

JOURNEY AHEAD

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Author's Note:

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Chapter One

The sun was just coming up as Nikki looked out the window of the bus over to Lake Michigan. The clouds were positioned so that even though she was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the horizon looked like mountains in the distance.

Nikki had been a tour manager for the last six years and was constantly going from one state to the other all over the country. She had just returned last evening about 10:00pm from a five day Mystery trip to Iowa. It had been an extremely stressful trip. The itinerary had needed a lot of adjusting and some of the meals were not what had been promised. One dinner was supposed to be chicken breast but they had been served cold salads! Nikki had apologized to her travelers and everyone had gone on and on about the chicken dinner they didn't get. For the next few days, every time the coach stopped Nikki found a chicken, hen, or rooster in many different forms sitting in her seat. Even though they had laughed a lot on the coach, Nikki was worn out after spending most of the five days keeping the passengers happy and focused away from the trip's flaws.

Now it was 6:30am and Nikki was on her way to O'Hare to fly to Seattle for a nine day trip. Normally she didn't do back to back trips, but one of the other tour managers had quit and they had asked Nikki to do the Iowa trip at the last moment. She wasn't sure how doing two trips in a row would work out and was a little worried since she would have the same trip schedule next month.

When Nikki got to the gate at O'Hare she discovered her plane had been switched to a 747. Since it was July and the heart of the tourist season, every seat would have

been taken in the other plane. Now there was a half empty plane for the four hour plus journey to Seattle.

As soon as the plane took off, she went to the back and found three empty seats to stretch across. She awoke when she heard the pilot say they were beginning their descent into Seattle. This was the first time Nikki had ever slept on an airplane.

Normally flying to the Pacific Northwest there was always a lot of cloud cover. Today the sky was a perfect blue with the sun shining brightly. As Nikki looked out the window, Mount St. Helens and Mount Adams were clearly seen in the distance. It was a sight that was always amazing. As the plane came into Seattle, she could see why the people who lived there loved Mount Rainier. It could be days without a view of that mountain, but today it was breathtaking.

Nikki's trip didn't begin until tomorrow since tour managers were always expected to be in place the day before. With no responsibilities for the moment, Nikki unpacked her suitcase and set out down the street to explore the city she was developing more of a fondness for each time she visited.

Tomorrow her passengers would be arriving and she would have to sit in the lobby most of the day meeting and greeting them with suggestions for free time and meals. But at the moment, the time was her's.

As she walked down the street, Nikki had time to reflect on her life. She was fifty-one years old, not very tall, and a little on the heavy side. Her short hair was blond and she had light blue eyes she had inherited from her Swedish grandmother. No one believed how old she was and told her she looked much younger than her actual age.

Nikki had been married for thirty-one years. Four years ago her husband, Ted, had had a series of strokes. He had not been paralyzed but had lost his peripheral vision so was no longer able to drive. He also suffered short term memory loss, which ended his working career. However, Nikki was most bothered by Ted's personality change. He had lost all his joy in living.

The doctor had tried to give Ted medicine for his depression but he refused to take it. He would constantly tell Nikki that his life was over since he couldn't drive anymore. All he did was sit on the couch all day with the TV on, reading a newspaper. He gave Nikki a peck on the cheek in the morning and evening and sometimes a pat on the back and that had been the extent of their emotional and physical life for the last four years. However, he was still able to walk down the stairs every couple of hours to the garage for his cigarette! The doctor had about given up on him and had told Nikki she had to quit feeling guilty for choices that Ted was making.

Nikki was so thankful for her job. Not only did she get a break from Ted while she traveled but she met wonderful people from all over the country. She had always had a positive view of life and believed that the next great adventure was just around the corner.

Nikki decided to shop before dinner. Whenever she got to Seattle the first thing she did was go to the Seattle Mariner's store for her son. She liked to check and see what shirts were on sale, but most importantly she liked to check out what was new in Bobbleheads. Her son, Brandon, collected Bobbleheads from teams all over the country and Nikki was always looking to add to his collection.

After purchasing a Bobblehead her son didn't have, Nikki went into a large department store that was advertising sales. It was fun being in a new town and having no responsibilities. That would change tomorrow as her passengers begin arriving. After browsing in the department store, Nikki walked down the hill towards Pike Place Market. The waterfront stretched in front of her. There was a small, favorite seafood restaurant she was headed towards. She was looking forward to watching the sun setting behind the Olympic Mountains. And, tomorrow there would be new people entering her life.

