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When the Long Road to the Mountains Disappeared

Part Two

By Rustin Hamilton

Nicky and Taylor, along with their parents, Charlie and Katie, were on their way to what was supposed to be an incredible ski trip in Colorado when they ran into a horrific snowstorm as they were driving through Nebraska. Behind them to the east was an ice storm. Ahead of them to the west was a scary blizzard that threatened to put a halt to their vacation.

As the family drove through the night, the blizzard only got worse, and eventually the family almost ran headfirst into a metal barrier that was placed across the interstate to prevent travellers from driving further west across the snow-covered highway. Fortunately, they missed the barrier, but unfortunately, their vehicle lost control and ended up in a deep ditch on the side of the road. Everyone was fine, but Nicky, Taylor, and their mom and dad were suddenly with no heat, no cell phone service, and no way to get out.

“What are we going to do, Dad?” asked Taylor. “Should we try to leave?”

Charlie was still counting his blessings that no one was hurt when their SUV spun off the road. And, his head was still spinning from the wild ride they just took down into the ditch. Suddenly, Taylor’s words registered with him. They had to come up with a plan. And whatever they did, they had to move fast, even if that meant staying right where they were. Charlie and Katie were especially concerned that they had no cell service; they couldn’t call anyone.

But no, they weren’t going to leave. Not yet, anyway. One of the first rules of being stranded on the roadside was to stay in the car. Allow the authorities to find you. There were exceptions, of course, but leaving the vehicle could be dangerous, and since they had no idea where they were, Charlie wouldn’t know where to go anyway. There was no reason to expose him or his family to the elements outside. Not yet, anyway.

“First things first. Let’s make sure the emergency lights are on,” he said to himself. “Check.” Then Katie chimed in. “We need blankets. Taylor, Nicky, crawl in the back and grab all the blankets you can see. We need to keep warm before all the heat totally leaves the cab of the SUV.” Katie had already found the flashlights and handed them to the girls.



"Can we grab some snacks too?" asked Nicky. "Yes! And there are some water bottles back there, too. Grab them," Charlie said. It was around this time that every family member, without saying it, felt grateful for all the years they were reminded by a parent to pack food and some blankets every time they had to travel in bad weather. Not once did they have to use them. But now, all that extra "stuff" that took up so much space in the back might just save their lives.

As the girls quickly gathered emergency supplies from the back, Charlie and Katie moved from the front of the SUV to the second seat. In spite of the situation, Katie couldn't help but laugh at how awkward it was for two adults in their 40s, with questionable knees and slightly stiff joints, to be crawling around the vehicle like a couple of kids. Oh, to be young and flexible, like their daughters.



Finally, after a few minutes of chaos, the entire family was huddled together in the second row of the SUV, covered with blankets and set up for at least the rest of the night if necessary. And, ironically, after several hours of stressful driving and an incident that left the family stuck in a deep ditch, unseen by the outside world, everyone fell asleep.

But before Katie finally nodded off, it suddenly occurred to her that no one in the vehicle had gone to the restroom for several hours. "What are we going to do?" she thought. What if someone has to "go" in the middle of the night? She could have hung onto that thought for hours, but instead, she followed that calm voice in the back of her head that said, "Don't worry about it. Everything will be fine." And so she didn't.

Highway Patrolman, Buck Anderson, was working the night shift along I-80 and was about to call it a night ... at 4:00 a.m. His day normally ended around midnight, but this time of year, with crazy winter weather and plenty of travelers heading east or west on the interstate, his days could turn long and adventurous. The mixture of ice and snow through central Nebraska made for treacherous driving, and he had already assisted a number of people who slid off the highway that day. But all of those occurred in the daylight. Very few people were still on the roads when it got dark.



Now, heading home, he made one last pass by the yellow highway barrier that the transportation department pulled down to prevent travelers from heading west. Even the weather experts got this one wrong. The storm was supposed to stay north of them. It didn't, and now every hotel along the interstate within 100 miles was packed. Even he was amazed at how much snow had fallen that night in such a short period of time. Add in the wind that created the blizzard conditions, and it became difficult to tell how deep the snow was in the ditches. This worried him. It was entirely possible that a vehicle could slide off the road and not be seen because of the blowing snow.

