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TREASURE

When the Long Road to the Mountains Disappeared

Part One

By Rustin Hamilton

It was the middle of winter. Short days, gray skies, cold weather, and just enough snow to make life kind of miserable. You know, not the fun kind of snow that you can play in, but the boring stuff that's only about one to two inches deep and never seems to get deeper or totally go away.

In other words, these were the "post-Christmas blues."

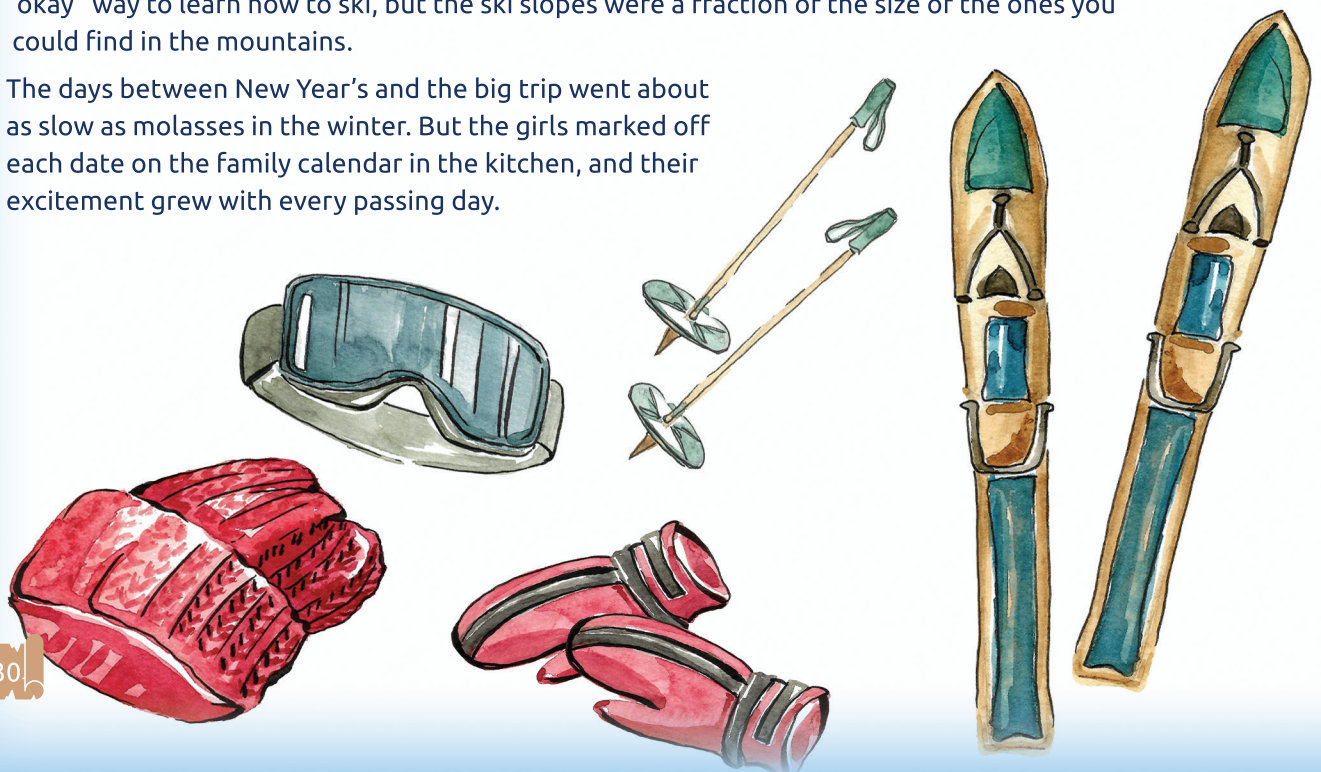
But for Nicky and Taylor, the post-Christmas blues would be relatively short-lived because of a planned trip to Colorado to go skiing. In fact, Christmas itself was a little different this year because of their upcoming trip. Normally, they would receive a variety of gifts from their parents and grandparents every Christmas. And indeed, they received a few presents this year as well.

But the best present this year, the biggest treasure that was waiting for them, was in the smallest box that the two girls unwrapped together. Inside the box were two new stocking caps and a note that said "Let's Go Skiing!" And that's how the girls found out about the upcoming trip to Copper Mountain, a beautiful ski lodge tucked in the middle of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado.

The ski trip would be part of their Christmas gift.

Growing up in Iowa did not present many opportunities for the girls to go snow skiing. Occasionally, they would drive over to Council Bluffs, Iowa, where you could find a few hills and a local ski park. It was an "okay" way to learn how to ski, but the ski slopes were a fraction of the size of the ones you could find in the mountains.

The days between New Year's and the big trip went about as slow as molasses in the winter. But the girls marked off each date on the family calendar in the kitchen, and their excitement grew with every passing day.



Finally, on the third Friday of the month, after school, the family loaded up their SUV with equipment, plenty of warm clothes, some blankets (just in case), and even some food that they could eat on the drive over to Frisco, Colorado.