Chapter Two

When Nikki awoke she realized it was going to be one of those exceptionally warm summer days that Seattle sometimes had. She was staying at a European style hotel in the heart of downtown. It was cozy with a polished air but the hotel had one major flaw—no air conditioning. It was rare when they needed it. Even on warm days, the nights would cool down, but it could be very miserable in the old building when it wasn't available when needed.

Usually the hotel scored pretty well on the evaluations at the end of the trip, but always received bad scores when the weather was warm. She always hated starting the trip off with a bad experience for the passengers but knew there was nothing she could do to change the developing situation.

Passengers began arriving shortly after noon. Nikki had a desk in the lobby she sat at to greet them. She was so busy giving directions and meal choices that before she knew it, the time was 6:00pm and she was able to call it a day and go to dinner.

She had a good feeling about the passengers she had met. There was a big group from North Carolina, a few from Florida, many from upstate New York, as well as New Jersey, several from the Midwest and even one couple from Phoenix. She liked it when passengers came from all over. It was very satisfying at the end of a trip to see how a big group of people from all over the United States would blend and become like a family on these trips.

Usually there was a welcome dinner on day one but since so many East Coast people tended to come on this trip, her company let them eat on their own the first night. People

came in at such different times throughout the day and with the different time zones involved, the passengers enjoyed a welcome dinner much more on the second night. And, since the hotel was right downtown, close to many different options, it gave the passengers a chance to choose something that interested them that evening.

The next morning—day two—was a busy day. Since it was Sunday, the motor coach company always sent a part time driver to cover the day so it wouldn't be until tomorrow when she would meet, for the first time, her full time driver for the rest of the trip.

The day was filled with a city step-on guide, shopping at Pike Place Market, and some late afternoon free time to clean up and rest before the evening activities. At 5:30pm they were on their way again for dinner at Alki Beach. The restaurant had large picture windows with a beautiful view of the Seattle skyline. There was also a white chocolate whipping cream cake to die for that Nikki was looking forward to.

After dinner they were off to the Space Needle for that adventure. Nikki liked the fact that they went to the Space Needle in the evening. It was always light when they got up there so everything in the Seattle area could be seen. However, night always descended while they were there and seeing the town lit up at night was also breath taking. It was a busy, fun day and Nikki was beginning to know her passenger's names, which made the trip more comfortable for everyone.

Chapter Three

Day three—7:00am—time for Nikki to meet her driver and get the luggage loaded for the trip to Mount St. Helens and on to Portland. The previous year, Nikki had done this trip for the first time. She had a driver, named Joe, who was a little rough around the edges, to say the least, but he had been a good driver and had shown her the ropes. Most of the time the drivers were very good and it was extremely rare for Nikki to not be able to get along with a driver. And, on the very few occasions that happened, the passengers never knew there were problems.

Nikki knew there had been a Seattle driver some of the other Tour Managers had had, who was very difficult to work with. The Tour Managers called him “the crazy driver.” Because of that, Nikki had emailed Joe from the previous year to see if he could drive for her again. He had emailed back that he already had a job but would see if one of his friends could drive for her, so she wouldn’t have “the crazy driver.”

As she got on the bus, Nikki introduced herself. She saw a man a little under six feet with short dark wavy hair and penetrating brown eyes. He also had a mustache. He was wearing dark dress pants, and a short white dress shirt and tie. She noticed the muscles in his arms from all the luggage he lifted.

The driver said his name was Chase. Nikki asked him if he was Joe’s friend. He looked at her a little strange and just said “no.” Then he immediately said to her, “I have to keep the shade on the front window down about six inches to keep the glare out of my eyes.” Nikki had had one other driver mention glare once before but Chase was the first one who wanted the shade down. Besides that, he said it so defensively she wondered if

something was wrong. It was almost as if he was daring her to say “keep it all the way up.” Instead Nikki said “fine” and started working on unpacking her four things and getting organized.

It was another beautiful day. Last year when she had arrived at Mount St. Helens there had been a low cloud cover all day encircling the mountain and the passengers never did see the top part of the mountain. Today was perfect! Things moved along like clockwork and they made two stops before they finally stopped for lunch at the Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center.

Nikki still wasn't sure about Chase. He seemed to be a good driver and seemed happy when she went down the aisle to collect trash. There were some drivers who took a lot of pride in keeping their coach clean. Nikki always liked those drivers. She was hoping to eat lunch with him since that was usually the best time to sit and get to know each other a little and discuss the trip without the passengers listening.

