

Chapter One

Nicky McCloud struggled to muffle her laughter. “No, Mrs. Baltimore, the mouse that was sent with your new computer isn’t for your cat to play with.” She listened patiently while Mrs. Baltimore explained how her cat, Thomas, just loved to play with the cords. Finally, Nicky was able to break in and add, “Mrs. Baltimore, you need to take the mouse from Thomas and plug it into the back of the computer.”

There was a pause as this was considered, then the caller asked, “What will I give Thomas to play with so I can get the mouse away from him?”

“Maybe you can give him a ball of yarn or another toy. Your computer won’t function properly without the mouse.” Nicky heard a disgruntled yowling from the feline as Mrs. Baltimore retrieved the device from Thomas.

“Okay. I have it. What now?”

After completing the call with Mrs. Baltimore, Nicky disconnected the phone, shut down her computer, and cleaned up her area. She needed to pick up her trekking poles for her trip. It would be her last chance to get them before catching her flight in two days. Gathering her purse and coat, she left the DTech building for the last time.

For thirty years, Nicky had lived in Seattle, Washington, with her husband, James, and their two children, Paul and Elizabeth. Then, five years ago, on January 5, 2000, her life took a drastic turn: James died after years of struggling with poor health. Her son was her strength during the difficult years that followed, her daughter having distanced herself after a disagreement with her father shortly before his death. Paul was now twenty-eight, married, and the father of two children. Elizabeth, now twenty-six, was getting her doctorate degree in humanities. And Nicky was preparing for a once-in-a-lifetime journey.

Six months before, Nicky had received an e-mail asking her to make a donation for the preservation of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail. After reading the appeal, she had felt compelled to do additional research. What she discovered, in trail journals that she found online, simply amazed her. Beginning in April and May each year, she learned, individuals and groups began hikes of the PCT that took them from southern California, right at the Mexican border, over sixty mountains, ranges with names like the San Jacinto, Sierra Nevada, Cascades, and Marble Mountain. Four to seven months later, after hiking 2,700 miles through California, Oregon, and Washington, they finished their treks at Manning Provincial Park in British Columbia, Canada.

As Nicky had read more, a sense of enthusiasm had begun to build deep inside her, calling to her, awakening her wonder of life as nothing else had ever done. Despite her job and nice apartment, she had been feeling as if life was passing her by.

I’ll be damned if I die before having a grand adventure.

Deciding that she was going to hike the trail and reach Manning Provincial Park by October 3, her fiftieth birthday, Nicky quit her job of seven years as a technical support representative for Computer Specialty Services. When she told her children the news, they received it with mixed emotions. Elizabeth seemed happy for her, whereas Paul, feeling responsible for his mother’s welfare, had reservations.

The night before she was to leave, Elizabeth, Paul, and Paul’s wife Becky took her out for dinner. As they ate, Paul beseeched his mother one more time. “Are you sure about this...hike? I can’t understand why you would do something like this. It’s so not like you to be this spontaneous, this irresponsible.”

Placing her fork upon the table, Nicky looked at her elder child. He was a strikingly handsome man, with reddish blond hair and brown eyes. Taking after his father, Paul stood over six feet tall and looked to be mostly bone and muscle. He was now a successful businessman in his field of expertise, software engineering, but he had one quirk that sometimes drove her crazy. His obsession with seeing to her well-being was driving her nuts. After all, she was almost fifty years old; she didn't need a babysitter or a guardian.

Nicky sighed and considered how best to express herself. "Paul," she began, "since your father died, you've done an outstanding job of stepping in when you considered it necessary, even sometimes when you weren't needed." She smiled to take the sting from her words. "I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

"But...what about bears, snakes, snow?" He was clearly agitated. "What if you break a leg or fall down a mountain? How will I know if you need me?"

Nicky held up her hand. "Honey, you're driving me crazy. I love you with all my heart, but you have to let me go. This is my time to live and learn."

"Learn what?" Elizabeth asked pointedly.

Nicky gave a little sniff. "I need to rediscover my wonder of living; I'm excited to see what happens. Please be excited for me, too."

"But—" Paul protested.

"Stop!" she said sternly. "Paul, I am going to do this. I would prefer you support me; however, I'm going on this journey with or without your approval."

Everyone grew quiet, concentrating on his or her dinner. Paul broke the silence, his voice quiet and strained. "I don't know how to let you go, Mom."

"You let me go by giving me the freedom to grow and to regain what I've lost."

"I never meant to annoy you; I just felt like I had to fill in for Dad."

He still didn't get it, but she would take what she could. "I know, honey. Let's just finish dinner. Elizabeth and I need to get to bed soon. I have an early flight in the morning."

"I'll take you to the airport," Paul offered.

"No. Elizabeth is going to take me. She's staying at my apartment while her car is in the shop, and she needs my car to drive back and forth from college until hers is fixed. You send me those resupply boxes like we've discussed, and that would be great."

Becky reached for her husband's hand. "We'll make sure you get them, Mom."

Paul reluctantly nodded his head in agreement.

Sitting at her gate at the airport the next day, Nicky might have reflected longer upon the events that had led up to her excursion, but the moment for embarking was upon her. Hearing her boarding call, she retrieved her backpack from the seat beside her and took her place in line with the others. As she took her seat on the Delta Airlines flight, she prepared herself for the first leg of her exciting adventure. The past couple of days had been an emotional roller coaster ride. One minute she was bouncing with excitement, and the next she was in tears, wondering what she was getting into.

