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160 *Feet*

How to start before you're ready, in the time you actually have.

Enjoy your free chapter.

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER 1

Who Trains for a Mountain on a Hill?

It was 105 degrees outside the first time we drove to the hill instead of the mountains. I remember sitting in the car a bit longer than I needed to, looking at Wayne with doubtful eyes, saying, "Are we really doing this?"

Wayne just smiled, grabbed my left hand, and said, "Let's do it. Time for PT." I laughed nervously, since "PT" was a running joke in our marriage — code to get me to work out — and at that moment, a workout was the last thing on my mind. I opened the door and quickly jumped out of the car.

The trunk made a noise as it opened. Inside were a couple of small but overloaded daypacks. We both grabbed them almost at the same time, and honestly, it looked like we were preparing for a huge hike, fighting our backpacks to fit perfectly on our bodies. We looked out of place in that parking lot, surrounded by people enjoying their time in the park after a long day at work. Everyone there looked relaxed — lounging on the green grass, playing with their dogs and

kids — but we were on a mission. The bottom of the hill was probably 200 feet away, and as we headed that way I caught a few weird stares from others.

I have never felt more visually mismatched in my life. There we were, stomping along the paved path in heavy, mud-caked hiking boots, sun hoodies pulled over our heads, and massive overstuffed backpacks, while everyone else wore sundresses and sipped iced coffees. We looked like a smudge on a picture that was otherwise perfectly ordinary. As we walked toward the hill, part of me desperately wished I could disappear into the bushes. It amazed me how quickly I let a few strangers make me question something that had felt like such a good idea just minutes earlier.

As we reached the bottom of the hill, another thought crossed my mind: Who the heck trains for Aconcagua on this? At that point I just shook my head and blurted out, "We are officially crazy!" And we both started to laugh.

My journey into mountaineering began after about ten months of a hiking romance around the Las Vegas area. Years ago, when my photography business was still in its early stages, I had more free time, and one day I decided to join a hiking meetup. I had no idea you could get hooked on hiking like heroin.

The organizers had mapped out 52 amazing hikes around the area. They also created a deck of playing cards, with each card featuring a different summit that you earned after

reaching it. At first, I was unfazed. Then I got my first card, and I was hooked. I just had to collect all 52 cards, as if my life depended on it. Looking back, I realize it wasn't just hiking that hooked me. It was turning hiking into a collector's game.

For about eleven months, I spent every free day out on the trails in our own backyard, chipping away at the list whenever I had a spare moment: weekends, weekdays, or even just a free half-day. What started as a fun game of collecting cards quickly turned into a demanding journey through Southern Nevada's most rugged terrain. I just kept showing up, over and over again, until I finally held the complete deck in my hands. By the end, those stolen hours of hiking had added up to 314 miles of trails and more than 114,500 feet of cumulative elevation gain across the region's most iconic summits. Wayne was skeptical at first, but after seeing how much joy it brought me and how committed I was, he finally jumped on board.

I was in great shape by then, and once I finished them all, I felt ready for the next challenge. Over the next couple of years, our goals grew right alongside our endurance. We collected summits the same way we had collected those playing cards, first celebrating my 40th birthday on top of Mount Kilimanjaro, then pushing our limits on the steep ice

of Mount Rainier, and finally flying to Russia to climb Mount Elbrus. Things moved very fast, and it all felt like a dream come true.

Then life in Las Vegas took over. The business grew, we got busy, and our ambitions of climbing bigger mountains slowly faded.

About two years later, I started feeling restless. It wasn't really the mountain I missed. I missed the version of myself that came alive while chasing something difficult. I missed the adventure, the uncertainty, and having a goal big enough to scare me a little.

One evening I brought it up with Wayne. I don't remember exactly why my choice landed on Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the Americas, but it did. I waited for him to tell me I'd lost my mind. Instead, he smiled. The even stranger thing was that Wayne agreed. I guess being married to me comes with random, impossible ideas that I somehow believe can happen. Or maybe he saw that I was losing my spark and knew I needed to find it again.

This was not the first time something ridiculous had come to me. Once, while showering, I got this brilliant idea that I would run the Rock 'n' Roll Marathon, which was a week away. Of course, I had never run longer than a mile. So when I announced it to Wayne, his eyes opened wide and he just blurted out, "You're not being serious, baby, right? You know it can be dangerous, and you can really get messed up."