Chase didn't disappoint her. He asked her if she wanted to split a sandwich and she said “yes.” They had a nice talk and after lunch Chase went back to the bus for some downtime before the trip continued.

The rest of the day went smoothly. When they got to Portland, Nikki had Chase circle several blocks around the hotel. Both nights in Portland, the meals were not included. Nikki had passed menus around the coach and wanted to point out the restaurants to the passengers so they would know where they were located since they would be walking from the hotel.

There was one restaurant, an Italian one that Nikki particularly liked. If you bought a drink during happy hour and sat in the bar section, several meals were available

at a discounted rate. The food was good and the prices extremely reasonable. Nikki told the passengers not to go there that night because she hadn't been there for a year and wanted to stop in and make sure they were still running the specials.

After finishing her chores on the coach, Nikki said good night to Chase. She finished her daily paperwork, went to dinner at the Mall, and completed her other duties before bed.

Chapter Four

The next morning Nikki was at a table with some passengers eating breakfast in the hotel restaurant when Chase came in. He walked right by her without saying good morning and sat at a table by himself with his back to her. She thought perhaps he didn't like to be bothered early in the morning. By the time she went out to the bus, he seemed his usual friendly self.

Today the passengers would be touring Portland, the Columbia River Gorge area, and Mt. Hood. It was a full day of touring and since there was a local step-on guide for the day, Nikki was able to go to the back of the bus and have some down time. They stopped for lunch at a cute little log cabin cafeteria style restaurant right on the river by the Rainbow Bridge. Chase had gone to fuel while Nikki and the step-on guide took the passengers in for lunch. As they were sitting at the table eating, Chase, with his tray of food in hand, walked right by them and sat once again at a table alone with his back to them.

This really bothered Nikki a lot. She had never had a driver eat alone like that before. It was almost as if he had a chip on his shoulder but yet when they were anywhere near the bus he was very friendly and acted like nothing was wrong.

Nikki liked her job and she had the feeling Chase did, too. It could be lonely on the road, though. It was always more fun when the tour manager and driver spent some downtime together. There were always things to talk about—the trip, the passengers or just pass the time away with some friendly conversation usually about different places

you'd traveled to. It helped Nikki feel more of a team when you spent some meal time talking and getting to know her driver a little bit better.

After lunch, Nikki went to the back of the bus again while the local guide continued her tour of the area. They got back to Portland about 5pm. Nikki told the passengers the Italian Restaurant was running the specials if they wanted to go there. Once again she finished her duties on the bus and just as she was leaving she said to Chase, "I don't suppose you want to go to dinner with me?"

She was shocked when Chase said, "let me see the menu." Nikki had never gone out with her drivers before but she didn't mind eating with them in restaurants when the passengers were also there. She didn't want her drivers to get the wrong idea and it just seemed like a good practice. She didn't think twice about asking Chase, since she knew tonight there would be lots of other passengers there. For some reason Chase had struck her as a lonely person and she was a little intrigued to know him better.

To her surprise, he said, "yes." She asked him when he wanted to go and he told her as soon as he finished his work on the bus and changed his clothes. It was a half hour later when they met in the lobby to walk to the restaurant, which was about two and a half blocks away.

When they got there, all the tables in the bar area were taken with their passengers so Chase led them to two stools at the end of the bar. The bar had several different kinds of beer that were new to Nikki. Chase suggested Hefeweizen, a Seattle wheat beer, and Nikki enjoyed the taste of it but was surprised that it was served with a lemon. She had had lime with beer before but never lemon.

Nikki ordered spaghetti and Chase the steamed clams. He told her he loved steamed clams and the minute he saw them on the menu he knew he would go to dinner with her.

They started talking about trivial things. He told her he had a lot of seniority at his company and could get most trips he wanted to drive. She guessed from his talk that he was probably a couple of years younger than her. She asked why he was on her trip when he could make more money on other trips. He said he had already done several Canadian Rocky trips that year and wanted a break. Since their pay was also based on mileage he thought driving to San Francisco would be a nice change.

He made a few references to Joe, her driver from last year, and she could tell from what he said that he didn't like him. She could understand how that probably set them off on the wrong foot almost from the start.

Nikki told Chase that she knew that Joe was very rough around the edges but that he had been good to her. She told him that last year in a five month period she had been given seven trips that were new trips for her and four of them were brand new trips her company had just set up. Even though she was familiar with the areas there was always stress when you did a trip for the first time. Joe had showed her the ropes and even told her about shortcuts that resulted in some itinerary changes. Several other tour managers had done this trip for years and didn't know about the things that Joe had taught her on her first time out.