Closing her eyes to get some much needed rest, Nicky reviewed her preparations. During her research, she'd found multiple websites that offered all of the information she had needed, even sample checklists on how to start planning. The first thing she had done was send off for her permits to hike the wilderness trail and to enter Canada. She already had a valid passport, so that was quickly checked off of her list, too.

Next, she'd made arrangements with a personal trainer at the health club to set up a four-month training program to help minimize the risk of blisters, exhaustion, and injury. She worked on strengthening her back, shoulders, stomach, and thigh muscles. The instructor had shown her some basic stretching exercises to do each morning and

night to keep her body limber and to prevent cramping in her legs and glutes. The hike was going to be a test of not only her skills, but also of her motivation and determination to succeed.

Nicky made several trips to her local sporting goods store to try out backpacks and other hiking gear. She hadn't been able to go on any overnight hikes, but when she could, she had walked around the neighboring parks with her backpack loaded. Gradually, with each hike, she'd increased her speed and distance and the weight of the pack.

Knowing that it would be impossible for her to carry more than a few days' worth of food on her back, she'd researched how to make up food boxes to be sent to her at various locations along the trail. Purchasing a guidebook, data book, and detailed maps of each state, she spent many evenings plotting out her route, then used an Excel spreadsheet to carefully compile a list of towns to which the boxes — twenty-two of them in all — should be sent.

What did a person eat without the use of a refrigerator or oven? How did one live without a microwave? Searching the Internet for inventive recipes which involved preparing and combining dry ingredients beforehand had been a definite eye opener for the city girl. She'd read that a hiker burns 4,000-6,000 calories a day. What foods would be the most nutritious and contain the most calories? Since cooking would be limited, her menus had to consist of foods where liquid was the only additional element required. She used the spreadsheet program to help her determine the type and amount of foods she would need to purchase. Some of the recipes required ingredients that had to be dehydrated. Drying them was a titanic undertaking that lasted the span of several months. At last, though, all the boxes were sitting in her son's garage, addressed and ready to go. Each had a sticky note attached showing the date it needed to be mailed to her.

Having Elizabeth stay at her apartment was a blessing and a curse. Feeling as a mother that there were things better left undiscovered by her daughter, Nicky rented a safety deposit box at her bank to store important documents and other things. She wasn't ready for some secrets to be revealed.

The last item of business had been to find a ride to the trailhead. Two days after Nicky posted her request on the Internet hiking forum asking to be picked up in San Diego and taken to the starting point, she received a call from Martha. Martha was a San Diego "trail angel" who routinely picked up arriving PCT through-hikers and shuttled them to the Mexican border to start their hikes. Nicky had felt such euphoria as she marked the last item off her list. She was ready! And now, at last, she was underway.

Nicky arrived in San Diego at 2:30 p.m. and took the shuttle bus to her motel. Her plan was to pamper herself with one last night's stay in luxury. After eating an early dinner, she called Martha and confirmed her ride for the next morning.

Feeling antsy, she rechecked her gear to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything. Laying everything out on the floor, she had to laugh at the mess it made. Inside the backpack in a plastic bag were her spare clothes and other necessary items — a sleeveless shirt, shorts, two sets of underwear, two pairs of socks, a set of thermal long johns, towel, rain jacket and pants, shin guards, extra rolls of toilet paper, a windbreaker, extra Wet Wipes, sunscreen, and bug netting. On top of the plastic bag sat her water filter, iodine tablets, stove, butane canister, cooking pot and lid, cord, duct tape, a plastic food container filled with five days' worth of food, spoon, cup, camp sandals, collapsible two-liter water bag, and a full two-liter water bottle.

Miscellaneous items fit in the left side pockets of the backpack — her first aid kit, medicines, toothbrush, reading glasses and case, comb, flashlight, extra batteries, memory card for her camera, lighter, pack cover, and sewing kit. The right side pockets

contained a backup copy of the maps and data sheets for the first section she'd be hiking, a paperback novel, passport, and a roll of toilet paper, a pencil, and her journal — all in plastic bags for protection.

The sleeping bag and ground cloth all fit inside the sleeping bag cover, which was secured to the outside bottom of the backpack. The sleeping pad was lashed to the back of the pack facing out and the tent and tent stakes were strapped on top of the pack. Her hiking poles were tied on top of all of that, handy for when she needed them.

In her fanny pack she carried more Wet Wipes, a compass, insect repellent, a camera in its case, sunglasses, pocketknife, lip balm, ATM card, her driver's license, insurance cards, maps and information for the first section of the trail. She'd added money, an assortment of first aid supplies, medicine, a bandana, and a can of bear pepper spray. Tied to each shoulder strap were bottle holders and two full one-liter bottles of water, a whistle, and a mini-thermometer.

Satisfied that she hadn't forgotten anything, she repacked, leaving out what she would wear the next day — a hat with a sun brim, a set of underclothes, a long-sleeved shirt, pants with zip-off legs, trail running shoes, socks, jacket, and gloves. The clothes she had worn on the plane would be thrown away.

After taking a shower, Nicky lay in bed, opened her journal, and began writing.

Though I've thought a great deal about the coming days and months, it's hard to not look back. I suppose it's wrong of me, but I don't feel sad about leaving any of it behind, even my children. Paul needs to learn not to cling so tightly and Elizabeth needs to grow up. I can't live my life for them anymore. I'm so excited — almost out of my mind — at having this opportunity to do something so big, so different. There's so much I want to accomplish. I hope I don't disappoint myself. I won't disappoint myself.

Nicky placed the journal on the nightstand and switched off the light. With a smile and a deep sigh, she snuggled down for a good night's sleep.