the best you were able to produce.

I also get questions from fans asking if they should enrol in writing classes. I've never taken any creative writing classes, and many well-known authors haven't either. That doesn't mean you can't – writing classes are a great way to improve because you're able to practise. If you're interested in a class, then go for it, but I don't think it's absolutely necessary. Do what <u>you</u> need and think you should do to improve.

Lastly, reading will also help improve your writing, vocabulary, thought process, etc. Find out what you like about the books you're reading and analyze them. It's ok to mimic a writer, but see how you can craft what you enjoy from their books into your own stories.

CONCLUSION

<u>Final Thoughts</u>

Writing Tomb Raider stories is something I've been doing for almost a decade, and I'm still enjoying every moment of it.

I hope this guide proves to be useful in your quest to write stories, and can shed a little bit of light on my world and how I am able to craft my stories. If you have any additional questions or comments, please do not hesitate to send me a message at katie@tombraiders.net

If this guide has helped you, or you are in the process of following it, I'd love to hear your comments. If there's a topic that I didn't cover that you would like me to, please e-mail me and I will work on it. This guide is for you and I want to make sure I've covered everything that you might be wondering about.

Good luck with your new adventure!

- Katie

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