It was a long drive—about 11 hours to Denver and then another couple of hours through the mountains to the ski lodge where they would be staying. Mom and Dad considered flying the family to Denver, but flights were expensive, and they would have to rent a car once they got there. Sure, it would take more time to drive the entire distance, but the family traveled well together and would make the most of it by reading, joking around, and playing games.

But more than anything, they would sleep. Mom and Dad decided they would drive straight through the night, taking turns at the wheel. Nicky and Taylor weren't crazy about that idea, but they weren't the ones who had to drive. And neither one of them had trouble sleeping on the road.

So right around 5:00 pm, with happy hearts and more "stuff" in the back of the SUV than they could possibly ever need, they headed out.



As you might expect, one of the biggest concerns driving across the country was the potential for bad weather. January in the Midwest is probably the snowiest and iciest month of the year. But Nicky and Taylor's dad had done his homework, and even though there was some bad weather just north of their route, it appeared, at the start of the trip, that all the roads would remain clear on Interstate 80, which took them through Western Iowa, the entire state of Nebraska, and then into Colorado.

But sometimes things don't work out as planned, and that was the case for the Williams family.

While the rest of the family was listening to music and playing games, Charlie Williams was listening to the weather reports on the local radio stations. Everything was fine until some unexpected snow flurries greeted the family around Lincoln, Nebraska. The cold front that was supposed to stay in South Dakota was starting to dip down and was now expected to cover most of the state of Nebraska, with snow. And ICE!

Katie saw the look of concern in her husband's eyes as he was driving down the road. "What's going on, Charlie?"

"We're heading into bad weather," he said.

"I thought it was supposed to stay north of us," Katie responded.

"I did too," he said with a worried tone.



The family kept driving west, hoping for the best. But around five hours into their trip, they found themselves surrounded by a massive winter storm with almost nowhere to go. To the west were blizzard conditions where you could barely see a few feet in front of you. Going back home wasn't an option either because, back to the east, it was even worse. The temperatures had actually increased in eastern Nebraska, and rain had fallen. Then the temperatures went down again, and the wet roads turned into a thin but dangerous layer of ice. Interstate I-80 to the east was now slicker than an ice skating rink.

The Williams family was now halfway across Nebraska. They were still moving, but instead of going 70 miles an hour, which was the state speed limit, they were now going about 30 mph, in the dark, with blowing snow obstructing their view.

There was a nervous feeling inside the SUV as Charlie focused intently on the road ahead. Katie and the girls remained silent.

"Do you think we should stop and stay the night somewhere?" asked Katie. But before Charlie could even answer, the decision was made for them.

There are some things in this world that are ALWAYS true. And for the Williams family, they experienced one of the most important and dangerous truths ever ... it doesn't matter if you have 4-wheel drive, All Wheel Drive, or how big your vehicle is, if you try to drive on ICE, you will SLIDE!! And that's exactly what happened to the big SUV when Charlie put on the brakes after seeing the big yellow barrier that was now blocking Interstate 80.

The barrier was used to keep people from driving any further West, due to treacherous weather conditions, but because of the blizzard, Charlie didn't see the barrier until the very last second. And as he tried to slow down and miss the big yellow metal poles, the SUV hit a patch of ice and started spinning, and spinning and spinning!

A scream came from the back seat and broke the silence. Gloves and ski pants flew through the air. Food that was gently packed in tubs back home, turned over, and coffee covered Katie and Charlie as their SUV spun across both lanes of the highway and then, with a thud, slid headfirst into a deep ditch along the road! When everything stopped moving, Katie and Charlie gathered themselves for a second and then immediately hollered for the girls.

"Taylor, Nicky! Are you girls okay?"

From the second row of the SUV, the parents could hear a whimper. Between some tears and a little crying, Taylor said, "Yeah, I'm okay."

"Nicky! Talk to us! Are you okay, honey?"

Nicky's head was lying on the center console and covered with a coat and blanket. Silence.

"Nicky!!" yelled her mother a second time.

She appeared to be unconscious until a small voice finally responded.

"Are we in Colorado yet?"

The rest of the family looked at each other. "Well, she was either knocked unconscious or she slept through the whole thing," said Katie. Nicky stretched her arms and yawned. "Why is the SUV leaning forward so much?" In the midst of their crisis, the rest of the family was able to laugh, even if just for a moment.

"Thank you, Lord," Charlie whispered. Everyone was okay. But a bigger question hung in the air. What would the family do now? Getting to the mountains tonight was out of the question. But that wasn't the real problem at the moment. No, the problem was that their vehicle was stuck in a deep ditch on the side of the road. It was no longer running, and it wouldn't start, so there was no heat. And they had no idea where the closest town was or even if there was a place to stay. And, as the snow kept falling, their big SUV, which just happened to be painted white, was becoming harder for anyone to see as the snow accumulated on and around them.

Charlie and Katie looked at their phones. No cell coverage.

Charlie took a big breath. He didn't want to worry the girls, but this was just the beginning of a long night in the middle of nowhere...

Continued next month in the ICE Issue!