He used a bit stronger word than "messed up" to make his point. For me, there was no turning back. I wanted to do it. Wayne knew that. We settled on me attempting a 10K instead of a full-blown marathon, and that he would train me to run the full one the next year.

And the next year, I did. True to his word, Wayne trained me. We didn't travel to any fancy tracks or training facilities. We started right from our own front door. Week after week, we ran our local neighborhood streets, the loops getting longer and longer. It started with just fifteen minutes, then twenty, then half an hour, an hour, and eventually grew into grueling three-hour runs near the end. When the big day finally arrived, I stood at the starting line ready. I ran the entire 26.2 miles and crossed the finish line in 4:39. It certainly wasn't fast enough to impress the elite runners, but none of that mattered. I had officially become a marathon finisher, all by starting right at my own front door.

Maybe because of that, or maybe because he knows me so well, this time he didn't even try to convince me not to do it. He even decided to join me on this silly mission.

Wayne is an amazing researcher for our family and a big thinker, and he found a climbing outfitter who could make it happen almost immediately. Our climb dates were set for January 2020. We knew this was a serious adventure that required proper preparation and training, but we were facing two problems. It was already late May, and between Wayne's

work schedule and my unpredictable schedule, we simply did not have time. On some days we only had an hour, some days two — but that would not work with driving to Mount Charleston for training, which was 45 minutes away. So what was left? A small hill in the neighborhood, Exploration Peak Park, three minutes from our home.

The idea was born. But was it enough? Could you actually train for a 22,841-foot mountain climb on this small, nothing-looking hill, while ordinary people walked their dogs? There were only two options. Abandon the idea and put it on the back-burner list that would probably never get done — or just give it a go. We decided to give it our best shot. And here we were, standing at the bottom of the neighborhood hill, ready for our first training hike.

The hill had two paths. One was a bit longer and gentler, and this was where most of the people coming to the park went. The other was a straight-up path, less groomed, the kind maybe only a few ever challenged. Looking at both, we decided that our training ground would be the steeper, ungroomed one. Since the goal was huge, we wanted to do something more than a normal everyday walk.

We started the hike strong — too aggressively, I think. By the middle of the hill, we had to stop.

We were both breathing hard. My legs were on fire. The burn I felt in my calves was barely manageable. The hot, stale air was so dry it felt like we were inside a fryer. Honestly, it

felt like our skin was roasting. I wiped the sweat running down my forehead. My face had turned red. I looked like something was seriously wrong with me. The hill was showing us just how much fitness we had lost, and the heat magnified our shortcomings even more.

I looked at Wayne and said, "I don't know if I can do it. It's too hot."

Secretly, I hoped Wayne would agree and we'd just turn around and head back to the air-conditioned car. I didn't want to be the first one to admit that this laughably small hill might have the power to derail our big dream before we'd even really begun.

Wayne didn't look much better than I did, but for some reason his spirit wasn't as crushed as mine. He answered in his steady voice, "Yes, I know it's hard. But if you really want to do it, this is what it takes. That's the way."

Looking into his eyes, I retreated into my own thoughts. We wanted to climb Aconcagua, yet we were struggling on a small, steep hill. Was this even enough? What if we spent all this time training and it was all for nothing? Or maybe I simply wasn't strong enough. Maybe I didn't have enough grit to make this happen.

Wayne waited patiently for my answer. I finally blurted out, "Sometimes you have to put in the work and see where it takes you, right? Let's see where this crazy idea takes us."

We didn't give up. We simply resumed our climb. Slowly, one heavy step at a time, we kept pushing forward.

We were spent when we reached the top. I just collapsed onto the ground. Wayne grabbed my hand.

"Get up, babe. Get up. You have to keep moving, even if it's just a little. Don't stay down."

With his help, I pushed myself off the ground and stood up. Wayne always made me keep moving after a hard climb. He swore that if you stopped, everything would seize up. He was usually right about things like that.

In a way, I was happy we had finally reached the top for one reason only: The misery was over. We still had to go down, but that seemed like child's play compared to what we had just done.

We took the gentle way down, the second path. On the way down we exchanged only a few words. Something we'd expected to be easy had turned out hard. Now we didn't just question whether the hill was enough as a training ground for our big climb — we questioned whether we were even in shape to do it at all. We left a bit defeated, full of doubt, but also curious. How steep was this little hill that just kicked our butts?

The climb continues.

Find out how steep that little hill really was, and where it took us. Keep reading 160 Feet.

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