As Patrolman Anderson drove past the barrier one last time, he strained to see the outlying areas beyond the pavement. Nothing. He then used his heavy-duty floodlight, just in case. Still nothing.

“No one would have made it this far in this horrible weather,” he said to himself. He noticed on the right side of the road that some of the snow had piled up higher than everywhere else. But even with the light flooding the area, all he could see was snow. Nothing else. No lights, no windows, and certainly not the family that was clinging to each other inside the now fully snow-covered SUV.



Within a half hour, Anderson was pulling into the driveway of his home. Fifteen minutes later, after a very quick shower, he was pulling the covers over his head, thankful to finally be warm and ready for a nice, long sleep. Except he couldn't sleep. Whenever he closed his eyes, he kept seeing that strange mound in the snow by the highway. His mind weighed the possibilities. It was probably a mound of brush or dead trees that had been cut and piled up by the transportation department, and was now covered with snow. But what if it was a vehicle that was completely buried? Unlikely, he thought. And even if it was, there was surely no one still inside.

Right around the time that Officer Anderson went to bed, Katie and Charlie almost simultaneously woke up. The girls were still sleeping, but the SUV was now in a deep freeze, and the cold woke up the shivering couple. Katie felt Nicky and Taylor's faces. They were hugging each other tight and somehow maintained their body heat. That was the good news.

The bad news was that it was still dark, so the family had no idea they were encased in snow.

The couple was now legitimately worried, but Charlie knew that if they could hold out until the sun came up, he could head out on his own and find help. After all, someone had pulled down those barriers last night. There had to be people somewhere.

Charlie prepared himself for the possible journey ahead. None of the options made him comfortable. But the family had obviously not been seen by anyone, and he was suddenly coming to the conclusion that they were fully covered by snow. His mind was spinning. How would he get out of the vehicle? Would he sink into the mass of snow when he tried to crawl out?

The girls woke up about the time the sun came out, not that the family could tell for sure. Charlie, like the rest of the family, was already wearing all of his winter clothes. He gave Katie, Taylor, and Nicky a quick kiss goodbye and tried pushing open the door.

Suddenly, they heard a swishing noise. "What is that?" Katie asked. As they looked out the windows, a trickle of light entered the vehicle. Then even more light. Suddenly, a green piece of metal struck the SUV. It was a snow shovel. Then another one. All around them, they could hear the swishing and metallic sound of shovels. Then the beautiful sound of people talking excitedly outside.

Above them, Officer Anderson and a group of volunteers in snowshoes were pulling snow away from the SUV. When Nicky's face greeted them through the glass, they were almost as surprised as the family was.

Fortunately for the family, Highway Patrolman Buck Anderson did not sleep a wink the night before. In fact, that "strange mound of snow" just off the interstate weighed so heavily on his mind that around 5:00 a.m., he put his damp clothes back on, grabbed a few friends, and rushed to the scene.

After just a few minutes of digging, the emergency lights came into view. A few minutes later, they could see the makeshift "HELP" sign that the girls had made for the back window. The family had food, blankets, flashlights, and the will to survive. Yes, Taylor, Nicky, Katie, and Charlie were cold by the time they were helped out of the vehicle, but they were in good shape, and now, they were in good spirits as well.

Over the next few hours, the family was taken to a hotel to clean up, warm up, and get a nice hot breakfast at a local diner. The SUV was pulled out of the ditch, and after a few minor repairs by a local mechanic, it was ready to get back on the road.

So with grateful hearts, and plenty of hugs and "thank yous" for Officer Anderson and his fellow rescuers, the Williams family finally made it to Copper Mountain to go skiing. But whatever adventure was waiting for them in the Rocky Mountains was nothing compared to the adventure they experienced on the plains of Nebraska—when the long road to the mountains disappeared.

The End.