Besides, Nikki told Chase, "I was worried sick about getting 'the crazy driver' and wanted to do anything I could to avoid that situation." Chase knew "the crazy

driver” but Nikki told him some of the stories she had heard from the other tour managers.

Chase had no idea the man was even worse than he had imagined. The worst story was how he had gotten pulled over at the Canadian border going to Vancouver and they had taken everyone’s luggage off the coach and searched through it. The tour manager said she had never been searched at the border before and that had delayed them by an hour. She was sure he her driver had made some crazy remark to Customs, which had resulted in the search.

By the time they were finished eating, Nikki felt very comfortable with Chase and was enjoying their conversation. She wanted to ask him about his not eating with her for breakfast and lunch but for some reason she had a feeling she might “spook” him if she asked that question. She couldn’t believe it was so easy to talk to him and yet he could close into himself very quickly at any moment. Since this was their first trip together, Nikki decided to just let things go as they were and see if Chase became more comfortable with her.

Chapter Five

Another beautiful day dawned. That was not always a given out here in the summer. Today they would be headed to the Pacific Coast and Nikki was hoping the fog would stay away.

Lunch was at a fun restaurant in Florence, Oregon, right on the coast. After lunch there would be a dune buggy ride in the large sand dunes that were in the area. The wind was blowing pretty strong and Nikki thought the sand would probably blast their faces. She felt the thing that made the trips so much fun even when you did them many times was not only the different people one met, but also the different weather conditions. There were mountain areas that looked beautiful when the sun was shining. But, on the cloudy days the colors of the rocks were so much different looking and sometimes prettier because the sun wasn't shining on them. She never got tired of looking and experiencing the different sights while on the road.

Chase took it for granted that they would have lunch that day. After the passengers were seated in an area out by the water, Chase and Nikki found a table on the other side of the restaurant. Nikki was able to look out the window and watch the seals playing in the water.

Once again the conversation was very easy going. Even though they really didn't know each other, they had things in common and the conversation never seemed to slow. Since this was a lunch and shopping time, after lunch Chase returned to the bus for his downtime and Nikki browsed the little shops in town.

Nikki was right about the wind. Although the dune buggy ride was fun, there were times it felt that the sandblasting on their bodies just cut right through them. It was even necessary at times to keep your eyes closed to keep the sand out when the ride faced the ocean. But, that was part of the adventure. Each time she did the dune buggy ride it was always a different experience.

After the ride, there was an hour drive to the hotel. Most of the passengers slept since they were worn out from the dune buggy ride. When they arrived in Coos Bay, there was enough time to freshen up before going to dinner and the casino that was in the town.

Nikki took the passengers into dinner at a wonderful Italian restaurant owned by the town's mayor. The Italian specialties were good, but Nikki never grew tired of eating the salmon when she was on the Pacific Coast. Once again, that was her choice that evening and she was definitely not disappointed.

Drivers always have to keep their logbook up to date after each stop. Usually when going into a restaurant, the driver would show up five to ten minutes after everyone was seated as they caught their log up. Nikki kept waiting for Chase but he never came into dinner.

After dinner Chase was waiting by the bus, with his usual friendly smile, to help the passengers on. Nikki went up to him and asked him why he hadn't come into dinner. It had been the first included dinner since he had started the trip. He told her he wanted to guard the bus since he had to park on a busy street in town, which was also the main highway.

Nikki just shook her head. She had never met a driver who could be so easy to talk to and then close into himself so quickly. As John Gray would say he was constantly “retreating into his cave.”

Nikki liked Chase and thought he was an exceptionally good driver. She loved how good he was with the passengers. There was a lady, named Joan, who had irritated Nikki the first couple of days. Normally she enjoyed her passengers tremendously but this lady had a little bit of a whiny voice and Nikki had been so worn out from her previous trip that she had let the lady bother her. When Nikki had said something to Chase about Joan, he told her right away that he thought Joan was “a sweetheart.” He pointed out what a lonely lady she was and since she was older, probably didn’t have a lot of years left to travel. Nikki noticed there was a slight tremor in Joan’s hands and once she started paying more attention to her, Joan became the bus mascot.

Nikki would have missed the fun experience the bus “family” had with Joan if it hadn’t been for Chase pointing out how wrong she was about the woman. Nikki’s respect for Chase was greatly enhanced by that experience and that’s why it bothered her when he seemed to retreat into himself so often. She felt he was a very lonely man, who had the ability to have a lot of fun if he would let himself out of his shell.